

Experienced Managers for an Agile Organization

Royal DSM and Ashridge Program for Experienced Managers



Many organizations struggle to find strategies that address some of today's most pressing corporate challenges: developing agility, co-operation and accountability. Typically, leadership development budgets support the encouragement of these attitudes and behaviours in both the most senior leadership and the most promising future talent. This leaves a valuable population relatively untapped, the very backbone of organizations, experienced managers. These are the people who are functional experts, who are connected to the clients and suppliers and who coach and influence scores of professionals below and above them in corporate hierarchies.

Royal DSM the global life sciences and materials sciences company, headquartered in the Netherlands and employing over 23,000 people, recognised the value of such an investment and eight years ago asked Ashridge Business School to run a program for their Experienced Managers (PEM program). The program complemented the existing suite of global executive and management programs offered by the DSM Business

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Academy. The Academy is the first port of call for any DSM employee wishing to expand their leadership skills, improve the dynamics of their team or enhance their knowledge within a particular business function.

Pank van de Kooij, program manager of the PEM at the DSM Business Academy, said: "To make learning on the job possible we should create conditions in residential learning to enable people

One participant states: "I learned to engage with people and started enjoying that. Because of this I was able to be more myself. Because I am behaving more authentically nowadays, this leads to: better results, having better and more trustful relationships, having more fun in work, being more inspirational for others."

Ashridge Program Director Myrna Jelman suspected that these new attitudes and behaviour would create over time a positive



to collaborate better and more efficiently together in their jobs and projects. Only in this way we can make learning sustainable, ongoing and make people not only accountable for performance, but also for learning. In the PEM, we have successfully created those conditions".

From the start in 2005, an Organization Development agenda was embedded within this Leadership development program, and over the years it has been continuously adapted to meet DSM's changing focus. Throughout, the core program philosophy has remained the same: to enable experienced managers to meet across functional and geographical divides, to make sense of current organizational challenges, to challenge their assumptions about their role as managers and to find their own authentic style of relating to others. The follow-up group telephone sessions demonstrated that these experienced managers returned to work with new attitudes, energy and commitment to their role as coaches, project managers and DSM representatives.

organizational impact and wanted to find out just how much of an impact could still be felt up to eight years on. "Janet Smallwood, Howard Atkins and I on the Ashridge team were always struck at the level of personal transformation achieved by these experienced managers in such a short program. It almost felt like awakening Sleeping Beauty. With a strong belief that personal transformation directly affects working relationships and therefore the organization, I was keen to research the impact of this program in particular."

The Ashridge team surveyed participants from 2005 onwards asking them to rate themselves 'then' and 'now' on carefully chosen statements directly linked to DSM's current concerns. They also provided their own assessment of the

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program's impact on them, their role and DSM. To add some objectivity to the research, a sample of these experienced managers' own managers were also surveyed.

From the self-report, participants saw a 44% improvement on average of their confidence, connecting differently, self-awareness, empowering others, understanding DSM and business results. Line managers saw a 46% improvement in confidence and taking a proactive stance and teamwork. A participant explains: “I try and focus on most important and valuable things in my work: broaden my network, challenge ways of working and ideas, connect people and focus, not only content, but try to stimulate good connection, communication and behaviour”.

The program is a blended-learning journey of six months which includes:

Pre-workshop:

- Conversations with one's line manager and with a trusted friend at work
- A pre-module two-hour telephone conference meeting to determine participants' key learning objectives

Workshop: A 4.5 day residential module

Post-workshop: Three half-day virtual learning team meetings spread over three or four months to support the ongoing development of each person's leadership and change capabilities.

The workshop has a strong focus on participation in a learning team formed on the second day and meeting several times during the week for increasingly transformative personal leadership work. Participants have consistently rated this element of the program as one of their favourite. A participant describes ‘the great feeling of belonging to a group of selected highly motivated professionals searching for similar improvement possibilities than me. We have created a compact group that gives feedback and support when needed.’

The workshop includes:

- Experiential activities: coaching practice, handling difficult conversations using Forum Theatre; comedy improvisation and story telling
- Theoretical input followed by reflections on own context: leadership theories including leadership in complexity, personal patterns and drivers, leading change, effective group relationships
- A chance to share real organizational issues: current organizational context in each business group; a presentation and conversation with Gerard de Reuver, Business Group Director of Dyneema; working on real change issues and receiving feedback from peers in the learning team.



The evaluation project showed that the participants had developed a greater awareness of the impact of their behaviour on others and of their own responsibility as a leader, including being a role model, needing to continuously learn and reflect as a leader, leading by example and taking time for reflection.

Confidence was another factor strongly highlighted with statements such as 'being more myself', saying 'what I need', directness including in feedback and coaching, being more open about my intentions and motivations and refocusing on what is important. One participant said: "My confidence in doing my job got a nice boost. The program gave me the confidence to speak out and ask for what I needed – even if it was not the desires of management."

This was followed by being more open to different views, listening to people and understanding situations differently, such as exploring what people are really saying, taking a broader view, thinking outside the box, an expansion of knowledge and of styles of communication and greater resilience towards change and complexity.

Interestingly line managers saw bigger improvements than participants, in particular for coaching, engaging people, leading change effectively and challenging effectively. One line manager reported: "More confident in the role, more aware of own impact, more sensitive to emotions, more aware of the importance of visibility". The fact that line managers saw more change than the participants is interesting in itself. Could it be misplaced humility on the part of experienced managers or more worrying, a lack of expectation on the part of their line manager in the first place? Is it also possible that participants do not feel they have 'suffered' for their transformation and therefore underestimate its effect? Indeed, many participants spoke of freeing themselves to be authentic, some reaping the rewards in bigger ways than others: "By speaking out more my thoughts, visions, directions for

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improvement and my wish for next role, a 'role' has been created fitting both the needs of DSM and myself and in which I have been able to develop beyond previous boundaries”.

At the organizational level, many mentioned increased efficiency and tangible business outcomes from better quality decision-making and increased collaborative working.

Gerard de Reuver, President of DSM Dyneema, is a guest speaker on the program. He says: “My aspirations are to achieve sustainable change in the organization and at different levels over a period of at least 3 to 5 years. What excites me is that we are addressing this among middle managers, a factor which is essential if there is to be lasting change.”

Reuver believes in developing a culture of agility throughout DSM. This he said could be achieved through a process of change amongst middle management by challenging them outside their comfort zone. “It is important to develop middle managers in a way that is not a fast fix, so discussions in groups like this program are a good way. Where you have people together with professionals around them to talk and work with them on behaviour is invaluable.”

He continues: “The positive results of the evaluation didn’t surprise me. It confirmed my strong opinion that culture and behaviour is driven by mindset – and mindset for me is about confidence and feeling comfortable in doing things they haven’t done before.”

Myrna Jelman explains: “The program’s starting assumption is that these experienced managers are knowledgeable, committed and can positively contribute to each other’s learning. Over one week, we offer them some theories but mostly experiences that help them reflect on their management habits, assumptions and patterns of relating to others. The program is preceded and followed by an opportunity for each learner to apply their insights to real organizational challenges in their current role. The result is truly a mindset change about themselves, their role and their responsibility to DSM”.

“With the increased awareness of my own position, I feel energised to pick up activities that are difficult to manage and or realize,” one participant said.

Gerard de Reuver added that agility is the key word to mark the success of the program. “I want an organization that can respond to changes in the world quick enough and that requires accountability.” It seems that the PEM program tapped into a crucial organization resource in its experienced managers by releasing their confidence to take responsibility. A participant declares: “When reflecting on what I’d learned, I found out that I didn’t want to be a manager. Instead, I decided that I wanted to become a leader”.

Participants up to eight years after attending the Ashridge program have been able to describe sustained changes in on-the-job habits, especially relating to self-awareness (through a keen awareness of the impact of one’s behaviour on others) and responsibility

The participants had developed a greater awareness of the impact of their behaviour on others and of their own responsibility as a leader

as a leader, (including for being a role model, needing to continuously learn, leading by example and taking time for reflection).

"In retrospect, my character has changed. I am more open now than I used to be, (pre)informing peers and team members about motivation for my policies and actions. But also in my personal environment I see myself listening to people in another way. I explore backgrounds of thoughts that make people say and do the things they say and do".

The changes in question are perceived not only by participants but also by their line managers.

"Results from my (altered and new) contributions are that the (project) teams and networks, of which I'm a member, produce more efficiently and that colleagues therein do feel much more supported or engaged. Some of these projects have resulted in new manufacturing facilities, systems and even organizations".

"I have felt more empowered to have difficult conversations when they are required. Through a couple of these conversations I have turned around a couple of individuals who were presenting difficulties but who are now strong contributors as managers".

Beyond validating the value of this particular program, this evaluation project highlights a most important possibility: Experienced managers are experienced, well-connected individuals who may look like they have lost some of their self-belief or energy for learning, but who are able to blossom into authentic, accountable, courageous leaders. At a time when any underused lever for change is an opportunity for competitive advantage, investing in experienced managers may be a profitable decision.



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