

The Story of MiL

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MiL Institute was founded for a reason. We – eventually about 100 individuals from large companies, Lund University and different consultancy firms – were not satisfied with the way management and leadership development was designed and run at the time. It was mostly based on an instrumental view of leadership, a mechanistic perspective of organization and an approach to strategy as merely a tool for the reduction of uncertainty. Above all: Too much teaching and too little learning. Academic subjects were taught, while the experiences of the real subjects, the participants, were overlooked. And few leaders walked their talk, especially concerning the catchphrase at the time: “Our employees are our most important resource”.

We worked for more than a year in an open-ended process, starting in 1976. The process was designed, while the results were genuinely co-produced in that process. This, we think, is a requirement for creating something really new – using the diverse competencies of all the participating individuals, from those practicing in the field and those from academia, side by side, on an equal footing. We were committed human beings, actors, practicing actorship, not powerless and passive components in abstract systems. In fact “actorship” became a concept of the same magnitude as leadership.

I led the development process and became the president of MiL Institute. Even though MiL is the creation of many, including the founders and all those having influenced the direction it has taken since then, this story of MiL is by necessity my version. Therefore, some words about myself would be in order.

By 1976, I had worked for several years organizing seminars at Lund University for managers, but when people finally got to know each other and the trust level for real learning was established, it was over. For years I wrote and edited numerous university books, but when the students eventually gained the power to put the new ideas into practice, time had elapsed, the ideas were forgotten, or the concepts were no longer timely. Working with managers in the field for a longer period of time in reality-based action projects would be much more effective, I thought. From working at the Harvard Business School in the early 1970s the concept of humanistic management became a reality, while I thought that there must be effective alternatives to the classic Harvard Business School cases.

After having worked in a variety of areas, including time as a journalist, traveling the world as a member of the Swedish National Fencing Team, writing books, working as an ordinary business man and board member and practicing as a management consultant, I felt, at the age of 33, that I wanted to commit myself full-heartedly and full-time to one important mission. MiL it became.

The tangible results of the development project in 1976-77 were three:

- MiL Institute was founded as a non-profit foundation in December 1977 – with companies in the majority on the board.
- A number of new ideas, concepts, even theories, were developed as well as guiding beliefs about leadership and learning.
- The first MiL program was designed – and easy to market, as it was co-developed by the companies later nominating participants.

This program started in 1978 and became the longest (50 days over 9 months), certainly the most innovative and probably the most advanced management development program in Sweden at the time. This program is still up and running, number 44 started in 2002. But it is new and fresh each time, according to one of the many organizing principles already laid down from the beginning: The program is staffed by a new combination of MiL people on each occasion. Thereby the innovative spirit will be preserved and boring repetitions are avoided.

At the beginning, MiL ran this one and only program. Period. But the humanistic values, innovative ideas and pragmatic concepts were stronger, as were the people in the two main networks of MiL: the Member Companies (then 13, today 150) and the professionals in the MiL Staff Network (then 13, today 100). Very soon MiL went up, out and – home.

“Up” regarding the target group. The “MiL Executive Program” exclusively for presidents and the like started in 1981. “Up” regarding the geographic reach. Large international companies from all over Sweden were attracted by the new ideas about leadership, learning and co-producing and came onboard as member companies very early in the 1980s. Volvo being one of the first.

“Out” regarding internationalization. The “MiL International Program” also started in 1981 with weeklong sessions at Ashridge, London Business School, IMI and IMEDE (later merged into IMD) and INSEAD. These programs were based on the MiL leadership and learning philosophy with real business challenges, as well as on MiL designs and processes through program directorship and learning coaches. In cooperation with these well-known business schools, however, this first series of international programs gained in both respectability and world-class content. It also led to mutual learning. Our own learning was immense. Likewise, some of these business schools became the ones most reorientated towards learning.

We also “came home”. An old farmhouse was renovated and designed according to our learning philosophy and working methods, MiLgården. It is situated on a wonderful golf course near Lund; it is homey, effective – and small, just like our programs. A feeling of being at home and in a productive learning environment without being disturbed by other guests. In 1985, when MiL had expanded, a somewhat bigger mansion was redesigned in Klippan, which eventually became the MiL Campus consisting of three separate facilities in close proximity – and additional installations such as an obstacle course, experimental workshops, and more. In 1980 we started our annual “MiL Day”, which has had its home at the MiL Campus since 1985.

Much happened in 1981! The whole MiL staff of professionals along with a few contact persons from MiL member companies went to the U.S.A. for a three week “inspirational tour”. At its founding, MiL challenged the dominant U.S. models of management and leadership. Armed with much curiosity, we wanted to find out about the original American ideas instead of the European reproductions. We were overwhelmed by the generosity with which we were welcomed by such diverse organizations as AMA, Aspen Institute, BCG, Berkley, Esalen, HP, Harvard, MIT, Motorola, NYU, Stanford, Tarrytown, UCLA, USC and the University of Arizona. Again, great learning took place and we gained new perspectives on our own ideas and development. Our way of working with “out-of-the-box learning” probably started here. When we presented our own perspectives and ways of working, we also received confirmation that we were onto something new and much needed. What was originally to be an account of “U.S. Trends in Management and Management Development” also became a missionary tour (MiL, 1982).

In 1984, MiL became engaged in its first in-company program, as well as its first consortia program – the “MiL Service Management Program”. When IKEA took the initiative to create what became “MiL International Partner Program” in 1987, we realized that our way of organizing this was a bit different from consortia existing in other places – especially regarding the real influence of the partner companies. That is why we labeled our concept “Partner Program”.

Later in the 1980s, the U.S. tour was replicated in Europe and a couple of Asian tours were completed with the participants of the MiL Executive Program. In the U.S., new relationships were cultivated which eventually led to the formation of LIM, Leadership in International Management. Again, lots of mutual learning and development. A simple but illustrative example: We from MiL helped our American colleagues with their name (LIM), while they helped us with labeling our learning philosophy – Action Reflection Learning (ARL). ARL was later trademarked by LIM in the U.S. and MiL in Europe.

Our management perspectives were influenced by the Scandinavian culture and traditions. Quite naturally, we took the initiative in 1987 to develop the “Scandinavian Business Development and Leadership Pro-

gram” with an even share of company representatives from Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden taking part in the one-year, co-development process. In a way it was like founding MiL again, ten years later, but this time with institutional partners: AFF (Norway), DMF (Denmark) and LIFIM (Finland).

The missionary spirit of MiL has led to several initiatives throughout the years. In 1981, MiL designed and ran a management program on the master’s level for graduates from Lund University and the Lund Institute of Technology. In 1982, MiL co-founded the Scandinavian Action Learning Society and arranged its first conference. We have been co-founders of SIMI (Scandinavian International Management Institute), SAMS (Scandinavian Academy of Management Studies), ICAL (International Community of Action Learners) and SVN Sweden (Social Venture Network). In 1998, we became the first Scandinavian member of UNICON (International University Consortium for Executive Education). The international association of greatest importance to MiL is probably efmd (The European Foundation for Management Development). Co-hosting the efmd anniversary conference in 1994, “Business Driven Management Development”, gave us the opportunity to experiment with a completely new opening – intercultural walks and talks in max-mixed small groups all over the MiL Campus.

With the exception of the 1982 book on the MiL management mission in the U.S., the early years of MiL were not about writing, they were about doing: trying out different designs and coaching methods in real-time, real-life situations. A lot of tacit knowledge was built up, and very little was systematized in writing. At the end of the 1980s, however, we felt that the disparity between our philosophy of leadership and methodology of learning – and the dominant way of looking at strategy and business development was great, to say the least. This annoyed us, as one of our main missions was and is to integrate the “hard” and the “soft” sides of business, organization and leadership. We started a development project labeled “StratoMiL”, as usual involving member companies. In 1991, the first results were presented at the MiL Day and in 1994, our first book was published, “Strategic Leadership in the Learning Society” (translated into English in 1998 and Japanese in 1999).

MiL during the 1990s was very much characterized by the expansion of in-company assignments like those joint initiatives described in this book. Other examples of new MiL activities during the 1990s are: Supporting management groups in their ambition to transform into genuine teams and facilitating their thinking about new strategies; facilitation of the process and people side of mergers and acquisitions; mentoring presidents and individual coaching on all levels; development programs for young managers and high potentials; “train-the-trainer” activities for internal HR managers and coaches. Just to mention a few.

This story of MiL is focused on the early developments as the culture of an organization is very much set by its original *raison d'être* and critical events during its early stages of development. It is in the hearts and minds of its people and it is easily absorbed by people joining later – both as an inspiration and as something to fight for – and against – in the ever ongoing process of renewal. During our 25th anniversary year, 2002, hundreds of people have written their story about a MiL event which they consider important for their professional development and, perhaps also, their personal life – the “Book of Friends”.

MiL in the future will become what the proactive actors of its main constituents want it to be. Rather beautiful than big, is my guess. In 2001, MiL was ranked the most valued knowledge company in Sweden in an independent survey. Behind this is much hard work by committed people always striving to do their best. People who dare to challenge their own way of working, as well as the member companies' ways of doing things. To explore, to invent and to create – in co-development and for mutual learning.