

The Power of Building an In-House Leadership Academy

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Over the past nine years at the Trust-Based Leadership Academy, we have had the privilege of working with a wide range of organizations in leadership development and skills enhancement. During this time, one of the most powerful, and certainly one of the most satisfying, approaches we have encountered has been the establishment of an in-house Leadership Academy.

Done properly, a Leadership Academy is much more than another training programme. It becomes part of the architecture of the organization: developing leaders, strengthening the leadership pipeline, creating a common language around leadership and, ultimately, shaping organizational culture.

What Is a Leadership Academy?

A Leadership Academy can take different forms, but fundamentally it is an in-house, structured leadership development process, suited to any organizations with a leadership population.

Ideally, it operates at one or two levels and runs over an extended period, often a year. This is important. Leadership is not developed through a once-off workshop. People need opportunities to learn, apply, reflect, experiment and return to the learning environment with real experiences from the workplace.

At the first-line or supervisory level, the academy focuses particularly on the important transition from leading self to leading others.

We typically begin with personal discovery: Who am I, and who pitches up on Monday morning? From there, participants explore their personal leadership brand: How do I want people to experience me, and what do I want to be known for as a leader?

The programme then moves into the practical realities of leadership: building trust, handling difficult conversations, dealing with performance, developing people, creating effective teams and understanding how a leader influences others in every direction - upwards, downwards and sideways.

Depending on the organization, this can be supplemented with practical management and organizational skills such as basic HR, performance management, time management, presentation skills, organizational financial systems, product knowledge, and other capabilities required by leaders in that particular environment.

There is also considerable value in involving key people from across the organization during the academy. Senior executives and specialists from areas such as finance, operations, HR, sales, quality, production or strategy can present focused sessions that expose participants to the wider business. In this way, the academy becomes not only a place to learn about leadership, but also a place to understand the organization and how its different parts fit together.

At senior and executive levels, the same philosophy can be taken to a more advanced level. Here the focus shifts towards the leader of leaders, incorporating areas such as systems thinking, ethics and governance, strategic leadership, change management, coaching, building a continuous-improvement culture and understanding the broader organizational impact of leadership decisions.

Formal or Informal Learning?

A Leadership Academy does not necessarily need to follow a single educational model.

Depending on the organization and the participants, programmes can be linked to formal education and accredited qualifications, providing participants with recognised learning outcomes or qualifications. Equally, an academy can operate as a highly practical, informal organizational development programme without the requirements associated with formal accreditation.

There can also be considerable value in combining the two.

What matters is that the educational structure supports the organization's purpose rather than allowing accreditation to become the purpose itself. The ultimate measure of the academy is not simply whether participants achieve a qualification, but whether they become better leaders and make a greater contribution to the organization.

Applied Learning, Not Academic Drivel

The content of a Leadership Academy needs substance. It should be grounded in credible research and developed by people who understand the leadership literature.

But that does not mean participants need hours of academic theory.

Busy leaders want to know: What can I use tomorrow morning when I get back to work?

The challenge is therefore to take robust leadership thinking and translate it into practical tools, conversations and behaviours that work in the real world.

Facilitation becomes crucial. If people are going to invest significant time in an academy, the facilitator needs more than theoretical knowledge. Great facilitation requires the ability to hold a room, challenge thinking, create psychological safety, draw learning from participants and connect theory with the messy realities leaders actually face.

There is enormous value in facilitators who have themselves experienced organizational life and can say, in effect: I understand the theory, but I also understand what Monday morning looks like.

Learning Must Flow Back into the Organization

One of the most important principles of a successful Leadership Academy is that the learning should not remain in the classroom.

Participants should work on real organizational projects as part of their academy experience. These might include improving performance-management processes, redesigning induction and onboarding, strengthening internal training, developing continuous-improvement initiatives, addressing employee or cultural challenges, or contributing to business and functional strategy.

This creates a powerful connection between learning leadership and practising leadership.

Rather than simply completing assignments to obtain a certificate, participants demonstrate their leadership capability by contributing to issues that matter to the organization. Their final projects and presentations can then form part of the academy's exit process, with senior leaders seeing both the quality of the work and the emerging capability of the individuals involved.

Leadership Development Needs Leadership Involvement

Another critical success factor is the involvement of the organization's existing senior leadership.

An academy should not be something that HR simply sends people on.

Senior leaders should help shape it, participate in aspects of it, mentor participants, attend presentations and take a genuine interest in who enters and emerges from the programme.

Ideally, entry into the academy should involve a nomination or selection process. Being selected should mean something. It should be something that emerging leaders aspire to because the organization has clearly communicated:

Leadership matters here.

The exit process is equally important. Participants should have opportunities to demonstrate what they have learned, present their projects and become visible to the organization's senior leadership.

This connects the academy directly with talent identification, succession planning, recruitment, promotion and career development. Over time, the academy becomes one of the mechanisms through which the organization identifies and grows its next generation of leaders.

The Outcomes Go Far Beyond Training

The first and most obvious benefit is better leadership capability.

The transition from technical specialist to leader of people remains one of the most underdeveloped areas in many organizations. People are frequently promoted because they are technically competent and are then expected somehow to know how to lead.

A Leadership Academy deliberately develops this capability.

But something more interesting begins to happen when the academy continues year after year.

People who have completed the academy begin mentoring those currently going through it. Leaders across different departments have shared concepts, language and tools. People who may seldom have interacted operationally develop relationships through the academy.

A leadership network begins to form across the organization.

People from operations, finance, HR, sales, engineering and other functions find themselves sitting in the same room discussing trust, performance, teams, accountability, culture and the challenges of leading people.

The academy begins creating a beating leadership pulse across the organization.

From Leadership Academy to Organizational Culture

This is perhaps the most important outcome of all.

An organization's culture does not exist independently of its leaders. Culture is, to a significant extent, the shadow cast by leadership.

If leaders consistently behave in particular ways, those behaviours gradually become embedded in how the organization operates.

But something particularly powerful happens when an academy has existed for some time. The leadership culture that emerges begins to transcend individual leaders and individual personalities. It is no longer dependent upon one charismatic executive, one manager or even one level of hierarchy.

Instead, leadership becomes grounded in a shared philosophy and way of thinking about how people should be led. The principles become part of the organization's collective understanding rather than something that flows down through the hierarchy from whoever happens to occupy the most senior position.

This makes the leadership culture significantly more sustainable. Leaders may move roles, senior executives may leave and structures may change, but the underlying leadership philosophy remains embedded in the organization through the people who have experienced and subsequently carried the academy forward.

When participation is prestigious, senior management is actively involved, projects address genuine organizational challenges, graduates become mentors to future participants, and academy outcomes influence succession and promotion decisions, leadership development stops being an HR intervention.

It becomes part of how the organization works.

Over time, an organization is not simply producing people who have attended leadership training. It is building a community of leaders who share an understanding of what good leadership looks like and who are increasingly capable of holding one another accountable for practising it.

That is the real power of a Leadership Academy.

It develops individuals, certainly. But at its best, it does something far bigger: it creates a sustainable leadership philosophy, leadership capability, leadership pipeline and organizational culture that can endure long after individual leaders have moved on.