From Specialist to Leader

– four shifts every new leader must go through – and how to train them

By **Mads Cronquist** · Cronquist Consult ApS

The best engineer becomes project manager. The sharpest developer becomes team lead. The best consultant becomes the boss. It is logical – and it is also where many leadership careers get off to a rough start.

Yesterday they were recognised for having the right answer. Tomorrow they will be measured on other people's results, on customer value and on the bottom line. These are two completely different disciplines.

This article is about the transition from specialist to leader – and why it resembles the difference between going to military academy and actually being at war. It is about four shifts every new leader must go through, and how they can be trained.

Military academy or war?

Some years ago there was a debate in Denmark about whether public-sector leaders should go to military academy. I commented on an article at the time with a simple point: There is a significant difference between attending military academy and actually taking part in a war. Military academies largely train management – planning, structure and order – and to a lesser extent leadership of anyone beyond the group you belong to yourself. And officer cadets are usually motivated and fairly compliant.

I learned this first-hand. At 20 I was a trained emergency preparedness officer, had trained firefighters and thought I had seen most things. A couple of years later I went to war in Bosnia and became head of the Danish Mobile Hospital. The staff did their best, but under the enormous pressure of war they did not work as a team at first. No textbook had prepared me for that.

What worked was something else entirely: Getting to know each person, working side by side 16–17 hours a day, sharing the hardships and building trust – so concretely that you could put your life in each other's hands. In the end the team called itself the "DMH Dream Team". You can read more about it in Building Real Dream Teams.

When new staff arrived, we combined a well-prepared induction plan with open questions: What competences, what knowledge and what energy do you bring to the team? That was not management. It was leadership – and it was something completely different from what I had learned in the classroom. That experience became the foundation for everything I have worked with since.

Management creates order – leadership handles disorder

John P. Kotter has put it sharply: No one has yet figured out how to effectively steer and control people into battle – they must be led. Management is about creating order in complexity. Leadership is about handling change – in other words disorder, bordering on chaos.

Robert Benfari, whom I drew on in my CBA thesis on middle managers as the key to successful strategy execution, says something similar. The leader's big question is not how to do things right – that is the engineer's approach – but how to find the right things to do. The specialist is trained in the first. The leader is measured on the second.

In Bosnia I also discovered that once self-leadership was established, day-to-day management became almost superfluous – except in situations where fear and chaos threatened to paralyse the team. Then clear direction was needed, and it was accepted because you had earned the trust. So the leader must be able to do both – and know when one is needed rather than the other.

> *No one has yet figured out how to manage people into battle – they must be led.*

Zooming in and out

I later rediscovered this mechanism in many organisations and called it "zooming in and out" – management versus leadership. Like a camera, we can learn to place our leadership deliberately in the right places at the right time. No one, however, can zoom in and out at the same time.

Zooming in is about the details and the people: Creating shared understanding, coordinating and getting different mental maps to point in the same direction. Zooming out is about the overview: Navigating by the major milestones when complexity approaches chaos. Operations and strategy.

The specialist's typical trap is to stay zoomed in – in the technical solution, in the detail, in what you are best at yourself. So you correct the task yourself instead of developing the people who are supposed to solve it. It feels productive, but it is not leadership.

The opposite trap also exists: The new leader who zooms so far out into strategy-speak and PowerPoints that the employees cannot use it for anything on Monday morning. The good leader moves deliberately between the two positions. It can be trained – and that is exactly what we practise in our leadership development programmes, where participants alternately have to create an overview and take care of the detail while the pressure and complexity are turned up.

But why do so many specialists get stuck zoomed in? Part of the answer lies in the organisation they come from.

The professional bureaucracy – when expertise is the glue

Henry Mintzberg calls organisations in which professional specialists form the core "professional bureaucracies". Here, skills are standardised through long education, and it is expertise that holds everything together like glue – the so-called prime coordinating mechanism. That makes them strong in operations and quality. But they are rarely very willing to change, because expertise dictates the right solution.

Mintzberg uses the term "pigeonholing": The customer is put into the right professional box – and that works as long as the customer knows which hole to go into. Cross-disciplinary work and innovation struggle, and new leadership knowledge may even be felt as a threat to expert power.

At Christiansen & Essenbæk I called our leaders "academics in wellies": Skilled engineers who planned and executed at the same time – with concrete on their safety boots. Many were in leadership roles because of their expertise and had had to learn how to lead along the way.

Responsibility must be pushed further down and across the organisation to develop the next generation of leaders – responsibility with freedom. And it is urgent, because unhelpful behaviour spreads faster than good behaviour. You do not become healthy by standing next to a healthy person, but the reverse unfortunately often happens.

The professional bureaucracy thus shapes the leaders it appoints. And what it shapes them into is not necessarily what they are measured on. Our mission to raise leadership quality at C&E succeeded beyond all expectations – in terms of awards and recognition, earnings and the fact that a young leadership talent is now becoming the new CEO.

What you learned at school is not what you are measured on

At engineering school, in computer science or in economics, you learn to get the calculation right. As a new leader you are suddenly measured on something completely different – and you have to show results quickly: Are we creating value for the customer? Am I getting the employees to pull in the same direction? And are we making money?

On arrival at a company, young engineers have rarely met a customer, met an employee they are to lead, or been responsible for a budget. Yet we give them responsibility for exactly those three areas and expect miracles. It ain't gonna happen. It is not their fault – but it is the company's responsibility to teach them.

"Mr Disruption", Clayton M. Christensen, writes that future leaders must be put in situations they are not yet qualified for, because it is the only way they learn. But that does not mean throwing them in at the deep end to see if they can swim. It takes gradual training, follow-up and someone who asks about it. The well-being survey at Christiansen & Essenbæk pointed to exactly this as the most important focus area: Far better and more systematic competence development. It is the company's responsibility to fill the competence gaps the new leader was made responsible for on appointment.

The hardest shift is mental. The specialist is used to having the answer. The leader has to ask the questions and get others to find the answers. Benfari calls it cognitive restructuring: Only when we become aware of our perception, assumptions and feelings – and of the way we talk to ourselves – can we change our mental model and thus our behaviour. It is not something you can read your way to. It is something you train, and that shift does not stop with the employees. It applies just as much to customers.

From expert to trusted advisor

The same shift applies in terms of customers. A skilled expert is not automatically a trusted advisor. It takes training in listening, asking and understanding the customer's reality, not just delivering the technically right solution.

At Cepheo we trained two Nordic consultant teams of 16 consultants each. Instead of only talking about the customers, we brought real customers into the learning room as co-trainers and co-creators. The consultants listened directly, asked questions, challenged their own assumptions and reflected on their own practice in the light of what the customers themselves told them. The customer's voice and perspective became decisive for co-creating a strong value proposition that matched the customers' real needs far better.

We have used the same approach at e-conomic and Twoday, among others, where customers taught the new leaders and graduates what they loved, missed and hated about products and service – delivered unfiltered. We call the ability to systematically discover, understand and deliver the value the customer actually seeks "customer value capture". It is a leadership competence, not just a sales competence.

This is exactly the move both the new leader and the new advisor have to make: From having the answer to understanding the question. You can read more in From Expert to Trusted Advisor.

How we have trained the transition

The transition from specialist to leader has been at the heart of many of our modular leadership development programmes – including at Visma e-conomic, Umbraco, Jobindex, Ageras (now Shine/Cegid), PSN Service, Tscherning and Christiansen & Essenbæk. The common denominator was skilled professionals who had never had people responsibility before, in companies where growth left no time to learn it along the way.

At e-conomic we started by observing actual leadership behaviour – what the leaders did, not what they thought they did. This was followed by action learning in changing learning arenas, a buddy system, 1:1 coaching and feedback on the new behaviour from both employees and management. The learning arena was changed deliberately – outdoors, the office, the hotel and a small theatre – because leadership behaviour becomes clearer when the setting changes.

At Jobindex, the team and supervisor leaders had been appointed on the basis of expertise, and the programme was repeated and further developed six years in a row. Elsewhere we trained skilled craftspeople and technical specialists to instruct, motivate and achieve results through others – and project managers to make decisions under pressure together with special forces instructors. At Umbraco the programme was established as the company's own academy and run in English, so that development could continue after the consultant had gone home.

I see the result today: Many of the participants from these programmes now hold management and executive positions. They did not learn leadership at military academy. They learned it in practice – with training, reflection and someone who kept at it.

The common thread – four shifts

Pulling the threads together, there are four shifts every specialist has to go through to become a strong leader:

From doing to getting others to do. Results are now created through others – and that requires trust, which has to be earned.

From having the answer to asking the question. Both with employees and with customers.

From zooming in to zooming in and out. The detail and the overview – at the right time.

From technically right to value-creating. Customer value, employees and profitability are now the yardstick.

None of the shifts happens by itself. They require training – in real situations, under pressure and with someone who has the background and leadership in place themselves, so that the right support and challenges can be given along the way.

Are you still leading like a specialist?

Five warning signs:

- **You correct the task yourself** instead of coaching, training and developing the person who is supposed to solve it.
- **You measure yourself on the technical solution** rather than on the team's results and the customer's experience.
- **You have the answer before the question is asked** – and your employees have stopped coming up with ideas.
- **You are stuck zoomed in** on the detail and never get up into the aircraft, where the view creates insight.
- **You know the technology better than the numbers** – and are not quite sure how your area makes money.

Three questions for you as a leader

Ask yourself:

- How much of my time do I spend solving tasks myself – and how much on developing others?
- How do I know what my customers and employees actually need from me?
- Who trains our new leaders in what they are actually measured on?

Conclusion – expertise is the ticket, leadership must be trained

Expertise gets you appointed. But it is not what you are measured on as a leader. Customer value, employees and profitability require new competences – and the ability to zoom in and out deliberately.

Leadership is not learned at military academy alone. It is learned in disorder, with training, feedback and someone with the right background and experience who can support and challenge you. It is the company's responsibility to give new leaders that training – before they are thrown into the war.

The article builds on, among others, my CBA thesis "LeaderShop – nøglen til succesfuld strategi" (LeaderShop – the Key to Successful Strategy, 2012), my book "Lederens inspirationsguide" (The Leader's Inspiration Guide, 2012, in Danish), my commentary "Ledelse af forandringer" (Leading Change, 2013), the article "Building Real Dream Teams" and cases from Cepheo, Visma e-conomic, Umbraco, Jobindex, PSN Service, Twoday, Tscherning and Christiansen & Essenbæk.

Do you want your specialists to become strong leaders?

Cronquist Consult ApS trains new leaders and middle managers in the transition from specialist to leader – with action learning, coaching and training in the company's own reality. Read more here: Leadership development · Middle management development · Executive coaching