Aker Solutions
Building a Project Leadership Pipeline

Norway-based Aker Solutions provides oilfield products, systems, and services for customers in the oil and gas industry worldwide. The company employs nearly 28,000 people in more than 30 countries and has highly ambitious growth targets. As Aker Solutions grows bigger and more globally distributed, project execution becomes more complex and requires a new class of project managers with strong leadership skills, thorough understanding of market dynamics, and ability to make informed decisions in an increasingly competitive marketplace.

With encouragement and support from the company’s Chief Operating Officer, Bjarte Johannessen, Head of Organizational Development at Aker Solutions approached MIT Sloan Executive Education with a request for a custom executive education program that would turn Aker Solutions’ high-potential project managers into capable future leaders. From the beginning, the relationship between the company and MIT Sloan faculty and staff became a partnership. “When we first started the process of looking at business schools, MIT Sloan was by far the quickest to respond to us in a very positive way. While I would not say that was the main reason we chose MIT, it was important that the school we partner with is responsive and adaptive to our business,” said Johannessen.

Working closely with the client, MIT Sloan Executive Education program designers developed a modular, multi-session executive education program to introduce the company’s executives to advanced management frameworks and latest thinking from MIT Sloan faculty and experts. After a day-and-a-half preview for Aker Solutions’ senior leadership at the company’s headquarters in Oslo, the program officially launched when a group of 25 senior managers arrived in Cambridge for a week-long learning module comprised of lectures, presentations, small-group exercises, and workshops. The program content covered a wide variety of subjects – system dynamics, change management, systematic management, supply-chain management, the global mindset, leadership and communication skills – integrated to address the specific business needs of Aker Solutions. “Another important reason for choosing MIT is the Mens et Manus philosophy,” explains Johannessen. “It resonates well with us, because we are an organization of highly competent people who deliver products, systems, and services to very demanding customers. A very strong academic and scientific foundation combined with practical application is key to how we think about organizational learning in our company.”
The next meeting took place two months later in Oslo, where MIT faculty conducted a two-day session and international participants had the opportunity to get work on action-learning projects together. An important feature in all MIT Sloan executive education programs, action-learning projects are essential for this particular group. "The challenge in developing people for a role they don’t have yet is that it’s hard to apply what they’ve learned immediately. Unless you do a project that gives them a chance to have a leadership experience, to practice the things that they have learned," explains Court Chilton, the MIT Sloan Executive Education Program Director and one of several faculty members on this program.

Several weeks later, everyone reconvened in Oslo to present projects to the company’s top management. The excitement in the room was palpable. Roberto Fernandez, William F. Pounds Professor in Management and Professor of Organization Studies at MIT Sloan encouraged the participants to reflect on their experience with the program. “And what happened was that we had testimonials, one by one, by one, by one. And they were absolutely moving. It was really a great outcome,” he says.

Networking was another important takeaway for the organization. Johannesssen sees it as a key component in Aker Solutions’ overall business strategy going forward, “Networking has an impact short-term as an experience, but also long-term, which is very important. Our company used to be built on a dispersed, decentralized business model. But the pendulum has swung in the other direction, more in the standardization, alignment, working together, collaborating across units, because our customers require it as well. And from that perspective we see that there is an excellent opportunity here to build relationships across business areas and across business units. That’s an effect we see already, but it’s even more important on the longer term.”

The success of the pilot program further reinforced Aker Solutions’ commitment to learning. “The experience was very positive. People came out of the program very inspired. And that was actually one of the objectives of doing this – creating this enthusiasm and engagement and motivation. The whole program was very professionally organized – from the logistical side to the delivery of the lectures. Very strong experts and very strong delivery,” notes Johannesssen. “The program opened my eyes to new possibilities and new perspectives on how to achieve my goals and the pitfalls to look out for along the way,” says program participant Dale Harris, VP, Customer Delivery at Aker Solutions, adding, “I continually go back over the material and always find something helpful.”

The program continues to evolve, as its content and structure are fine-tuned to best serve Aker Solutions’ growing base of future leaders. The second cohort of managers visited MIT twice for week-long learning modules three months apart; and the final module was held at the company’s headquarters in Oslo two months later, followed by a debriefing session where alumni of the program shared their knowledge with colleagues. “Some of the topics presented and the discussions we had during the program have definitely influenced my way of handling daily challenges, particularly risk handling and change management, as well as changing my own and my department’s attitude towards continuous improvement,” says participant Ann-Kari Heier, VP, Mooring and Loading Systems at Aker Solutions. “My plan is to refresh parts of the material regularly in order to assure a permanent and positive long-term effect. Meeting inspiring Aker Solutions’ colleagues from all over the world, discovering that we all have more or less the same challenges on project management and management in general, was both reassuring, inspiring and it created a valuable network for me.”

"This program is an illustration of how we expect people to work going forward, meaning working more across the business areas and together. In that sense, this program is a symbol of change in our organization.”

Bjarte Johannessen
Head of Organizational Development
Aker Solutions

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