



DANISH SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
AARHUS UNIVERSITY

LEARNING LABS HANDBOOK

A method for mobilising
the innovation ability
of managers and employees

Learning Labs Handbook

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the innovation ability
of managers and employees



Manufacturing companies are the main target group of this handbook, but the Learning Labs method can be adapted and used in different companies and public organisations.

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We can now see how our way of working supports a continuous innovation culture.

Preface

From the companies' perspective, participating in a Nordic development and research project on learning and improving innovation capacity has been exciting and instructive.

Innovation and continuous product development have always been a natural and integral part of our companies' DNA, so naturally, we were curious about the idea behind the project: "To strengthen the innovation capacity of enterprises through methods of cooperation and development based on Nordic values".

These four elements were of particular interest to us:

- That the involved employees had the opportunity to develop new perspectives on their work processes through cross-functional collaboration
- To gain insight into and knowledge about Nordic approaches that give employees the responsibility for innovating their work processes
- To obtain research-based documentation on the internal factors influencing an enterprise's innovative capacity
- To have the opportunity to work with how we can measure innovation based on more dimensions than new products on the market

It has been instructive to rediscover the value of the innovation potential inherent in the employees' specific knowledge of daily work-flows. Great potential is unleashed when the employees' space for experimenting is expanded. The working methodology of Learning Labs has supported this in the best possible way.

Creating a space where company representatives can talk to each other and cooperate in an open space without any specific agenda – creates not only development but also commitment and interest.

After the project was completed, it was very rewarding to see how the involved employees have taken responsibility and developed new ways of working. This has resulted in several innovative initiatives – now we can see that this working method supports a sustainable innovation culture, and we have a model that we can use in other development processes.

Finally, as leaders, we have been inspired by the interaction with knowledge and research institutions, which has partly supported our learning journey and partly given us a solid basis for our further work to develop companies' innovation capacity.

Maria Jönsson,
Learning and Development Manager, Husqvarna.

Flemming Paasch, CEO & Johanne Engelhardt Ibsen Said, Head of Design and Innovation at Easyfood.

1

Purpose and background information

To build, lead and develop innovation capacity from within the company.

Companies and managers must work organically to build, lead and develop innovation capacity bottom-up in their organisations.

THE NORDIC LABOUR MARKET is facing major changes due to globalisation and demographic, economic and technological development.

These changes raise new demands on the competences and learning processes of companies and employees and the workplaces' organisation and management. There is thus an increasing need to develop sustainable and innovative models for continuous and flexible competence and organisational development so that Nordic countries remain innovation leaders.

In recent years, innovation and learning research has highlighted that companies will not become innovative and competitive by purchasing the necessary knowledge and skills alone, but must also strengthen their abilities, processes and competences to create better and more sustainable solutions and work processes in practice.

Companies and managers must therefore work organically to build, lead and develop innovation capacity bottom-up in their organisations.

Creating sustainable innovation processes and managing changes in workflows and work content requires independence, courage and what the Nordic Council of Ministers (NMR) has described as an 'innovative mindset' in companies.

Based on this, the Building Innovation Capacity project (BIC) is developed as a co-creative development and research project between private individuals, companies and knowledge and research institutes in Denmark and Sweden, as well as the Nordic Network for Adult Learning

(NVL), which is a programme of the Nordic Council of Ministers. Overall, the project aims to develop and test methods to promote work being done in Nordic companies to strengthen their innovation ability.

Knowledge and experience from BIC are the basis for the content of this handbook.

The Swedish Innovation Agency (Vinnova) has financed the project intending to use the results to strengthen the Nordic business community. NVL and the participating companies have contributed to the financing and development of the project.

The Handbook

In this handbook, companies can find a method for internal learning and skills development – *Learning Labs* (LL), which is based and builds on employee experience, knowledge and skills and the current challenges faced by the company.

The purpose is to provide inspiration on how to specifically organise and implement LL, and what considerations may be relevant in the process. Interested organisations can follow the process and test, further develop and implement the working method as a continuous, practice-oriented model for competence development in the company.

Learning Labs is a proposal for a way of working that ensures common, continuous knowledge and knowledge development in companies.

Learning Labs – a Nordic approach to competence development

In a complex and changing labour market, there are no simple answers to simple challenges, but a need for multiple perspectives and good cooperation between different disciplines, departments and levels to be able to tie flexibility, innovation and entrepreneurship to the company's current problems and future challenges.

Learning Labs is a proposal for a way of working that ensures common, continuous knowledge and knowledge development in companies and workplaces. Learning Labs can contribute to strengthening companies' innovation capacity and thus the opportunity to act in a highly changing world, by e.g.

- strengthening the innovative and entrepreneurial skills of employees
- involving all employees' knowledge and skills in problem-solving and innovative development
- strengthening collaboration between departments, disciplines and levels in the organisation
- developing a sustainable model (structure) for continuous competence development, based on the companies' internal competencies and current challenges

Learning Labs' approach to working as described in this handbook is based on values that are seen as common features in Nordic societies and corporate cultures. Different values form part of an overall 'value complex' as the basis of culture. 'Proximity to power': meeting each other at eye level across levels of the company, 'trust' and equality': trusting and caring about each other, and 'inclusion': wanting to have everyone on board – are all recognisable values that enable 'flexibility': exploring and adapting to our surroundings. Furthermore, it can be seen as a good basis for motivation and interest in learning and developing work processes together with colleagues that the Nordic region is characterised by a 'Protestant work ethic', defined, among other things, by finding meaning in the work.

2

Learning Labs – Working methods



Participants have the freedom to decide on content, and the opportunity to develop new ideas and try out new actions.

IN AN ORGANISATIONAL FRAMEWORK

"Learning Labs" is a structure for intra-company meetings where a group of employees meet continuously for six months to a year to develop and find new solutions to current challenges in the company.

The initiative for LL and the overall purpose of an LL process are determined by management, in cooperation with the employees. The content of each LL is specific challenges or a set of challenges that the participants experience in daily work that they would like to learn more about through dialogue with colleagues.

Thus, "Learning Labs" can be described as an organisational framework for learning processes, where the employees' specific skills and special knowledge of workflows and specific challenges are the basis for the joint development of sustainable, forward-looking solutions and actions.

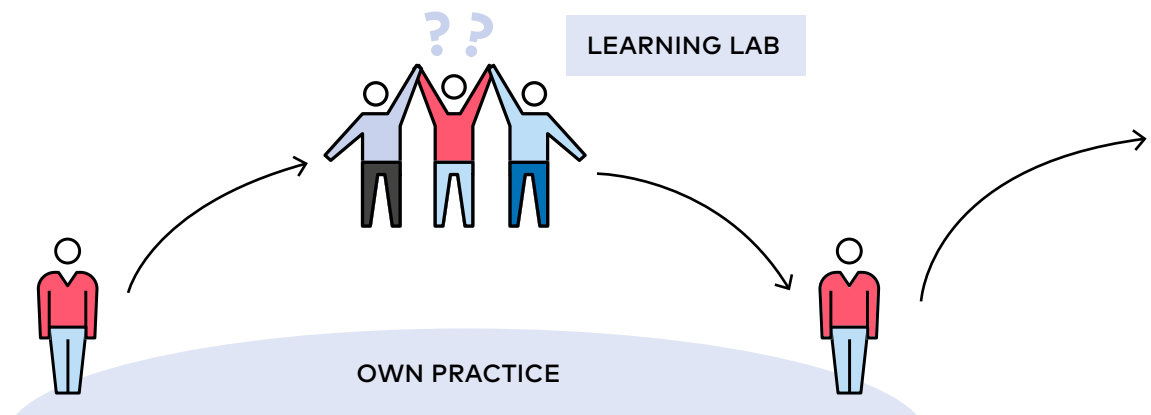
Working method

Learning Labs intend to involve all employees (their professional skills, competencies and special knowledge of workflows) in a joint effort to develop sustainable solutions to face the company's challenges.

That is why it is important that employees have the freedom to decide the content, take up the challenges they experience in daily work, and that they have the space and opportunity to develop new ideas and try out new actions.

This means that the participants are responsible for bringing real current challenges from daily work that they would like to better understand and deal with. All the participants of the LL group will present their challenges. They identify a topic that is relevant to everyone, such as 'interfaces' in workflows or between departments, the experience of 'time' etc., and through group reflection and dialogue to elaborate on the topic and put it into perspective. Then the participants connect inspiration, their new understanding and new ideas from today's reflections to their challenges. Finally, each participant chooses one or more new actions and solutions they will test in practice for the next LL session.

The working method in Learning Labs is thus an interaction between the individual participant's experience of challenges in their work, reflecting on and developing new knowledge together with colleagues, and testing and experimenting with new actions in practice. This can be illustrated as follows:



This approach to problem-solving is based on participant involvement and participant responsibility for content and process. The participants meet and develop – in a co-creative process

based on their experiences, existing knowledge and skills – to generate new knowledge that will form the basis for gaining new experiences.

A long-term process

Working with LL is a long-term learning process that helps to strengthen and develop a learning culture that underpins the company's innovative capacity. To benefit from this way of working, there must be time to alternate between reflection, new knowledge, testing out and changing practices. A course with at least 5–6 and preferably 8–10 LLs over six months to a full year can provide the necessary time to establish interaction among the participants and time to experiment, test and create real changes in one's daily work.

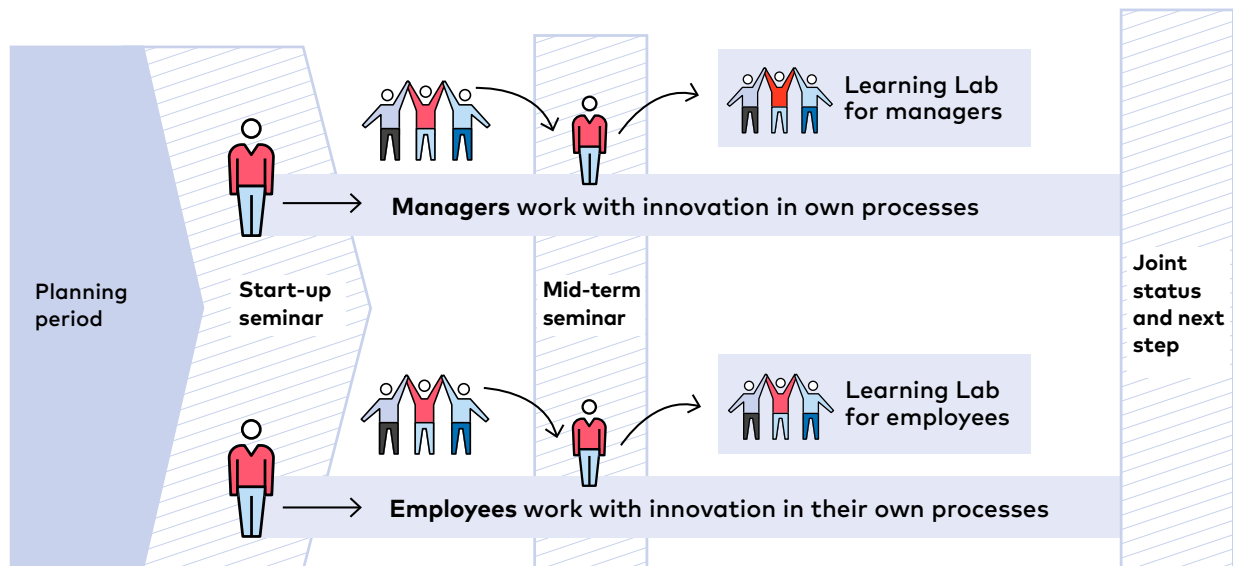
There must be plenty of time to practice and develop between the individual LL sessions. Approx. 4–6 weeks between each LL session seems appropriate.

Each LL should last about 3 hours so there is time to look at the challenges of each participant from different perspectives, then reflect on and turn new input into action.

If necessary, you can divide the development processes into 3–4 months and evaluate with a forward-looking batch of experience and gains, and from there adjust focus, participants etc.

It is to be expected that the LL process not only affects the individual employee but also affects the structure, leadership and ways of cooperating in the organisation. That is why the management has a role to ensure organisational frameworks and support to the project and employees who provide the necessary practical knowledge and skills.

The process can be organised in several ways. One proposal for organising may look like this:



In this model, two parallel LL courses have been established, one for managers and one for employees. This is done to ensure both the organisational framework and daily work practices. The idea behind separating managers and employees is that both groups create a space with room to have an open and exploratory dialogue about their own challenges.

It is important that managers and employees are informed about each other's work and can continuously adjust and adapt important factors to the overall process. Meetings between the two groups can happen as joint seminars at some time during the process.

3

Preparing the LLs



To develop a structure for sustainable strengthening of the company's innovation capacity through workplace learning.

LLs can only be implemented if employees commit to sharing their experience, knowledge and insight into workflows, product development, collaboration structures etc., and work in LL requires that the employees have the will and courage to address relevant and perhaps not-so-popular topics.

Goals and objectives – are we ready?

As a starting point, the organisation must be clear about the purpose of testing and implementing LLs. The LL working method intends to develop a structure for sustainable development and to strengthen the company's innovative capacity through learning in the workplace. You have to be clear about whether you are ready for it and whether an LL process can be included as part of other ongoing or planned activities and development projects in the company.

This is especially true for larger companies; many development projects and activities can take place simultaneously in different parts of the organisation. A clear overview of the totality of activities, results and experiences can increase the gains from Learning Labs as a new activity.

An overall assessment of the organisation's current situation can therefore be a relevant starting point and can help to clarify development needs and clarify whether there is an understanding and readiness on the part of managers and employees to start such a participatory development model as LL.

As working with LLs can affect and change familiar structures and workflows both for employees and managers, both senior manage-

ment and middle managers must approve and support the LL work.

Clear communication and employee involvement

Working with LLs is very much a participatory and participant-driven way of working based on Nordic values.

Right from the start, it is therefore important that both employees and managers are involved in the development of the process, so as to ensure multiple perspectives and create the basis for a sustainable organisation.

Transparent and clear communication is essential for trust and openness between managers and employees, and between the employees who participate in LLs and other employees.

LLs can only be implemented if the employees have the confidence to share their experience, knowledge and insight into workflows, product development, cooperation structures etc., and this presupposes that employees have the will and courage to address relevant and perhaps not-so-popular topics. It is at once a great recognition of the participants' resources and a great expectation of their competence to act.

Choice of participants

Participants in LLs can be put together and selected based on different goals and intentions. In an LL, they can represent different disciplines, departments and levels in the organisation, e.g. to strengthen coherence and joint development throughout the company. In another LL, participants may be from the same department to develop particular areas. There may be LLs for managers, and there may be LLs for employees etc.

The important thing is that the participant mix best promotes the overall purpose through the development of the participants' challenges and insights from daily practice.

Most often, in companies with several departments, each department develops its own culture. That is why it is important to consider the company structure when organising a development process that may involve several departments or the entire company.

Process support – choosing facilitators

Working with LLs, where the participants in an 'agenda-less' space create the content themselves, is a process that must be learned. Especially in the beginning, there is a need for a facilitator who can frame and facilitate the process in such a way that the participants familiarise themselves with this way of working and can continue to work with it themselves.

There is a need for a facilitator with knowledge of learning and learning processes for adults who is prepared to reflect on the facilitation process itself. It is also important that the facilitator has knowledge and insight into organisational learning and understanding of the work processes at play in the individual companies.

The facilitator must also understand that it is the participants who set the agenda in terms

Consider the following questions:

- Which departments should be involved? Are there processes that run across departments and/or relate to the outside world that need to be developed?
- Which managers should participate and how can managers support the employees' development work? What options do managers have to introduce new routines etc.?
- Which employees should participate? What opportunities and influence do employees have to change their own and cross-disciplinary work processes?

of content and process, and that it is not the facilitator who ensures that the participants get from A to B or that there is constant progress towards B.

Economy

Set aside resources for things like physical settings for meeting, snacks for meetings, buying literature on the topics being explored, possibly visiting other companies to be inspired etc.

Set up a framework for describing a business case so participants can make qualified suggestions for major development or change initiatives.

4

Specific work in LL processes

A development-oriented and experimental way of working, where new ways of doing things are explored.

To create a framework for a common insight into and understanding of the project in the company and to present a project design.

THIS SECTION FOCUSES ON SPECIFIC IDEAS and inspiration for working with LLs in companies. It is important to point out that even though specific initiatives and considerations are described, the section is intended as inspiration and as a call to work towards development based on Nordic values and principles.

Introduction and assumptions

Common knowledge and understanding – start-up and mid-term seminars

Once the initial considerations, choice of overall topics, participants and facilitators are in place, a project design is drawn up and the process is initiated.

The first task is to create a framework for a common insight into and understanding of the project in the company and to present the project design. Information about the project can be disseminated at a joint start-up seminar for employees and managers in either the entire company or in the involved departments (depending on e.g. the size of the company).

A start-up seminar sets the framework and tone for the work and can help ensure the openness and understanding necessary for the implementation of new ideas and actions in daily work. Insight into the working method in the individual LL and the overall organisational development, the managers' reasons for wanting to try out and implement LLs as a development model, as well as the purpose and working method are discussed and qualified through comments, ideas and questions.

The start-up seminar can be the first of several joint seminars during the process where the LL work is discussed and adjusted, and it is therefore particularly important to introduce and lay the foundation for dialogue and participant activity. (see Model Proposal on page 11)

A joint seminar with the opportunity to work in groups, group dialogue and reflection can be carried out in about 2–3 hours.

Understanding what LL is

It can be difficult to explain what the working method of LLs involves, what it means to create and be in charge of a process, and what tasks are involved. Part of the process must be experienced to truly understand it. But one way to explain it is to see it as a development-oriented and experimental way of working where new ways of doing things are explored, perhaps trying to put into words where it differs from the usual practice, e.g. that

- It is not just another kind of operational meeting – however, issues from operational meetings can be dealt with in a Learning Labs process
- It is not innovation understood as a single innovation – but rather as the continuous building of innovation capacity
- It is not team development for team development's sake – it is about strengthening the team's problem-solving capacity
- It is not about dealing with complaints – but complaints have the potential for change/action
- It is not about the handling of complaints about the state of affairs – but complaints that arouse one's curiosity

Both the individual LLs and the joint seminars in LLs can be carried out physically, digitally or as an alternation between physical and digital work.

Transparency

At the start-up seminar, transparency about the reasons behind the time frame, agreements etc. is crucial for further work. In particular, it may be important that criteria for selecting participants are clear and transparent.

Clear criteria are important for everyone, but perhaps especially for the employees who feel that the task has been assigned to them, and for the employees who have not been invited and would like to participate.

Digital or physical meetings

Both the individual LLs and the joint seminars in LLs can be carried out physically, digitally or as an alternation between physical and digital work. There are advantages and disadvantages to both forms of work, and the choice may depend on what is most convenient possible, the participant mix and time frames. It is possible to work on the basis of a Nordic approach that is involving, flexible and democratic in both digital and physical sessions.

For example, digital meetings can make joint seminars and LLs possible in large companies with geographically dispersed departments. It requires different considerations and ways of organising digital and physical courses to ensure participant activity and interaction between presentations, dialogue, reflection and choice of practice actions.

For physical LLs and joint seminars, the room must be of a size that accommodates all

participants and preferably with room for group table arrangement, wall space for e.g. post-it's, flipcharts, movement between tables and alternation between individual and joint reflections.

If joint seminars and LLs are conducted digitally, other considerations must be made in relation to time and work tools. It can be difficult to stay focused and present for a long time in a digital meeting. There may be a need for more breaks and possibly shorter meeting times, and the use of digital tools for the co-creative dialogue processes in small groups and in plenary at LL can promote the common process. If neither facilitator nor participants have digital skills, you can involve and work with a "technical assistant".

The LL work process

LL meetings – Basis for cooperation

At the first LL, the work process is started and the foundation for cooperation is laid.

One round in which the individual presents himself, his own field of work, experiences, expectations and wishes for LL and personal motivation is a good basis for mutual alignment of expectations and agreements. Especially in an intra-company work with LLs, it may be particularly relevant to have clear confidentiality agreements. Trust that what you share in LL stays in the room and is confidential is a prerequisite for the openness required for idea development, sharing challenges, mistakes etc.

Key principles in LL work with Nordic inspiration

It requires special considerations to develop working methods that partly promote real participant responsibility through learning based on one's own work practice, and partly create a framework for new experiences and reflections through a co-creative process with colleagues in a workplace.

It is therefore important that the key principles of this approach to learning are discussed so that the intention and the demands that the working method places on the individual, the group and the workplace can be adjusted and adapted to the specific context.

The key principles are:

- That the participants are responsible for the content of the LL work.

This means, among other things, that the participants enter a "room without an agenda". There isn't a plan or an externally specific task for the group to solve. The content is the real work challenges that the participants bring to the table and would like to find new solutions to.

- That the participants choose a common topic of relevance to everyone for the in-depth discussion.

The topic is chosen on the basis of the various

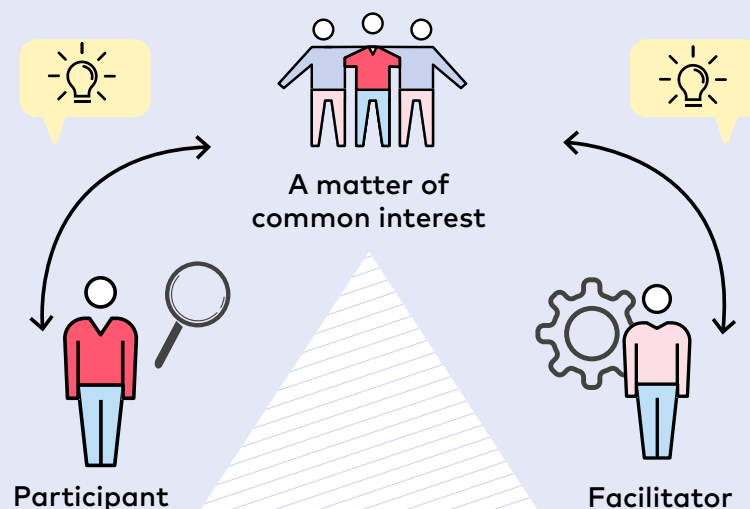
specific challenges, and the discussion must be able to provide new perspectives to solve these challenges. Thus, the work is not a 'group coaching' in relation to challenges faced by the individual participants.

Finally, new inspiration is linked back to the individual's challenge, and each participant decides on one (or more) new action(s) they want to try out in their practice.

- That the participants commit to developing and testing new options in relation to challenges in their work.
- Working via LL is a process where you become wiser together and get inspiration to face the challenges in your daily work in new ways.
- That the participants join a common 'cause', and that both professional and personal development originate from the joint work with the 'cause'. That is, personal and relational aspects of the group are included to the extent that they are enriching for the cause, but they are not the case.

Relations develop through preoccupation with the same cause.

- That new awareness and knowledge are developed in a co-created process based on the equal value of the participants, democratic principles and mutual recognition, which stems from the fact that what is said and the experience gained is taken seriously and included in common solutions.



The process within each LL session

We will now describe an example of a process based on the LL approach. The process can be varied and adapted to e.g. the assumptions that each participant brings with him, the content the participants generate, time frames etc. Nevertheless, an overall process structure can be described in general steps, as follows:

a. Each participant prepares for an LL meeting

Choosing a challenge or problem from your daily work, which you want to learn more about in terms of finding solutions. The challenge may come from something that does not work in your daily work. Or the challenge can link to a larger context within the company, such as misunderstandings between departments. Consider how the challenge can be described so that it can be understood by others.

b. LL meetings

Each practical problem is presented.

Based on the problems presented, a common relevant topic is identified and selected by the group as a whole, e.g. delegation, collaboration, workload.

The participants put the topic into perspective and nuance through dialogue and group reflection.

If necessary, short professional or theoretical input can supplement the work.

New inspiration is linked to everyone's own problem.

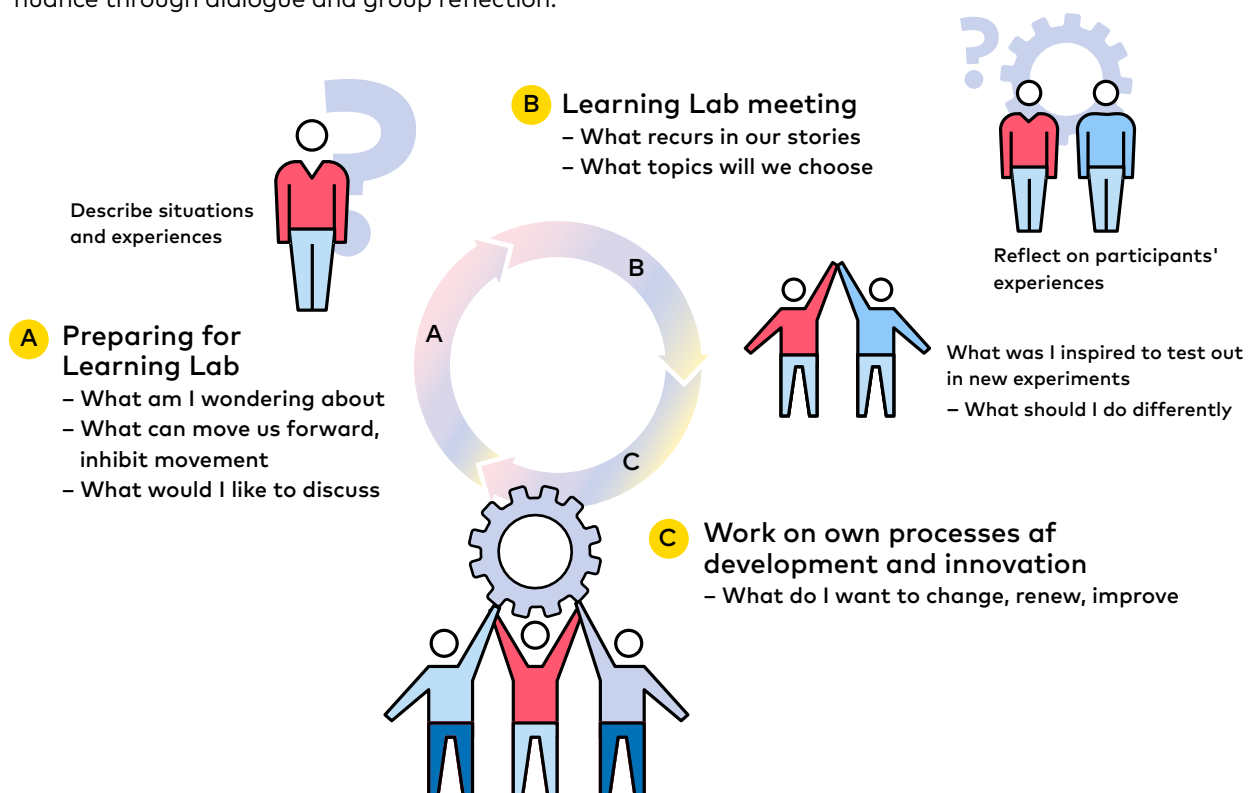
The participants choose which new actions they want to focus on and test out for the next Lab.

c. Putting learning into practice between LL meetings

Between meetings, the participants test, develop and experiment with new ways of understanding and solving their challenges/problems. It may be a good idea to develop tools that support the participants' attention to their own work/practice, conscious reflection and putting words to (often) silent knowledge linked to actions. Documentation of observations, new experiences, considerations and questions can be done in several ways, e.g. by taking pictures, taking notes and keeping logs, in schematic overviews etc.

At the upcoming LL meeting, take stock and go back to Step A and describe your current challenges.

The process can be illustrated as follows:



When the participants have taken responsibility and experience that their knowledge and ability are recognised and are important in a larger context, this often increases both motivation and commitment.

Deepening specific challenges and opportunities

Real participant responsibility – Involvement and resistance

Most employees who participate in LLs are used to the fact that work meetings have a pre-determined agenda, specific tasks that must be solved, decisions to be made and that there is always a moderator. In LLs, they enter a free space where they are responsible for the content and where their experiences from real situations are the most important content. A strange framework like this can initially arouse uncertainty and reluctance that may appear in resistance and defensive reactions, such as "It's a waste of time", "Why do we have to sit here?" or "Tell us what to do." Of course, the reactions must be taken seriously so as not to waste the participants' time. But it is equally important that we understand the reactions as part of a learning process that requires completely new ways of acting.

When the participants have taken responsibility and experience that their knowledge and skills are recognised and important in a larger context, this often increases both motivation and commitment.

Dialogue – An open process with different perspectives

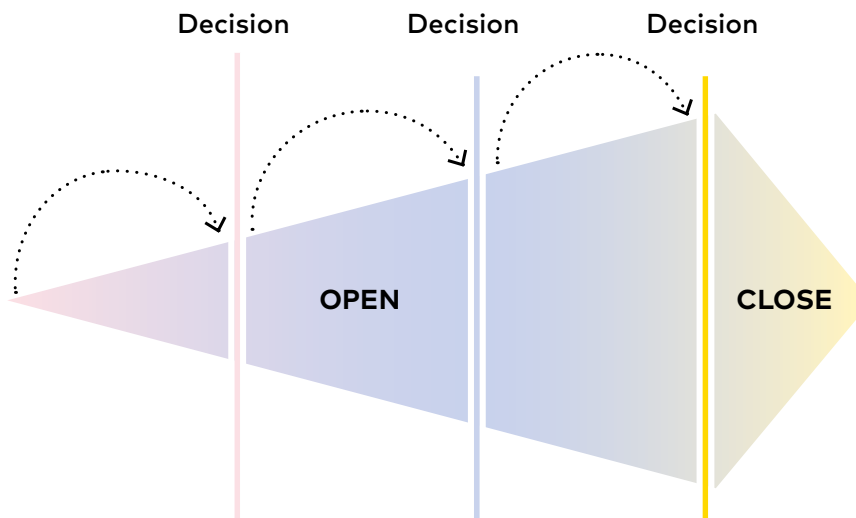
The LL working method rests on co-creation and development through dialogue.

Dialogue-based working is not new. Nevertheless, participants often need to learn this process to enter into a co-creative dialogue which is not about getting it right and knowing the most.

In a dialogue where diversity is a driving force that provides nuances, puts things into perspective and deepens our understanding, participants must listen and ask questions. They must let go of fixed preconceptions, attitudes and opinions and – together with their colleagues – put themselves into play in the search for new understandings and solutions. That, too, is a learning process.

The dialogue can be supported by various physical exercises, reflection exercises, graphic visualisations etc., which can increase the mutual understanding of different perspectives and recognition of each other's different competencies for problem-solving and development.

The LL process can be illustrated like this:



A free space for contemplation (slack)

The topic for joint reflection and exploration is free and without fixed goals. This free space (slack) is key to our LL way of working.

Most participants come from a workday characterised by high pace and with a requirement to find here-and-now solutions. A busy life makes it difficult to find time to immerse yourself, investigate a cause and see several potential solutions to a problem. In other words, many are used to having to move very quickly from an opening and exploratory (divergent) process to a closing and deciding (convergent) process.

The model illustrates that maintaining an open process for a longer period of time can expand the potential number of solutions that participants can develop.

Maintaining immersion rather than quick fixes can be strengthened by spending more time understanding and investigating a problem.

More angles and greater understanding of problems can promote more comprehensive and better solutions.

A double learning process – Metareflection

The LL process can challenge the usual roles of both participants and facilitators in relation to the distribution of responsibility, governance and the 'Nordic' approach. For the participants it can be difficult to take charge, and for the facilitators it can be difficult to let go of responsibilities, known methods and their 'role as an expert'. The process can give rise to frustration, uncertainty and reactions based on the desire to re-establish a classic division of roles, where the facilitators are positioned as experts and the participants as the 'learners'.

In the LL process, you often have to both 'learn about' and develop the content, and you have to 'learn to learn' in a new way. Ensuring continuous 'metareflection' about the process itself can enhance the participants' understanding of the dual learning process and the emotional responses to LLs.

5

Process management

Participants will be responsible for the content and development of new solutions, and thus develop action competence.

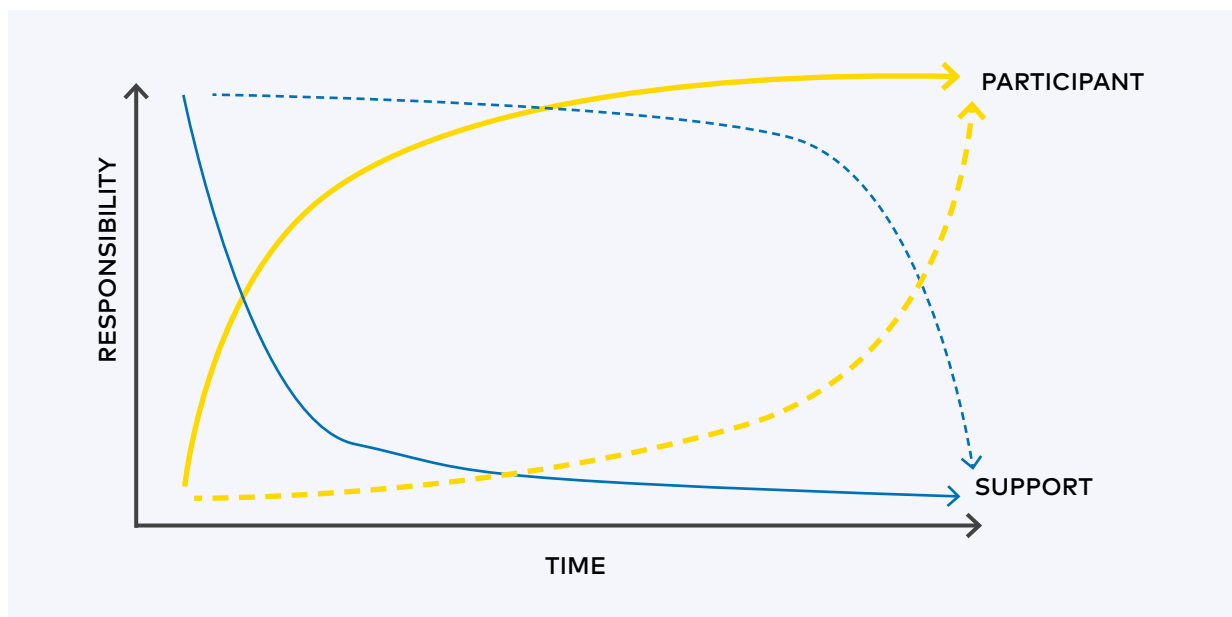
The participants must take more and more responsibility, and the role of the facilitator is to hand over more and more responsibility.

The role of the facilitator

LLs is a framework for both open space and structured competence development with demands for development and action. It is often, and especially at the beginning, necessary to have someone to facilitate and secure the framework for the LL process.

The goal of LLs is for participants to take more and more responsibility, and the facilitator is to hand over more and more responsibility to them. Attention should be paid to the fact that decisions in and on the process are democratised as early as possible – of course with respect for participants' prerequisites and the framework for the project.

This can be illustrated as follows:



The completed lines show how responsibility in the LL process is moved as early as possible from a supportive person (e.g. facilitator, HR manager, consultant) to the participants – to support them in their learning to take responsibility for their learning process.

The key is that development work through LLs can become a lasting working method at the company so that LLs do not become one of many 'development methods' that end when facilitators or consultants leave the company.

To build up a lasting innovation ability in the company, it is essential that the participants are given responsibility for the content and development of new actions and thus develop the action competence. This is in contrast to the more classic model; the dotted lines show where the facilitator has the greatest responsibility throughout the process and thus maintains and develops his own action competence.

Considerations in the organisation of LLs based on Nordic values

The facilitator must reflect on how the Nordic values of equality, democracy and inclusion can be promoted in a co-creative, participatory learning process. One interpretation of 'Nordic qualities' in LLs is that the development processes emphasise inviting the participants to take responsibility and take part in decision-making processes. It does not necessarily make the process 'easy' to be a part of – neither for participants, facilitator or managers – but competences can be developed

in the process that strengthens a lasting capacity for innovation.

Ideas for specific actions that can support a Nordic working methodology

You can work with participant involvement, responsibility, co-creation and democratic processes in many ways. The following describes some specific ideas for how action, Nordic values and learning principles can be described as a coherent process.

Principles put into practice

Action	Value	Working method
Go away... Allow plenty of time	Proximity to power	Democratic Involvement of employees in decision-making Participant-led
Questions rather than answers	Equality	Dialogue-based Patience
Put the common cause first	Community Trust	Co-creators Open and honest interaction
Stay open for new opportunities for action	Daring to risk more	Critical experimentation: practice-oriented, continuous exploration. Flexible

The open, critical and honest dialogue is based on equality and that there is time and space for more voices.

Action 1: Go away... and allow plenty of time!

Nordic value

The action is rooted in Nordic values that prioritise proximity to power and democratic principles. It emphasises the significance of assuming responsibility and actively engaging with the cause by participating in decision-making processes. To facilitate this, it is crucial to establish an inclusive and transparent decision-making environment where all participants are encouraged to contribute.

If there is room to take responsibility, then one has also had the opportunity to train the skills to take on this responsibility. If, for example, you are used to meetings being controlled by one person (i.e. decisions being made only by managers) your ideas not being used, and knowledge being received passively, then it can be a completely new practice to have to take full responsibility for a space, such as a Learning Lab, with free time and wide scope.

Action in practice

One possible solution is to use a simple technique – to stay away as facilitator – thereby letting the participants step in and take over. For example, by walking out of the room and letting the participants work alone with an identified problem position or a question. Alternatively, one can remain silent during periods of group silence and wait for progress to emerge organically. It can be challenging for the facilitator to resist the urge to steer the group towards a predetermined outcome. However, it is crucial to refrain from interfering with the process.

It is difficult to continuously step out of the process to allow the participants to take responsibility, but doing so to a suitable degree so the participants are only disturbed and not caught off guard by the new position. Throughout the process, the challenge is to learn more about how to avoid becoming the key to the participants' work.

Action 2: Questions rather than answers

Nordic value

Open, critical and honest dialogue is based on equality and that there is time and space for more voices. The answer is not always simple. In this way, questions become the key. Questions can support an open dialogue and that the participants together create new knowledge and new understandings. Questions can help prevent the facilitator from being given the role of expert in the participants' processes. Even if you are used to using questions in development processes, the exercise here will be sharpened on how questions can be used to live out Nordic values in a learning process.

Action in practice

There are many ways to use questions throughout the process and with varying degrees of success. Where possible, it is advisable to select diverse question types that aid the desired outcome. Examples include questions that encourage thoughtful reflection for generating solutions and answers, questions that promote active participation, and questions that facilitate clarification and concretisation.

Action 3: Put the 'cause' first

Nordic value

When 'the community' is considered a Nordic value in this context (competence in working life), it is not community for the sake of the community. The community is formed on the basis that there is 'something' – a cause – that we strive for together. Interaction between the participants, mutual respect, personal and relational development take place based on working with and having a dialogue about the 'cause'. The key is to focus on a common issue that concerns the entire group of participants.

Action in practice

It is the facilitator's job to support participants in defining issues/problems together and to make it easier for participants to take responsibility for the work. This can be done by bringing the participants' professional and personal preconceptions and knowledge into the community in a way where everyone is heard and all voices have equal value. When the participants listen to each other, they are asked to practice to think both in terms of their own challenges and in relation to an overall common plan.

The individual's learning and the group's learning are given equal weight. This can be done by e.g. alternating between individual-driven and joint reflection processes through dialogue. For example, the individual is allowed to reflect first. Next, this is lifted into a joint dialogue. And finally, the participants find actions they want to perform individually.

It may be necessary to underline and highlight disagreements within the group in order to avoid too great and too quick a consensus on an issue, so that there is a focus on learning rather than resolution. Thus, disagreement – dealt with in a

proper and open way – becomes a starting point for learning and for understanding the problem both deeper and broader. New understanding and knowledge are developed here in a co-creative process based on the equal value of the participants and the community on cause and mutual recognition.

Action 4: Be open to new opportunities for action

Nordic value

Being open to new opportunities for action is based on a high degree of risk-taking and experimentation, which are associated with Nordic values. It requires great openness and trust between the different participants to experiment and explore together. This openness also means that the model here cannot be seen as a ready-made recipe, but that in the process further experiments and exploration are invited based on experiences with the Nordic.

Action in practice

In order to experiment and see new paths to take, there must be quite a long time in the process where everything is still seen as a potential that we can test out and try to understand better. Stay focused on the exploratory aspects through questions and small brainstorming meetings between the participants, and draw their attention when solutions come too quickly before the content is elaborated – when the actions become solution-oriented instead of being comprehensive and oriented towards understanding. You may want to raise the question of how you 'usually' solve current problems.

6

Possible outcomes

That participants develop approaches to innovation such as process innovation and organisational innovation.

Results point to Learning Labs as a potential 'solution' to interdisciplinary and cross-functional collaboration and development issues.

AS MENTIONED UNDER "Purpose and background information", this handbook includes knowledge and experience from the Building Innovation Capacity project (BIC) – which primarily aims to develop and test methods to promote work being done in Nordic companies to strengthen their innovation ability.

The intention of the project was not to be a traditional 'manual-based' development project, where there were fixed scripts and expected benefits for the individual phases, which may be the case with innovation processes aimed at product innovation.

The project's development focus was based on a high degree of involvement and commitment through the participants' work with specific challenges in their own work processes. This focus points towards approaches to innovation such as process innovation and organisational innovation. Organisational innovation generally focuses on people, work routines and workplace organisation, which can result e.g. in:

- The participants gain better knowledge of each other's competencies across work processes
- The way of working means that time for reflection is perceived as value-creating, and that – as a result – new perspectives arise on the challenges that the group has been focusing on
- Development of the collaborative work culture so that the 'Nordic values' become visible in practice, and – as a result – the participants experience a recognition of their professionalism and approach to solutions
- New understandings of innovation and learning and thus more informal and cross-functional collaboration

Together, these possible results can point to Learning Labs as a potential 'solution' to interdisciplinary and cross-functional collaboration and development issues.

7

Completion of the process and further work



This way of working is based on the participants' experience, knowledge and skills that are translated into solutions to the company's current challenges.

WITH A POSSIBLE OUTCOME as described above, developed and initiated by a Learning Lab process over 1 to 1 ½ years, there is a basis for looking at the working method in Learning Labs in a larger perspective, where LLs can continue to strengthen and develop a learning culture that underpins the company's innovation capacity.

Using the results as standards for development in learning cultures

The status meeting, the last workshop in the overall process design, gathers the participants across the groups for knowledge sharing and developing the common learning model. In addition to the work being done on selected problems being completed, the learning from the process must be addressed.

At the status meeting, all the results from the development process can be summarised, large and small, so that it is visible to everyone just what changes the participants experiences have generated in workflows, collaboration, ways of seeing things from new perspectives etc.

At the same time, evaluations of the way the problems are worked on in Learning Labs are important to take with you to the solution of future complex problems.

In this way, a common status scenario is formed as a starting point for discussions on factors that promote and inhibit further development work.

In a first process with LLs, there may be a predominance of results in organisational innovation, which can be continued in the next process if the participants so wish. It can also build on the achievements in organisational innovation by focusing in the next process cycle on process innovation, working on improvements in the methods, equipment and/or knowledge used to provide the company's services or products.

The ripple effect

Irrespective of the innovation methods chosen to progress, it is important to address the status and plan for the dissemination of the LL working methodology to other areas of the organisation.

Take a moment to reflect on how the next stage should be organised by revisiting the section on participant selection in Chapter 3 of the handbook.

Once internal experience has been gained with the LL working method as a method for developing the company's innovation capacity, it may be time to look at more externally-oriented collaborations such as with suppliers, customers etc., so that organisational innovation and process innovation can be worked on in the value chain for the benefit of many operators.

A learning process where the employees' specific professional skills and special knowledge of workflows are at the core, and where concrete challenges are the basis for joint development of sustainable, forward-looking solutions to the company's challenges.

Stay focused

Learning Labs is a proposal for a way of working that ensures common, continuous knowledge and knowledge development in companies and workplaces, and which can contribute to strengthening companies' innovation capacity and thus the opportunity to act in a highly changing world, by e.g.

- strengthening the innovative and entrepreneurial skills of employees
- involving all employees' knowledge and skills in problem solving and innovative development
- strengthening collaboration between departments, disciplines and levels in the organisation
- developing a sustainable model (structure) for continuous competence development, based on the companies' internal competencies and current challenges

When LL as an approach to work is disseminated in the company as a model for in-company learning and competence development, **try to stay focused** on the fact that this way of working is based on the experience, knowledge and skills of the participants/employees and the company's current challenges. It is a co-creative approach to working based on high participant responsibility (management by participants), a bottom-up perspective and with an exploratory, experimental and action-oriented focus.

It is a learning process with the employees' specific professional skills and special knowledge of workflows at the core, and where concrete challenges are the basis for joint development of sustainable, forward-looking solutions to the company's challenges.

8

Theoretical inspiration



The Nordic corporate culture supports working experimentally and searching for new solutions in a participatory development process.

A Nordic approach to development and learning expands the possibilities of creating new solutions and changing practices compared to organisational learning and competence development.

Organisational learning based on a Nordic understanding of development and learning.

Organisational learning and development is a rich field of practice and theory that covers many concepts, models and tools that companies and researchers use to explain and manage development and learning processes in organisations.

The Anglo-Saxon theoretical approach

The dominant approach to knowledge and tools for development and learning in organisations has been developed within an Anglo-Saxon framework. The Anglo-Saxon theoretical tradition works with planned changes and learning initiatives through linear development models guided by the implementation of external experts' knowledge and models.

This approach focuses on the transfer and implementation of external knowledge, experiences and tools and directs its attention to personal development, changing behaviour and group dynamics, learning new productive patterns of action and/or development of democratically-based organisational and management systems.

Nordic theoretical approach

An alternative to the dominant Anglo-Saxon approach can be found in Nordic understandings of development and learning in organisations and in working life, which have a long history of development (Dahl, 1985; Eldh et al., 1978; Ellström, 1996).

Knowledge and experience show that Nordic corporate culture, values and forms of organisation are characterised by the following aspects: proximity to power, equality, trust, open interaction between employees and managers, to work experimentally and searchingly with new solutions and participatory development processes (Brandi & Sprogøe, 2022; Hofstede et al., 1990; Kangas & Twig, 2018).

These characteristics have had a significant impact on how to work with development and learning in organisations in more participatory and experiential ways. Ways that have a positive influence on e.g. the working environment, competence development, HR systems, innovation, knowledge sharing and performance both economically and socially, as also emphasised in several recent studies (Asheim, 2011; Elkjaer, 2018; Houten & Russo, 2020; Nerland, 2022; Nielsen et al., 2012; Tikkanen et al., 2018).

A Nordic approach to development and learning thus expands the possibilities for creating new solutions and changing practices in relation to organisational learning and competence development.

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