Future Leadership Preparedness

– what 32 young people taught us about leadership

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Leadership does not begin with a title. It begins with the ability to lead yourself – to muster a surplus mentality and overcome even the impossible.

In 2015–17, 32 perfectly ordinary 6th-graders in the village of Sengeløse showed that self-care capacity, collaboration and team leadership under pressure can be trained from the age of 12. Today they are in their early twenties and an important part of future leadership preparedness.

This article is about what the young people taught us – and why the same principles work for managers, leadership teams and graduates in companies.

It started at my dining table

I met Emil at martial arts training in the village. His 9-year-old energy shot off in all directions, and outside the dojo we worked out together how it could be gathered and focused like a blowtorch, so he learned to burn through instead of burning out. For six years we did homework every Thursday evening to train focusing, overcoming what is difficult and conquering ourselves. Along the way, Emil also learned to play the guitar.

It became the seed of a vision one dark night in a forest in Canada, where I had gone on a masterclass, partly to reflect a little on life: What mark did I really want to leave on this world, so that it would make a difference people could feel? A mission whose importance was bigger than the ego of the personality.

Could I create an entirely new concept that could change our shared welfare model? Could and would I dedicate roughly a full person-year of my spare time to it – and pay most of the bill myself; around DKK 300,000? Could I get others on board?

In the glow of my little candle, with the wolves prowling around me, I sketched on a small page in my notebook what shortly afterwards would become www.fremtidenslederberedskab.dk.

In short, the idea was to offer a dozen young people – before they became teenagers – intensive training in channelling their energy, combining homework training – around my dining table – with character-building outdoor activities both in Denmark and abroad. And just as my parents had taught me: To give before you can take – combined with my 25 years of hard-earned leadership experience from both war and business. They were to learn to lead themselves, collaborate effectively in teams and take turns being leaders. At 12 years old.

There was a certain risk that I might be branded the village idiot, but when the project was launched at the school, all places were taken within an hour. Emil gave a speech at the launch. It became two teams of 16 young people – eight boys and eight girls on both teams over two years – and a long waiting list.

Now the hard work began. Not least mobilising a lot of committed instructors and homework trainers. It succeeded beyond all expectations. The importance of the mission found its footing – and its launch pad.

Five expeditions with increasing difficulty

The training, run by my company OLTC, took place in the main school holidays over five modules totalling around 20 days – each day with at least 15 hours of activity, solo, in teams and together. The difficulty increased gradually, so the young people were constantly challenged right at the edge of what they thought they could do:

The first module was 30 hours of non-stop action – starting with basic outdoor skills such as building a bivouac, cooking over a fire and first aid – and a complex rescue exercise at 4 a.m. leading straight on to smoke diving and firefighting at the Danish Emergency Management Agency, where in my younger days I was head of training.

On Anholt we worked with silence, contemplation and inner preparedness together with a special forces soldier and a mindfulness expert. In Värmland in Sweden it was team training in the wilderness by canoe at NKTC, where I myself trained as a wilderness guide, and in the Austrian Alps it was ski touring training, a snowshoe expedition and leadership in headwinds. The finale was four days in Bosnia with my old comrades from the war, where the young people, among other things, abseiled 42 metres down a mountainside and went white water rafting at dawn.

Between the expeditions, we met every Thursday at 7 p.m. around my dining table for an hour and a half of homework training. Training, not a homework café! Those who needed extra support got a volunteer homework trainer at home, and in the second year the parents took turns being homework trainers in smaller groups. Small, self-reinforcing positive circles.

> *After just a few weeks, the teachers said: "It's already working!"*

Responsibility is the ability to respond

To be accepted onto the project at all, it was an absolute requirement that the young person had to find, complete and document at least 20 hours of voluntary charitable work in the local community themselves – for example at the nursery, at the care home, at the village festival or for the elderly neighbour who needed help mowing the lawn. Many continued after the project. More welfare for zero kroner – because the solution is volunteers.

Responsibility is about being able to respond: Proactively meeting every challenge – including those that are not your own. The young people strove not just to be accepted, but to be perfect in the eyes of others. But the secret lies in imperfection, just as in innovation. When you accept that you are imperfect, you can begin to develop.

The recurring, self-invented method was 3H – head, heart and hands – which ensures that the learning sticks and that the young person consciously learns to realise their untapped potential. The project strengthened not only social and personal competences, but also, quite markedly, the ability to absorb academic learning at school.

"I can do anything"

The strongest proof came from the young people themselves. A girl on the first team who, at 13, had not dared to jump from the five-metre board at the swimming pool the year before, wrote after the project about how she now jumped – because in Bosnia she had learned to believe in herself: "When I stood on the five-metre board, I realised the thing you have been trying to cram into our little heads: I can do anything. I jumped."

The evaluation showed that more than nine out of ten parents thought the programme was exceptionally good – among other things because it intervened much earlier than expensive, remedial teenage projects. The project was nominated for the Erhvervsprisen business award and received coverage in local newspapers, on radio and in Rotary clubs. You can watch a short film about the project at fremtidenslederberedskab.dk (in Danish).

Emil, who was an assistant instructor on many of the expeditions, has now started training as a special needs educator, got top marks in psychology, has joined a band that is going to play at festivals, and lives in Copenhagen with his girlfriend. Recently he wrote to me as he was on his way to Paris with her:

> *"Sitting here feeling a bit nostalgic at the airport – and just want to say thank you for everything you have given, and you should know that I still think about and have my 'inner dialogues' about everything you and I have created and been through together."*
>
> *– Emil, former participant and assistant instructor*

I received the message during an interval at the theatre with some good friends – and had to borrow a napkin. Emil was passing the baton on, and you can only be immensely proud of that.

What companies can learn from 12-year-olds

The essence of the project was to develop strong self-care capacity and a surplus mentality as the foundation of future leadership preparedness. That is exactly what we work with when we train leaders, leadership teams, teams and graduates in companies: First you must be able to lead yourself before you can lead others with authenticity, inner calm and personal strength. In fact, it is also the foundation for how to work with product innovation, process improvements and greater value creation together with your customers.

The principles are the same: Training with increasing difficulty, close to reality. Follow-up between modules. Former participants as co-instructors, so they themselves become razor-sharp. And a clear requirement to contribute to the community – not just to yourself. This can advantageously be built into the company's own academy and into graduate programmes, where new employees need to find their footing.

On my computer, the project amounts to 100 GB of data spread across almost 6,000 files and thousands of emails. But the greatest value cannot be measured in gigabytes. It lives in 32 young people who are now heading out into life believing they can do far more than they ever thought. My contribution to the important leadership preparedness of the future.

Five principles from future leadership preparedness

Any organisation can use them:

- **Start with self-leadership:** Self-care capacity and a surplus mentality are the foundation of all leadership.
- **Increase the difficulty gradually:** Challenge people right at the edge of what they think they can do.
- **Train with dedication:** Fixed, committed training in everyday work between learning modules and big experiences.
- **Pass it on:** Former participants become co-instructors – and learn the most themselves.
- **Require a contribution to the community:** Responsibility is the ability to respond – also to others than yourself.

Three questions for the leadership team

Ask yourselves:

- Do we train our leaders and new employees to lead themselves before we ask them to lead others?
- Where do we challenge our people right at the edge of what they think they can do?
- How do we pass leadership on to the next generation in our organisation?

Conclusion – pass leadership on

32 young people from a small village showed that leadership can be trained much earlier in life than most people think – and that it starts with self-care capacity, a surplus mentality and the will to contribute to the community.

It is the same path leaders and leadership teams must take: First with yourself and then with those right around you. Small, self-reinforcing positive circles that over time become the leadership preparedness of the future.

The article builds on, among others, my LinkedIn articles "Giv lederskabet videre" (Pass Leadership On, 2015), "Overskudsmentalitet i praksis" (Surplus Mentality in Practice, 2015), "Landsbyens unge laver lektier omkring mit spisebord" (The Village's Young People Do Homework Around My Dining Table, 2015), "Tak for musik" (Thanks for the Music, 2016), "Ny velfærdsmodel baseret på frivillige" (A New Welfare Model Based on Volunteers, 2021) and "Fremtidens ledere fylder snart 20 år" (Future Leaders Will Soon Turn 20, 2022).

Want to train the future leaders in your organisation?

Cronquist Consult ApS helps companies with leadership and team development, graduate programmes and OLTC training that builds self-care capacity, a surplus mentality and leadership under pressure. Read more here:
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