

## FRED: A Coach and Approach for Agile Learners

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Heard just about enough about the learning organization, continuous learning, life-long learning, team learning, learn as if your life depends on it, Total Quality Learning, learning for earning and learning collaboratives? Tired of rhetoric and detailed descriptions of what these learning “things” are, but a touch short on usable tools for implementing them? Me too! So here is the answer you’ve been waiting for...NOT!

So what is in this article? Two major topics. The first is a brief description of the *Agile Workforce & Agile Learner*, terms I first heard at a retreat which was facilitated by Paul Messier, President and CEO of the National Learning Foundation based in Washington, D.C. The second is FRED, a user-friendly framework for taking a person a couple of steps closer to becoming an *Agile Learner*. These concepts are not answers or prescriptions for meeting any collective learning desires. Rather, they serve as seeds for generating thought on how to better implement personal and organizational learning.

### ***The Agile Workforce***

We live in a time which is characterized by constant, discontinuous change; increasing customer and client expectations; global competition; shifting morals and social values; increasing unpredictability and uncertainty; multiple faces of diversity; a breakneck pace of change, development and growth; demographic flip-flops; major shifts in the use and abuse of formal and informal power; and Barney. Many of these (with the possible exception of Barney) seem to be requiring a shift in the way business is done. It seems there is an ever-growing need to form virtual corporations—those which form freely and rapidly to respond to emergent needs, opportunities or threats. A corporation that comes and goes like a passing breeze; signalling little of its approach, and leaving nothing of itself behind.

To be successful, these virtual corporations require access to what has been termed an *Agile Workforce*. This workforce must consist of people who have the necessary talent, skill and desire to work together on projects of variable intensity and duration. They could be a pool of individuals within a finite, well-defined organization, or within society as a whole. Agility is required to be able to quickly form, perform and move on to other virtual corporations as new needs arise. In fact, it is quite likely that a person will be part of several virtual corporations at the same time. (As I write this, I can’t help but wonder what changes this will require of the Income Tax Act and the Corporations Tax Act—perhaps its best to let sleeping Acts lie).

I was intrigued to hear Paul Messier use the term *Agile Learner* to describe the type of person who would make up this *Agile Workforce*. The term really struck home as one which very well describes what my clients need, what many organizations need, and indeed, what our global society needs to thrive in a socially responsible, economically viable and highly sustainable fashion.

## ***The Agile Learner***

From a Personal Attribute point of view, the *Agile Learner* is:

- Flexible;
- Creative;
- Introspective;
- Curious;
- Imaginative;
- Adaptable;
- Aesthetically aware;
- Ambiguity tolerant;
- High Integrity in word and deed.

From an Interpersonal Perspective, the *Agile Learner*:

Celebrates Diversity;

is Altruistically Motivated;

is Effectively Interdependent (a collaborator and a team player).

Essential Skills of the *Agile Learner* include:

- Literacy/Numeracy;
- Mastery of technology;
- Communication;
- Negotiation.

And from a Performance Skills perspective, the *Agile Learner* requires:

- Systems Thinking;
- Pattern Detecting;
- Synthesizing;
- Analyzing;
- Experimenting;
- Problem Solving;
- Decision Making;
- Reflective Thinking.

In contrast, I believe we have an oversupply of what I would call *Fragile Learners*. These are individuals who act as if their knowledge and information is highly breakable. They protect it, defend it, cling to it, hide it or hide behind it (dangerous as that may be, should their "knowing" be shattered by new information). They may be the subject of a future article.

So how might one become an Agile Learner? For that, let me introduce you to FRED.

## ***The Truth About FRED***

As you might have guessed, FRED is an acronym. FRED is something (or someone) to be used as a reminder or technique for enhancing personal agility as a learner. FRED came into being when I was looking for a symbol to remind workshop participants of their responsibility for personal learning. And so FRED, a metre-tall hand puppet started to make an appearance as a co-facilitator. One of my favourite clients is using two puppets, FRED and FREDA to maintain a gender-balanced approach (a great idea, in my opinion).

FRED is introduced to participants at the beginning of workshops (through word & action) and becomes a reference point throughout the program, encouraging people in a light-hearted, non-frivolous way to look after their own learning.

Getting anxious to know what FRED stands for? Isn't curiosity a wonderful learning aid?!? FRED stands for Feedback, Reflection, Engagement and Dialogue. Simple. Worth waiting for? Perhaps. Let me elaborate!

### **Feedback**

Feedback provides significant learning in two primary ways. First and most obviously, I can learn a great deal by receiving personal feedback from others (if it is presented appropriately). I can also learn a great deal by giving someone else feedback. To do so effectively, I must be paying attention so I can compare that person's behaviour against a norm or standard that has been either externally provided (via lecture, video, written material, job aid, etc.) or is present internally (morals, values, beliefs, etc.). If I choose to take the opportunity, I can often learn as much by giving feedback as by receiving it.

### **Reflection**

With the pace most of us operate at these days, we rarely take time to put things in context from a personal perspective. Instead, our learning focusses on jamming piece after piece of information into an already overstimulated grey mass. I find reflection to be a simple, yet powerful learning "technology". Whether it takes the form of formal journalling, "think" time (vs. "do" time), quiet time, meditation or something more organizationally palatable, this critical search for meaning is highly underused. Regardless of participants' learning styles, I have found reflection (guided or otherwise) to be a well-received and well-acknowledged means of enhancing learning.

### **Engagement**

Sorry, no room for passengers! I've never found learning to be optimized through the use of passive means. Before ozone depletion, we used to get a tan by inattentively basking in the sunshine. I've rarely found basking in information to be an effective way to get a "learn". Engaging oneself in learning takes more effort than just sitting back and letting it be done to you. Whether audibly voicing opinions, physically participating in activities or mentally wrestling with concepts, learning takes place faster and more deeply by engaging with the content. (I consider reflection to be an active, intentional form of learning).

## Dialogue

In the true spirit of the word, dialogue (as a conversation form that is quite different from discussion) is a highly effective and very satisfying way of interdependent learning. I won't go into the differences between discussion and dialogue at this point—Peter Senge and other distinguished authors have done a fine job in that area. Suffice it to say that in dialogue, the purpose of conversation is to inquire, explore, expand possibilities, determine what lies “in between” differing opinions, deepen understanding, etc. The ultimate purpose of dialogue is to learn. It requires active listening, suspension of judgment and constant self-monitoring one's role in the conversation. It is virtually impossible to not learn if one is truly in dialogue. In reality though, it is easier to observe the difference between dialogue and discussion than to intentionally move back and forth between them. However, the payback in terms of enhanced learning and improved interpersonal trust is well worth it.

FRED becomes an approach and a symbol for taking personal responsibility for learning in workshops, seminars, conversations, and life. By practising these simple, yet powerful ways of learning, I believe anyone can be well on the path to becoming a more *Agile Learner*. The reason for moving in this direction may be to become a more effective member of the *Agile Workforce*, or simply to live a more growth-filled and learnful life!