

From Retreat to Simulator

– why leaders must be trained under pressure and not just withdraw

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Many leadership teams go off-site a couple of times a year. A beautiful location, good talks, a little yoga, a cup of herbal tea and a good dinner. They come home rested and inspired – and on Monday morning everything is back to normal.

In aviation they do something completely different. Pilots spend hundreds of hours in simulators, where they are exposed to all kinds of scenarios. Firefighters train in simulated fires. It is done to get better at what has to work when it really matters.

This article is about why leaders need a simulator rather than a retreat – and what it can look like in practice.

A retreat is a withdrawal

The word says it all: A retreat is basically a withdrawal. It rarely creates progress – not even on a personal level. A breathless break does not help much if you are then overwhelmed by the same reality again afterwards.

Leaders need immersion far more: A deep dive in which you learn to listen to yourself as a prerequisite for listening to others, and in which you find the potential you have not yet put to use. You have to change yourself before you try to change the world.

Calm under pressure is not a personality trait you either have or do not have. It can be trained. But it requires that you get into situations that are genuinely difficult – and that there is structured reflection afterwards. That is exactly what a simulator does.

The simulator is a room for refinement

The simulator is not a room for fear. It is a room for refinement. Pilots train emergency procedures, but just as much collaboration, timing, communication and decisiveness. They repeat the right movements until they become second nature. Firefighters train coordination and trust in each other.

In companies we talk a lot about strategy, values and customers. But do we practise good briefings, clear division of roles and the decisions that have to be made when time is short? We expect experience alone to make us robust. That is rarely the case.

Aviation learned this the hard way. After a series of accidents in the 1970s, it was discovered that they were rarely caused by the technology, but by collaboration: Silence, deference to authority and misunderstandings in the cockpit. The answer was Crew Resource Management – systematic training in using the capacity of the whole crew, not just the captain's.

The leadership team's simulator

A leadership simulator does not necessarily need a cockpit, a forest or a burning building. It can be built in the meeting room, as long as it does the same as the flight simulator: Exposes the leadership team to realistic situations, under pressure and with a thorough debriefing afterwards. A few examples from practice:

Exercises the leadership team can train:

- **The strategic case:** Once a quarter the leadership team plays through a current strategic decision under time pressure – focusing on the best arguments winning, not the loudest voices.
- **The role swap:** The CFO argues as commercial director, the HR director as head of operations, and the CEO has to stay silent and observe.
- **The strategic test flight:** Before a new business area is launched, sales presents the value proposition, operations shows delivery capability, and HR describes the competence needs. It is cheaper to fail in the simulator than in the market.
- **Message training:** Two minutes to convey strategic direction, one minute to create engagement and 30 seconds to recognise an exceptional effort.

Nature as a simulator

Sometimes pressure and complexity need to be turned up further than the meeting room can handle. That is why at [OLTC](#) we train leaders and leadership teams under demanding conditions in Denmark and abroad: Rappelling down the 42-metre natural stone bridge Kameni Most in Bosnia, canyoning and white water rafting at dawn, a jungle expedition with special forces instructors, winter survival in Värmland, and a leadership team that cycled to the top of Mont Ventoux after a year of training.

The point is not to learn to climb or cycle. The physical challenge is a means – not the goal. The point is to mirror the organisation's reality in a controlled experiment. When nature becomes the simulator, behavioural patterns emerge clearly: Who takes control? Who keeps the overview? Who creates calm when the plan does not hold? And is it always best to lead from the front?

After completing one of our demanding [OLTC training programmes](#), a leader said:

“It is the best course I have ever attended. The course fully lives up to what it promises: You learn something about leadership under pressure.”

— Site manager, Christiansen & Essenbæk A/S

The debriefing matters most

In aviation the debriefing is sacred. You go through actions and consequences – not to assign blame, but to improve the system and yourself. Without a debriefing, an expedition is just an experience. With a debriefing, it becomes learning.

And notice the question. When the focus shifts from “who failed?” to “what worked particularly well?”, powerful learning emerges. The patterns that work can be repeated – also back home. That is why we always link the experiences from the simulator back to the leadership team’s own tasks, strategy and collaboration.

I take my own medicine. When, quite a few years ago, I walked 130 kilometres with 20 kilos on my back north of the Arctic Circle and climbed Kebnekaise along the way, it was not for the experience. It was training in keeping going when body and mind say stop – and in feeling where the reserves come from. Inner readiness is not trained on a retreat.

From luck to competence

When an organisation handles a crisis well, we often call it strong leadership. But behind strong leadership there is typically training, reflection and awareness. The simulator moves success from luck to competence.

When leadership teams train together systematically, a shared language, stronger trust, faster coordination, clearer decisions and a shared instinct for who does what when it matters emerge. It is not something you talk your way to. It is something you practise.

Training in the simulator is only half of it, though. The other half happens when the leaders return home and try out what they have learned in their everyday work. I have written about this in [“Action Learning in Practice”](#).

Three questions for the leadership team

Ask yourselves:

- When did we last train a difficult decision together – before it had to be made for real?
- What are we actually training when we go off-site: Immersion and decisive action – or rest and comfort?
- How do we debrief after major decisions, and do we also learn from what succeeded?

Conclusion – train before it matters

Pilots cannot control the weather, and firefighters cannot predict where and when something will burn. But they can control their preparation. The same applies to leaders. A retreat gives you a break. A simulator gives you competence.

So the next time your leadership team goes off-site, the question is not only where you are going – but what you are going to train, and how the experience comes home with you. Because that is where leadership is formed: Before it really matters.

This article builds on my LinkedIn articles “Simulatoren i lederskab” (2026) and “High performance lederskab i det virkelige liv” (2017).

Does your leadership team need training under pressure?

Cronquist Consult ApS and OLTC train leaders, leadership teams and teams in leadership, collaboration and execution under demanding conditions – in Denmark and abroad. Read more here:

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