The Company's Own Academy

– build it on your own playing field, not from a course catalogue

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Many companies send their leaders and key employees on courses from an external catalogue. They are easy to book, though often rather pricey and generic, but the leaders return to an everyday reality that has not moved – and often they are the only ones from the company who attended.

For more than 25 years I have helped build or supplement successful internal academies in industries as different as IT, construction, finance and medtech. The common denominator is the same: Learning is rooted in reality, the customers and the strategy – on the company's own playing field and with closed groups.

This article is about why a company's own academy beats the course catalogue – and what it takes to build one that works.

The course catalogue is not a strategy

A generic course on an open programme provides new knowledge. But Robert O. Brinkerhoff's research into learning transfer – the process by which knowledge from a course is actually turned into practical value in the workplace – reveals a harsh reality: Up to 85% of the learning from traditional courses is lost if there is no active effort to integrate it into everyday work. Only around 15% creates real impact. His answer is the 40-20-40 model, which shifts the focus from the course itself to what happens before and after. It is the conditions around the participant that determine whether learning becomes results: The manager's support, the opportunity to try out the new, and systematic follow-up. Without them, old habits return within a few weeks.

A company academy turns this around. Instead of asking which courses are available, you ask what leaders and employees need to be able to do, do and decide differently for the strategy to succeed. As I describe in "When Strategy Becomes the Training Ground", the company's own strategy becomes the curriculum.

When colleagues train together in closed groups, with their own tasks, their own customers and their own dilemmas, a shared language and a shared commitment emerge. That is what makes the difference on Monday morning.

> *A course catalogue provides knowledge. An academy provides a shared way of working.*

Train close to reality

My view of training was shaped by my years as an emergency services officer. I trained fire and rescue crews in countless scenarios – hands-on, again and again and with increasing difficulty, until everyone knew their role when it became real. You do not really learn to put out a fire in a classroom with Post-its and PowerPoints.

The same applies in a company: Training must be so close to reality that it works when it matters. That is the core idea behind all the academies I have since helped build.

Where it all began – ISS

I built my first academy as a project manager at ISS. We had to train hundreds of peer trainers who could teach new colleagues on the job. For this I developed two courses: VITEK (Voksenpædagogisk InstruktionsTeknik – adult-education instruction technique) and GUT (Grundlæggende UndervisningsTeknik – basic teaching technique). It all took place out in the field, at ISS's customers, in our own premises and with our own tools and machines – and external trainers wore ISS-branded clothing.

The point was simple: The most skilled employee is not automatically the best at teaching others. It has to be trained. Later, in my own company, I developed the world's first video CV for job placement of new Danes – here too with training and communication at the core.

Eltel Networks – an academy in a financial crisis

When I was HR director at Eltel Networks in 2007–09, we built an internal academy with blended e-learning, outdoor exercises, coaching and homework. The framework was the LeaderShop model on a single A3 sheet, so everyone could see the connection between strategy, leadership and everyday work.

In the middle of the financial crisis, this delivered a margin improvement of EUR 3.5 million. Sickness absence was halved, staff turnover fell to less than a quarter of its previous level, and we delivered more than 2,000 training days. The HR system ECOL, which we designed, developed and implemented ourselves, also saved around EUR 1 million.

From tradesperson to foreman – the construction industry

In the construction industry, leaders are typically appointed because they are good at their trade. At Christiansen & Essenbæk we therefore built leadership development at two levels: Basic leadership for foremen over 8 modules and advanced leadership with 12 modules for salaried staff – both lasting 1½ years. Everything was action learning on the participants' own tasks – supplemented by training expeditions in Bosnia, France and Sweden.

In our award-winning project "Trivsel – 360 grader" (Well-being – 360 Degrees), we trained 12 hourly-paid concrete workers as crew representatives in VITEK-based peer training, communication and working environment. On the next team, two of them took part as assistant instructors. Sickness absence was cut by two thirds, the well-being index rose by 7 percentage points, and EBITDA shot up by more than DKK 10 million.

At Tscherning, foremen, crew supervisors and project managers got their own Tscherning Academy with instruction technique, collaboration and team leadership – and together with Christiansen & Essenbæk we ran the cross-company development project BygOp!.

> *"For our company, this collaboration has been 'the ultimate lift' from being a mediocre player to playing in the premier league."*
>
> *– Christiansen & Essenbæk A/S*

The IT industry – growth without losing the culture

At e-conomic (now Visma e-conomic), I was attached to the company's own academy for several years: "The Way We Work" with outdoor action learning for groups of 10, eight days of process leadership training, Train-the-Trainer for eight groups in Danish and English, and 1:1 coaching in the transition from specialist to middle manager – more than 50 course days in total. As the company itself wrote: "With Mads' help, among other things, we have retained our culture despite our almost explosive growth."

When Kim Sneum Madsen became CEO of Umbraco, he took the concept with him. Here it was built as an "own academy rather than a bought-in course": Repeated process leadership programmes with five modules in English, an outdoor residential retreat, a Customer Deep Dive into Umbraco's own customer culture, 1:1 coaching and buddy sparring.

At Jobindex we have developed team and supervisor leaders six years in a row. It started in 2013 with a team leader programme and became a supervisor programme with four modules, an outdoor residential retreat and 1:1 coaching in the workplace – repeated year after year. According to Jobindex, several former participants have since advanced to more important leadership roles.

At Twoday we have facilitated both the international graduate residential course and the Danish graduate programme three years in a row, with around 30 graduates on each team.

Inviting customers in as co-trainers makes it even stronger – that is exactly what we did on one of the three modules for two teams of 16 people on the Nordic consultant training programme for Cepheo.

The order: Know yourself first

A good leadership academy follows a specific order. First, the leader gets to know him- or herself under pressure. Next, you learn to listen to others and lead the processes. And finally, you see the company through the customer's eyes. "In that order", as we said at e-conomic.

Kim Sneum Madsen put the goal for the participants briefly and precisely: "The target for you is to become a better version of you." It is not a matter of learning more models, but of becoming a better version of yourself – in the company's own context and together with the colleagues you have to succeed with.

True leadership is leaving a legacy in which those you led take up the baton themselves. That is why high fives from previous teams, former graduates sharing their journey, and assistant instructors from the previous team are not decoration. This is how the culture is anchored from team to team.

Train-the-trainer – the engine of the academy

An academy that relies only on external trainers never becomes part of the culture. That is why it is crucial to train the company's own specialists, instructors, mentors and super-users to teach others. As we say on the Train-the-trainer course: "Being good at your trade is not the same as being good at teaching it to others."

The training consists of around one third instruction and two thirds practice on the participants' own professional topics – from a short pitch through 1:1 instruction with VITEK to teaching groups.

At Danmarks Nationalbank, we trained eight IT specialists this way, who were to teach their colleagues a new payment and banking system.

At C-level too

The principle applies all the way up. In LEAP – Leadership Execution Acceleration Program, the executive team of a company in critical infrastructure is going through a modular development programme: Leadership Preparedness, Trust and Shared High Team Standards, Alignment, Acceleration and Mobilisation.

Between the modules, the executives work on their own business cases, 1:1 coaching, buddy follow-up and observation of leadership meetings. It is not a course, but an academy for top management – built on the company's own strategy.

Measure capacity to act – not satisfaction

Classic course evaluations measure whether participants were satisfied. That says very little about the business impact. When the academy is linked to the strategy, you can ask sharper questions: Have the strategic focal points moved? Are decisions made faster – and do they hold? Are more projects completed and fewer started? Do employees experience more consistent leadership?

That is precisely where a company academy differs from the course catalogue: The impact can be seen in the company's own results and not just in a random evaluation form that does not address whether the specific learning objectives were put into practice, but asks unimportant questions about, for example, venue, food and time spent.

How to build your own academy

Five levers for management:

- **Make the strategy the curriculum:** Start with what participants need to be able to do and do differently – not with a course catalogue.
- **Train on your own playing field:** Closed groups, your own tasks, your own customers and your own dilemmas.
- **Build modules with gaps in between:** Homework, buddies and 1:1 coaching, so learning is tested in everyday work.
- **Train your own trainers:** Train-the-trainer and peer training make the academy part of the culture.
- **Repeat year after year:** Each team builds on the previous one – and former participants become co-trainers.

Three questions for the leadership team

Ask yourselves:

- Are we training our leaders in what the strategy requires – or in what the course catalogue offers?
- Who in our own organisation could become internal trainers and peer trainers?
- What would change if the whole leadership team trained together on the same challenges?

Conclusion – build it on your own reality

A company academy is not a course catalogue with the company logo on it. It is a way of making the strategy, the customers and the culture the training ground – with closed groups, your own tasks and a dedicated consultant supplemented by your own trainers.

The experience from more than 25 years in IT, construction, finance and medtech is the same: When colleagues train together on their own playing field, impressions become imprints – and the learning stays in the company.

The article builds on, among others, "When Strategy Becomes the Training Ground", "Building real Dream Teams" and my LinkedIn articles "Real Dream Team Building" (2015) and "Ledelse i praksis" (Leadership in Practice, 2015).

Want to build your own academy?

Cronquist Consult ApS helps companies build or supplement internal academies, graduate programmes and leadership development on your own playing field. Read more here: Graduate programmes and academies · Train-the-trainer · Leadership development