

# How to jump-start a transformation

by Marie Baatsch, Christophe François, Nils Müller and Christoph Schmitz

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Any large organization that is serious about transforming itself faces a daunting prospect. In a very short time, thousands of its people will need to develop new capabilities, especially on the principles of lean management and operational excellence.

The standard starting point is to follow the train-the-trainer model, whose pyramid structure creates a cascade of learning from a small team at the top of the organization through the remaining levels of personnel. But the practical difficulty is that even the “small team” may number dozens or hundreds of people. If some people in that group prove unable to build the required skills, whole sections of the organization may fall behind.

## A better way of learning

That is when an effective training methodology matters most, says Marc Jongejan, operations excellence director for AkzoNobel’s functional chemicals group: “In my experience, training usually means sitting in a classroom and listening to people tell stories or show slides.” But with adult learners, he finds that these traditional learning techniques are not very effective. “You have to return to your own plants before you can really apply any of the practical lessons. At a minimum that means a delay, because stopping production to test new ideas on your own equipment is time-consuming. It is also expensive and difficult—if it is possible at all.”

Moreover, adults usually learn most effectively when the learning environment looks and feels like where they work, whether an office, a retail store, or a factory floor. That’s why so many organizations rely on on-the-job training for new hires, and turn to classroom training only when they must—such as when many employees need to learn at once, and the organization cannot risk having so many people training on “live” processes.

But what if the “classroom” were instead a replica of the actual workplace? As AkzoNobel and other organizations are learning, that sort of experiential environment can provide a level of realism that no classroom can match. “Of course you need a short introductory session that teaches the framework,” Jongejan explains. “But this is different. Classroom-style lectures are only a small part of the process. Instead, most of the training involves going onto a model ‘factory floor,’ practicing the ideas, testing how they work, and then holding feedback sessions. You actually do everything you hear about.”

## The experiential edge

One of the critical differences in a model factory, says Jongejan, is that in a single week, his organization is able to cover much more than just the technical changes people must make to their day-to-day tasks. “We can conduct realistic role-playing exercises that help people learn concepts such as how to conduct a performance dialogue, analyze key performance indicators, or coach people effectively. In this way, we can change people’s mind-sets and behavior—which, after all, are usually the most important barriers to a successful transformation.”

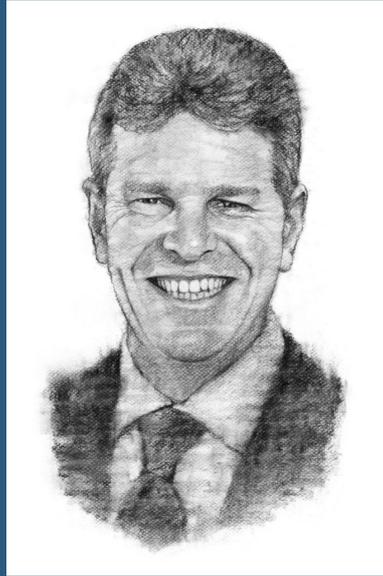
Moreover, people can experiment more freely because any mistakes they make are only in a mockup rather than on the actual work floor. That encourages innovation while minimizing embarrassment as people learn. “You can’t do anything seriously wrong—which means you can’t make any wrong impressions in front of your colleagues,” Jongejan observes.

## Applying the results

All told, experiential learning has enabled AkzoNobel to transform itself more quickly, with its people able to apply what they learned right away. “Several of our plant managers are now starting their transformations. They tell us that the experience is making a tremendous difference. Instead of being surprised when the transformation specialists arrive, and wasting time trying to learn methodologies while the equipment is still running, they can understand what is happening and provide immediate support.”

At other organizations, experiential-learning centers are playing a crucial role in helping improvement continue once an initial transformation process is complete. A European financial institution, for example, is using its experiential learning center—capable of training about 1,000 people per year—to train every manager above a certain level of seniority in the ideas underlying its new way of working. Each year, the company has increased its return on equity while cementing its customer-services leadership in its major markets ■

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**Operations Excellence Director**  
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Marc Jongejan started his 25-year career at AkzoNobel as a process engineer. Appointed plant manager in 1999, he became an operations manager in 2005 and a director of manufacturing and technology in 2009. Most recently Mr. Jongejan was director of technology and engineering, overseeing construction of a new plant in Ningbo, China, before assuming his current role as operations excellence director in 2013. He holds a master's of science in mechanical engineering from Twente University.

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