

THE FAST TRACK TO CREATIVE LEADERSHIP

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How do you, as a business, develop a vision that will still be valid 10 years from now? A dream team of young, creative leaders in Amsterdam is helping entrepreneurs to come up with radically innovative ideas. (With a video message from preacher-director Ruben van Zwieten of Zingeving Zuidas, an organization for Christian professionals.)

It is the tragedy of every large business. Despite large budgets to attract top talent, many large organizations fail to devise enough truly groundbreaking ideas.

This is why the city of Amsterdam is seeking a new vision for how the city should look in 2030. City hall is not looking to its 12,900 employees for an answer, but to 32 participants at THNK. This school on the Westergasfabriek terrain in Amsterdam offers entrepreneurs and leaders at large companies, non-profit organizations and government organizations a part-time study program in “creative leadership.” After a year and a half, participants are equipped to revamp their own organizations.

Necessity

There’s a great need for this, says co-founder and McKinsey veteran Menno van Dijk (50). “The world around us becomes ever more complex. CEOs are looking for people who are pioneers of a new development or service, a new product or revenue model. They want leaders who can not only build a vision for the future but who can also realize it. Such a group has not been properly trained in the past decades.”

Those who take part in the THNK program receive, for the first six months, lessons in strategic and creative thinking. “Most people find the ‘creative process’ rather murky,” says program coordinator Berend-Jan Hilberts (48). “But it’s not. You have a variety of methods you can use to be creative in a structured way. For many people this is a revelation.”

Participants can put their lessons into practice immediately: after the first six months, they are given a year to realize a growth plan for their business or organization. Most participants want to grow an existing part of an organization. Others want to start their own business. Between these goals, participants also solve “challenges,” such as Amsterdam’s vision for the future.

Internet Technology

ICT company Cisco also found its way to THNK. The company requests an answer to the following challenge: how can we use internet technology to turn important markets on their heads? Take the way in which we now produce, sell and consume our food. Can ICT radically change this?

Is there then no one at Cisco itself who has an answer to this? Yes, there is, says Nicola Villa (43), who is responsible for innovation and the recruitment of top talent at Cisco. There is, however, one problem: despite all the different nationalities, the ideas are not big enough game changers, because people who work at the same organization often think in the same ways. Even a team from Cisco and business partner IBM combined could not deliver the desired results. So Villa tried a different approach: he began an ongoing search for the networks that attracted the most diverse people. The greater the differences, the greater the chances of a groundbreaking and revolutionary idea. Villa's expectations were high.

The Best People

Eduard Burer (39), recruiter at THNK, does everything he can to find the best people to tackle the challenges that Cisco and other companies deliver. With five colleagues, he roams the internet each day on the hunt for that unique top talent. Are you on the list of Young Global Leaders from the World Economic Forum? Have you presented at an international TED conference? Then you score points. Burer also receives many tips from former program participants – which now number around 175. Around 80% of the participants find the program via word of mouth.

From the 300 applicants, a maximum of 40 are approved for each class. The requirements are strict: the business plan that the participants pursue must be “super inspired” and relevant to society, according to Van Dijk. Anyone just looking to maximize their profits will not be accepted to THNK. Plus, participants must have a firm eight years of leadership experience, preferably international.

“These people must be standing on the cusp of a second career,” says Burer. THNK offers them the tools, the network and the inspiration to break through, so the recruiter entices the participants. But, he says: “It’s not as though you can expect to walk away from your THNK experience with a €100,000 raise in salary. For that you need to go to Harvard or Stanford.”

Jargon

The classes take place in the first half year during four gatherings in Amsterdam. The program bursts with creative jargon. THNK's method for radical renewal consists of four steps: “sensing,” “visioning,” “prototyping” and “scaling.” That is: you first research the problem and the client; then you come up with ideas, which you test practically as soon as possible, so that you can then introduce them to the market and eventually scale up your offering. The growth needs to happen quickly in a short time. This is not a new method, admits coordinator Hilberts, “but the composition of the program and the methods to scale up make THNK unique.”

One of program coordinator Hilberts' favorite methods is the "wild safari," part of the first phase. Participants are sent out into the world to "observe clients." For example, to research the behavior of commuters switching trains at the station. Where do they get their information? For most top talent this field work is new. "They're used to diving into reports."

Work is also done on internal motivation: each participant must seek his or her "passion and purpose" during the program. What would you like to achieve in life? "You are continually thrown off balance," says participant Ellis Bartholomeus, who works as a game consultant. "It's exhausting. Everyone has their break-down moment." This is why there's a personal coach on stand-by.

Pressure

The pressure on the THINK participants is high. When class five's solution to the "challenge" is presented in September, Nicola Villa of Cisco expects "radically innovative" ideas for breakthroughs in current food consumption using internet technology. Villa: "Anyone can think up a good idea, but there are only a few who will actually make a difference." Participant Sabin Lakhani, a management consultant from the United Arab Emirates, has complete faith they will succeed. "Our group is made up of very high-caliber people."

THINK leaves nothing to chance. The classes are a mix of 40 nationalities. The average age is 39. A sharp eye is also kept on the balance of males to female. The school is purposefully designed to activate. There are few regular chairs to be found, and you won't last more than an hour on the small cubes. That is also the point: standing regularly ensures good blood circulation. There is also a car with Lego, rope and drawing supplies: any means to sparks the creative spirit is valid. At 4 pm there is a conscientious vegetable snack with hummus dip. Even the background music has been taken into consideration.

"With the right mix of people, methods and inspiring speakers, chances are we will be able to deliver on our promise to come up with breakthrough ideas," says Hilberts. But, he says, "You can't just order up a great idea."

The success of THINK lies in the hands of the participants. Once they have finished the program, they can do anything but lean back. "It all revolves around action," says Sharon Chang (42), an American partner of THINK since March. "If you've set a clear goal, then it's contagious. It's our ambition to start a worldwide domino effect. We're creating a pool of breakthrough talent." Co-founder Menno van Dijk sees his five classes through the eyes of a risk investor. "Not everyone will be successful. The first class has now been done for a half a year. It takes an average of seven years before a portfolio delivers money. The wine, thus, still needs to mature."

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