

ALTECH – tailored training for Alfa Laval

Alfa Laval wanted to improve the integration between the company's units and speed up the rate of renewal in its product portfolio. In collaboration with Chalmers Professional Education, ALTECH was created – a tailored 14-day training programme for business development.



Study visit at Goodbaby International in Kunshan, Shanghai, June 2011

Alfa Laval is a global concern with 11,500 employees around the world, about 1,900 being in Sweden and 1,100 in Denmark. The core business consists of industrial products and applications in heat transfer, separation and flow handling. The company has three divisions: "Operations" with production, purchasing and IT; "Equipment" which is responsible for product sales; and "Process technology" offering comprehensive solutions for the process industry. The product development is organized in terms of products or product groups, and is conducted for instance in Sweden, Denmark and Italy.

The background to Alfa Laval's collaboration with Chalmers Professional Education is that the time from a new innovation until a profitable product, or "time to market", was experienced as too long. The product portfolio contained a low share of new products, and the company management saw a need for change. Bjarne Søndergaard is vice president of Alfa Laval's product centre "Fluid Handling".

"We wanted to strengthen the cooperation between the company's different functions and units by creating a common language and understanding. An example is product development, where the coordination between our development centres was deficient."



Aiming for cross-functional competence

On assignment from Alfa Laval, Chalmers Professional designed ALTECH – a tailored training programme for directors. The general goal was to raise the participants' understanding of each other's respective work situations. Mikael Weimarck, who is responsible for the training at Chalmers Professional, tells more.

"In the training's lectures, seminars and practical elements, we give perspectives on cross-functional challenges. The focus shifts between, for instance, production and product development and logistics, and the participants get insights into areas that they themselves do not work with."

A central feature in ALTECH is the work with current and concrete improvement projects that are coupled to Alfa Laval's operations. The assignments are based on important strategic issues and are of cross-organizational nature – they involve several different departments and functions in the company. The participants are divided into project groups and, at the first training session, the company management gives an assignment to each group, a procedure that sends clear signals.

"The management's engagement in the assignments strengthens the participants' motivation," says Mikael Weimarck. "They get a real opportunity to influence the company's strategic decisions, and this yields results in the form of ambitious and well-done work."

External experts contribute new knowledge

In the implementation of ALTECH, company-internal challenges are addressed with the help of knowledge from external experts. The training's teachers come from, among other places, Chalmers in Göteborg, the Politecnico in Turin, Cranfield University, and China Europe International Business School in Shanghai. In addition, a number of companies are taking part – Hewlett Packard, SKF, ABB, ST Microelectronics and others – with study visits and presentation of cases. This design is much appreciated, according to Bjarne Søndergaard.

"The lecturers in the programme are highly qualified and provide valuable knowledge. It is also useful to have an outside perspective on the company's processes, as we cannot always evaluate our own way of working."

Chalmers Professional's company-internal training programmes focus on business development, which is illustrated by the current assignments in ALTECH. At the same time, it is important that a balance exists between organizational goals and the personal perspective – the participants should experience that the training is rewarding and places reasonable demands on their work efforts.

"Through ALTECH we have a possibility to deal with numerous prioritized issues every year," says Bjarne Søndergaard. "These issues are central for the company's development, but we still consider the greatest benefit to be that the participants build up strong networks internally. This facilitates the integration between different functions and simplifies the decision processes."

Continued commitment to the Asian market

ALTECH is a contribution among several activities that Alfa Laval conducts in order to strengthen the internal collaboration and shorten the lead times in product development. The training has been carried out annually since 2005 and the design is continuously refined. During 2011, for example, a clear focus on the Asian market has been added, something that is marked by one of the training modules being conducted in Shanghai. There are also plans to locate training sessions in India.

"As our operations become ever more international, with product development and production spread all over the world, our need to understand other cultures is growing. It will be exciting to continue improving ALTECH so as to meet these challenges," concludes Bjarne Søndergaard.

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