

When Strategy Becomes the Training Ground

– why the best leadership development programmes use the company's own strategy as the curriculum

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Strategies rarely fail because of their ambitions. They fail in execution – in the thousands of small decisions, priorities and conversations that leaders deal with when everyday life takes over.

Yet many companies treat strategy and leadership development as two separate tracks. The executive team owns the strategy. HR owns leadership development. And the leaders are left in the middle to make it all fit together on their own.

This article is about what happens when you merge the two tracks – and let the company's own strategy become the training ground where its leaders develop.

The double waste – two tracks that never meet

In many companies, the picture looks something like this: Management has spent months formulating a new strategy. There are analyses, focus areas, KPIs and a polished presentation. At the same time, HR sends a handful of managers on open leadership courses, where they learn about situational leadership, feedback and change models.

Both are valuable investments. But they rarely talk to each other.

The leader returns from the course with new models in the backpack and meets a strategy he or she has never practised translating into action. And the strategy is rolled out to a leadership team with widely differing views of what good leadership actually is. The result is a double waste: The course does not turn into new behaviour, and the strategy does not turn into action.

This is not the leaders' fault. It is a design problem.

Why learning gets lost on the way home

For decades, research into what is known as *learning transfer* has pointed in the same direction: What happens before and after a development programme matters far more for its impact than the teaching itself. The American evaluation researcher Robert O. Brinkerhoff has shown over many years that it is above all the conditions surrounding the participant – the manager's support, the opportunity to apply what has been learned and systematic follow-up – that determine whether learning turns into results.

It makes good sense when you think about it. A leader who has learned to give more direct feedback returns to a culture where nobody else does. Colleagues were not there. The boss asks for something else. And three weeks later the old habits are back – exactly in line with what I describe in my article [Change Management and Organisational Culture](#) as the organisation's natural immunity to change.

The individual leader is rarely the problem. The system around the leader is.

You cannot send one leader on a course and expect the whole organisation to come back changed.

The strategy as the curriculum

The logical consequence is to turn things around. Instead of starting with a generic course catalogue and hoping that leaders will connect the content to the strategy themselves, we start with the strategy – and ask: What must our leaders be able to do, do differently and decide differently for this particular strategy to succeed?

The answer to that question becomes the curriculum.

If the strategy requires more cross-functional collaboration, the leaders practise resolving real cross-functional conflicts – their own. If the strategy requires sharper prioritisation, they practise saying no to good projects that no longer fit. If the strategy requires greater customer focus, the leaders must get close to the customers' reality and work with what customers actually hire the company to solve.

Models and theory still have an important place. But they become tools for solving the company's own challenges – not goals in themselves.

That is the difference between learning about leadership – and training leadership.

When leaders train together – across departments and levels – something else happens that an open course can never deliver: They develop a shared leadership language, a shared understanding of the priorities and a shared commitment to each other.

The space between the modules matters most

One of the most overlooked levers in leadership development is the time between the modules. Many people think of a programme as a series of good days away from the office. But in a modular programme, the space in between is where the execution actually happens.

Each module ends with concrete commitments: What will you – and we – do differently over the next six weeks? Which decision needs to be made? Which conversation needs to be had? Between the modules, the leaders put this into practice, receive sparring and coaching and gather experience they bring back to the next module. There, the experience becomes the subject of shared reflection: What worked? What did we run into? What do we need to adjust?

In this way, the programme becomes a learning engine and an execution engine at the same time. The leaders grow stronger while the strategy moves forward.

What a modular programme might look like:

- **Module 1 – Shared direction:** The strategy is translated into leadership tasks. What does it mean for our specific areas of responsibility – and what should we stop doing?
- **Module 2 – Shared standards:** The leadership team formulates Shared High Team Standards for behaviour, decisions and collaboration.
- **Module 3 – Difficult conversations and priorities:** Training in constructive disagreement, feedback and deselection – using the leaders' own, current cases.
- **Module 4 – Mobilisation:** Passionate change agents and key employees are engaged in the strategic focal points.
- **Module 5 – Status and anchoring:** What has moved? What should be sustained, and how will we follow up going forward?

Between the modules, the leaders work on applying what they have learned, individual coaching, peer sparring and follow-up with the executive team. The content is always tailored to the specific company, strategy and leadership team.

From individual competence to collective momentum

The aim of a tailored programme is not simply better leaders. It is an organisation that gets better at turning strategy into results.

This requires the leadership team to move from being a collection of capable individuals to being a team with shared responsibility. In my approach, this happens among other things through working with [Shared High Team Standards \(SHTS\)](#) – concrete standards for how we make decisions, handle disagreement, follow up and hold each other mutually accountable. Also when it is inconvenient.

The standards only come alive when they are applied to real situations. And that is exactly what a programme built on the company's own strategy makes possible. The leaders do not practise on

constructed cases – they practise on the decisions they have to make anyway.

The effect is reinforced further when the programme is linked to the people in the organisation who have that famous spark in their eyes. With the [Ildstorm \(Firestorm\)](#) method, we mobilise passionate change agents across hierarchy and seniority around the strategic focal points, so that the momentum does not stop with the leadership team but spreads throughout the entire organisation.

What should we actually measure?

A classic leadership course is typically evaluated on participant satisfaction. Were the days inspiring? Was the trainer good? These are fair questions, but they say very little about whether the investment has made a difference to the business.

When the programme is linked to the strategy, we can ask far sharper questions: Have the strategic focal points moved? Are decisions made faster – and do they stick? Are fewer projects launched, but more of them completed? Do employees experience more consistent and clearer leadership? Do the leaders talk about the strategy using the same words?

This shifts the conversation from learning as an activity to learning as business value. It is also the core of the [LeaderShop](#) model, which I developed in my CBA thesis on successful strategy execution: connecting the strategy with leadership competencies, development initiatives and concrete results.

Three questions for the executive team

If you sit on an executive team or in an HR function and are considering your next leadership development initiative, these three questions are a good place to start:

Ask yourselves:

- Do your leaders know which three things they must do differently – and what they must stop doing – for the strategy to succeed?
- Are you training your leaders in what the strategy requires – or in what the course catalogue offers?
- Who follows up on the leaders' commitments between meetings, and how does the leadership team hold each other accountable?

If the answers are unclear, it is rarely a sign of poor leaders. It is a sign that strategy and leadership development have not yet become one project.

Conclusion – strategy and leadership development are one project

Strategies rarely fail because of their ambitions. They fail in execution. And execution is ultimately a matter of leadership – of what leaders prioritise, decide and follow up on, day after day.

That is why it makes sense to let the strategy become the training ground. When leaders develop together, on their own challenges and with the company's own strategy as the curriculum, a shared leadership language, clearer priorities and greater momentum emerge.

You can read more about how such a programme is designed and delivered in practice in the client case "[LEAP](#)".

The leaders do not just get better. The organisation gets better at turning strategy into results.

Want to make your strategy your leaders' training ground?

Cronquist Consult ApS designs closed, company-tailored, modular programmes that connect leadership development and strategy execution. Read more here:

<https://cronquist.dk/en/strategy-and-execution>

<https://cronquist.dk/en/leadership-development>