

From groups to teams: applying Team Academy methodology in organisational development

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Abstract

Purpose – Team Academy, known in Finnish as Tiimiakatemia, is a well-known method for team-based learning in education, but rarely studied as a tool for organisational development (OD). This article asks whether Team Academy methodology can help organisations move from groups to genuine teams, and whether human collective learning will become a key organisational strength as artificial intelligence changes what individuals can do.

Design/methodology/approach – The article combines a literature review, drawing on the learning organisation (Senge), knowledge creation (Nonaka and Takeuchi) and selfmanaged learning (Cunningham), with three semi-structured interviews. The practitioners interviewed had each introduced Team Academy methodology inside a large organisation: an industrial technology and logistics company, a telecommunications company and a financial services company. The three cases are discussed together, theme by theme, using thematic analysis.

Findings – Thematic analysis identified eight cross-case themes, including person-dependent adoption, partial uptake of Team Academy tools, letting go of hierarchical control and middle management as a friction point. Rather than one shared model, the cases show a repeating pattern: a committed individual applies parts of the methodology, meets resistance and builds trust through small steps. A six-phase framework is proposed.

Originality/value – Team Academy methodology has been widely studied in education, but very little academic work has looked at its use in OD. This article addresses that gap using original practitioner interviews from three sectors, and connects Team Academy to a topic not previously explored: artificial intelligence in the workplace. The resulting six-phase framework offers a new, practical starting point for organisations and researchers.

Keywords Team academy, Organisational development, Team coaching, Artificial intelligence, Learning organisation, Tacit knowledge

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

Many organisations are still struggling to understand the differences between groups and teams, and continue to mislabel them (Katzenbach and Smith, 1993). People are assembled, assigned to projects, given shared goals and digital tools to coordinate their work and then, almost inevitably, expected to perform as though the magic of teamwork will simply emerge. It rarely does, at least not quickly or without deliberate effort. The management literature has long acknowledged this challenge, from Tuckman's (1965) model of group development to Katzenbach and Smith's (1993) discipline of teams. Yet organisations continue to invest in individual training and hope that the sum of it will develop the whole team; however, Salas *et al.* (2015) argue that different kinds of training and cultural shifts will be required to truly build high-performing teams. This article outlines how the Team Academy methodology could address this.

Team Academy – known in its original Finnish form as Tiimiakatemia offers a different approach. Developed in 1993 by Counsellor of Education, Mr Johannes Partanen, at Jyväskylä University of Applied Sciences (JAMK), it is referred to as “Tiimiakatemia by JAMK” in this article. Team Academy was not designed to teach people about entrepreneurship or teamwork in a conventional sense but to enable the learning to happen through them. Learning takes place through real projects, real clients and real consequences. The team decides what they want to learn and how, and together they develop their learning paths. The educator's role also



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changes, from teacher-centred delivery to student-centred coaching. The coach does not teach; they ask, challenge and hold the space for reflection. The programme has spread to over twenty countries and inspired a growing body of practice and research (Leinonen *et al.*, 2004; Tiimiakatemia Global, 2023). Soon after Tiimiakatemia by JAMK was launched, Partanen also established a private company, Partus Ltd., to help spread the team learning methodology to a wider audience through team coaching programmes for individuals and organisations. Later, the company was renamed to Tiimiakatemia Global Ltd. and the owner base was expanded (Tiimiakatemia Global, 2023). This article uses the term “Team Academy methodology,” which combines team learning and coaching methods developed by Johannes Partanen, Tiimiakatemia by JAMK, Tiimiakatemia Global Ltd. and the tribe of practitioners around the world.

The additional focus of this article is shaped by a broader technological shift. The rapid adoption of artificial intelligence tools in workplaces across every sector is changing what individuals can do alone and, by extension, raising profound questions about what teams are actually for. This article argues that Team Academy methodology speaks directly to both challenges: the enduring human difficulty of building genuine teams, and the emerging opportunity to define what collective human intelligence offers that machines cannot.

While Team Academy has been widely researched in educational settings, its application in professional and organisational development (OD) contexts remains underexplored. A small number of practitioners, particularly within the broader global Team Academy network, have begun to apply Team Academy tools in corporate settings. Still, this work remains largely practitioner-led and insufficiently documented. The academic literature on Team Academy in OD is sparse, representing both a gap and an opportunity. Tosey *et al.*'s (2013) case study of the original Jyväskylä programme, for instance, offers a detailed, peer-reviewed account of Team Academy's pedagogy and “micro-culture”, but is concerned exclusively with its function as a management education model rather than with its transfer into existing organisations – precisely the gap this article addresses. To explore how this methodology behaves in organisational settings, the article draws on semi-structured interviews with three practitioners who have each introduced Team Academy thinking inside large organisations outside the educational sector: an industrial technology and logistics company, a telecommunications company, and a financial services and insurance company. All three interviewees have requested organisational anonymity; we refer to them by role and organisational type rather than by name or employer. They are also identified as Case A, B and C.

The main research question of this article is: What is the impact of team coaching (Team Academy methodology) in the large organisation? The secondary research question is: How is Team Academy methodology applied and developed in the large organisation?

2. Literature review

2.1 *The origins, principles and adoption of Team Academy*

Tiimiakatemia by JAMK was established in Jyväskylä, Finland, in 1993 as a radical alternative to conventional business education after Partanen (2012) discovered that not everyone learned through traditional teaching. That is when he pinned a paper on the notice board saying: “Do you want to go on a trip around the world and learn some marketing on the side? Come to class 147 at 3 p.m. to hear more!” (Partanen, 2012, p. 9). That is how the first team was born, and since then student teams have been formed to run real companies with real customers, enabling learning by doing (Fowle and Jussila, 2016). Students, or as called in Team Academy, “team entrepreneurs”, influence their own curricula. They are also not taught or lectured in the traditional sense; in their place are team coaches, whose role is to facilitate learning through dialogue, challenge and structured reflection rather than instruction (Nevalainen *et al.*, 2021). The theoretical underpinnings draw on many models: Revans' (1982) action learning, Nonaka and Takeuchi's (1995) knowledge creation, Senge's (1990) learning organisation, Isaacs' (1999) dialogic practice and Cunningham's (1999) selfmanaged learning (SML), among others.

Central to the methodology are a number of distinctive practices. The training session is a structured dialogue in which team members share readings, test ideas and challenge each other's thinking. The learning contract, adapted directly from Cunningham's SML model, commits each individual to a personal plan for their own development, reviewed and renegotiated with peers and coach over time (Jussila and Fowle, 2017). Cunningham's (1999) individual reading plans support personal learning objectives, but they also support the growth and continuous learning of the whole team. The team contract, which uses individual goals as a building block, establishes shared values, rules and a vision for the future (Katzenbach and Smith, 1993). Projects are undertaken with genuine clients and genuine stakes (Revans, 1982; Kolb, 1984). Travel is used as a vehicle for expanding perspective and building networks (Fowle and Jussila, 2016).

This model has been adopted and adapted across Europe, Latin America and beyond (Fowle and Jussila, 2016), and the manner of its adaptation has varied considerably with the cultural and institutional context into which it has travelled. In the UK context specifically, research has noted both the power and the friction of the model: UK students tend to be younger and less financially independent than their Finnish peers, institutional assessment requirements create tension with the philosophy of self-directed learning, and the cultural disposition towards hierarchical authority can make the shift to a coaching model particularly challenging (Blackwood *et al.*, 2016). A comparative study of UK team coaching practice makes a related point from a different angle: even within a single national context, the way training sessions are run and the balance struck between coaching and more directive facilitation vary considerably between institutions (Iraci *et al.*, 2022). Mondragon Team Academy (MTA) was among the earliest adopters of the model outside Finland, established in 2008 through direct cooperation with Tiimiakatemia by JAMK and Tiimiakatemia Global Ltd. While Mondragon Team Academy follows the same underlying methodology, it has continued to actively develop its own programme rather than simply replicating the Finnish original. One clear differentiator is its strong international dimension: team entrepreneurs undertake yearly international trips, and the programme itself has expanded internationally, running in 13 cities across 4 continents by 2020 (Luzarraga Monasterio *et al.*, 2022). Adaptation becomes more pronounced still in contexts further removed from the Nordic or European institutional setting. In Tanzania, for example, introducing Team Academy principles into entrepreneurship education required significant rethinking of team formation, assessment and the coach role to fit a developing-country higher-education context with very different resourcing and institutional norms (Sabokwigina, 2022). This pattern, of selective, locally negotiated adoption rather than uniform replication, has become significant enough to attract sustained academic attention: the four-part *Routledge Focus on Team Academy* series devotes its concluding volume specifically to Team Academy's translation into settings as varied as the United Kingdom, Finland, Brazil, Japan, Argentina and Tanzania (Urzelai and Vettraino, 2022). The cultural responsiveness often treated as an implementation challenge for Team Academy is, more accurately, a structural feature of the methodology itself: because it depends on dialogue, shared norm-setting and locally negotiated team contracts rather than fixed curricular content, Team Academy is inherently disposed to be reshaped by the people and cultures that take it up. This has direct implications for organisational application, a point developed further below: any organisation introducing Team Academy principles should expect, and plan for, a process of cultural negotiation rather than direct procedural transfer.

This negotiation is possible because of the kind of space Team Academy creates in the first place. In anthropology, this space has a name: the liminal state (Turner, 1977; Kontinen *et al.*, 2013), defined as an intermediate state, a state of being on the threshold. Originally a concept related to anthropological research on rituals, it has been applied to new contexts in contemporary discourse and has been interpreted in various ways. In recent organisational research, the concept has been used, among other things, to study the nature of organisations, the experiences of temporary and project-based employees, and the relationships between

consultants and client organisations. The liminal space is a kind of creative chaos in which the rules and routines of everyday life do not apply. The liminal space holds great potential; “anything” can happen (Turner, 1979, p. 468). This state generally enables innovation and creativity, provided it is utilised sufficiently. One of the strongest social positions in work culture is the relationship between a manager and their subordinates. In a transitional state, this relationship can be parodied, and more or less temporary anti-structures can be created in which the organisation’s social order is renegotiated (Kontinen *et al.*, 2013). When using the Team Academy method, one enters a specific type of liminal space – that is, a space of anti-structures – where learning takes place collaboratively with the team, starting from the individual level. The learning team serves as a tool for individual learning.

Team Academy’s identity as a learning organisation in Senge’s (1990) sense is not incidental; Toivanen (2025) recounts that Senge visited Tiimiakatemia by JAMK in person in the 1990s and described what he saw as the first true learning organisation he had encountered, later sending the organisation a congratulatory message for its anniversary celebrations. Toivanen treats this lineage as a continuing point of method rather than a piece of origin-story colour: he draws directly on Senge’s five disciplines, and on the closely related circles-of-learning model from *The Dance of Change* (Senge, 1999), to explain why team-based change in organisations is slow to take and easy to undo prematurely and why a team coach’s patience is itself a methodological commitment rather than a personality trait.

2.2 From groups to teams

The distinction between a group and a team has been a concern of organisational psychology for decades. Katzenbach and Smith (1993) offer one of the most durable definitions: a team is a small number of people with complementary skills committed to a common purpose, shared performance goals and mutual accountability. A group, by contrast, may share a workplace, a manager and even a stated goal, while remaining fundamentally a collection of individuals who coordinate rather than collaborate. The team has a shared vision – the group does not have one (Toivanen, 2025).

Tuckman’s (1965) model, forming, storming, norming, performing, describes the stages through which groups typically move towards team functioning. However, the journey is rarely linear and organisations often intervene to shortcut the messier stages (storming in particular) without understanding what is being lost in the process. Lencioni (2002) frames the dynamics in terms of dysfunction: the absence of trust, fear of conflict, lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability and inattention to results. What both frameworks share is an implicit understanding that the transition from group to team requires more than structural intervention; it requires a shift in the quality of relationships, communication and shared accountability.

OD as a field has developed numerous tools to facilitate this transition: team diagnostics, performance monitoring, psychometric profiling, away days, and coaching and leadership programmes. Shuffler *et al.* (2018) argue that the evidence base for many of these interventions is mixed, and the tendency to treat team development as an event rather than a process remains widespread. What is often missing is a sustained methodology that holds teams in a learning relationship with their own experience over time. Team Academy’s own team coaching programme offers a concrete example of what a more sustained alternative can look like. It is held over the course of a year and includes three to four modules, enabling learning not just during the sessions but also in the months between them through real experimentation, applying learning in practice and continued reflection (Tiimiakatemia Global, 2023). However, it’s important to note that this kind of commitment and investment is not realistic for all organisations. Recent industry data shows that even as overall training spend has grown, large organisations have cut their average training budgets and spending on in-person, sustained delivery has fallen while spending on cheaper, more scalable alternatives has risen sharply (Training Industry, 2025).

2.3 Mapping Team Academy methodology onto organisational development

[Nonaka and Takeuchi's \(1995\)](#) knowledge-creation cycle is at the core of Team Academy. Setting goals and executing action plans enable the creation of explicit knowledge, whereas continuous reflection and regular dialogue sessions make tacit knowledge visible. This cycle is the conceptual spine of the whole methodology. It offers a first transferable principle for OD: the explicit understanding that an organisation's most valuable knowledge typically starts tacit, lodged in the heads and habits of individuals, and that dialogue and structured reflection are the mechanisms by which it becomes shared and explicit. The question is: Do organisations enable this to happen, or are people holding tight to their own knowledge ([Partanen, 2014](#))? Organisations that treat knowledge transfer as a documentation problem, rather than a dialogic one, are working with only half of this cycle.

The second transferable principle is the primacy of dialogue itself. Drawing on [Isaacs' \(1999\)](#) work on dialogue as distinct from discussion or debate, Team Academy creates regular structured spaces, the training session in which teams get to practise the four elements: Listening (actively, without preconceptions), Voicing (expressing oneself and one's feelings genuinely), Respecting (acknowledging other's position and the impossibility of understanding them totally) and Suspending (holding back from making conclusions or judgements). Dialogue is not a conversation for the sake of it; it is conversation as a learning platform. In organisations where the dominant communication culture is one of information transmission and decision-making, introducing genuine dialogue requires both skill and deliberate structural support.

The third principle is learning through real work. Team Academy rejects the separation of learning from doing. Teams learn by taking on projects, facing real consequences and reflecting on what happened. This maps closely onto [Revans' \(1982\)](#) action learning methodology and onto broader constructivist approaches to adult learning ([Kolb, 1984](#)). For organisations, this suggests that the richest development opportunities already exist within the flow of everyday work; the challenge is to create the conditions for reflection that convert experience into learning.

The fourth principle, and the one that most directly underwrites the other three, is SML. [Cunningham's \(1999\)](#) *The Wisdom of Strategic Learning* argues that sustainable learning cannot be designed and delivered by someone else on the learner's behalf; it has to be owned, planned and evaluated by the learner, in negotiation with peers and with whatever expertise the organisation can make available. This is the theoretical basis for Team Academy's learning contract: a personal, free-form document built around Cunningham's five questions (where have I been as a learner, where am I now, where do I want to go, how will I get there, how will I know when I have arrived), discussed by the individual with their team and coach at regular intervals. [Partanen \(2012\)](#) adds that creating a reading plan based on these learning goals is crucial, as it allows the individual to acquire new theoretical and conceptual knowledge; choosing their own reading, which they can apply directly in practice, will also increase their motivation. The learning contract is not an HR form to be completed; it is the mechanism by which responsibility for learning is returned to the person while remaining within a community that can support that learning.

The fifth principle is the role of the team coach. The team coach can have multiple roles; [Hackman and Wageman \(2005\)](#) summarise them into three functions: motivational (building commitment and effort), consultative (helping the team develop strategies) and educational (developing the team's own knowledge and skills). At Team Academy, team coaches' roles change depending on the team's situation. [Nevalainen et al. \(2022\)](#) describe team coaching as a deliberate sequence tied to the team's own development, beginning with trust and psychological safety, after which the coach shifts focus to challenging the team to reach its full potential. The emphasis is on the team, but a team is made up of individual people. Coaching individuals matters too, since a team is ultimately a tool for individual learning. [Partanen \(2014\)](#) adds that the team coach does not tell the team what to do; rather, by asking questions, the coach enables the team to identify the necessary actions. Coaches can also name

dynamics the team cannot see and hold the team accountable to its own commitments, but because the coach's job is to support learning, they do not directly participate in the team's challenges or topics (Partanen, 2014). Toivanen (2025) makes a related point with one of the Team Coach's Laws: a coach is "more than an acquaintance, but less than a close friend" to the people they coach, a deliberately uncomfortable middle distance that lets the coach stay close enough to be trusted and far enough away to intervene without becoming entangled in the team's own decisions. Clutterbuck (2007) ties team coaching explicitly to organisational learning, arguing that a central function of the team coach is to help teams and through them the wider organisation, learn from experience rather than simply perform, a connection he draws directly from Senge. This is a fundamentally different role from that of a manager, and yet it is precisely what many organisations say they want their managers to become. The challenge is that coaching requires a different relationship to authority, expertise and uncertainty than most management cultures currently support.

These five principles are also closely related to Senge's (1990) five disciplines, which are well known in the OD literature. For organisations to succeed, Senge (1990) believes these all need to work together: personal mastery (individuals continually clarifying and deepening what they actually want and are capable of), mental models (surfacing and testing the assumptions people carry about how the world works, rather than acting on them unconsciously), shared vision (a picture of the future genuinely built together, not handed down), team learning (a team's collective intelligence coming to exceed what any single member could produce) and systems thinking, which Senge treats as the discipline that integrates all the others, the ability to see an organisation as an interconnected whole rather than isolated parts, and to spot the patterns and feedback loops driving its behaviour. As already noted in Section 2.1, this connection was not built retrospectively; Senge himself recognised Team Academy as an early example of the very model he was describing.

2.4 Team Academy in the age of artificial intelligence

Any discussion of team development in organisations today must reckon with the rapid integration of artificial intelligence into the workplace. Artificial intelligence tools are already transforming what individuals can accomplish alone, drafting, analysing, coding, summarising and generating ideas at a speed that would have seemed implausible five years ago. This has profound implications for how we understand the value of teams, and for why a methodology like Team Academy may matter more now than ever before. Research in this area is still new, so its long-term impact is hard to predict, but some clear findings have already emerged at the individual, team and organisational level.

At the individual level, Bankins *et al.* (2024) found that satisfaction with an artificial intelligence tool depended less on the technology itself than on trust and fit: workers who saw artificial intelligence as well-suited to a task were more likely to use it well, while those with high domain expertise often resisted artificial intelligence advice, believing their own judgement superior, whereas those with low expertise resisted it for the opposite reason, unable to judge its output. Workers with moderate expertise seemed to gain the most. There is also distrust towards artificial intelligence. Zirar *et al.*'s (2023) explained it as an existential response, a perceived threat to one's job or professional identity, rather than a rational assessment of the technology's actual capabilities.

At the team level, Schmutz *et al.* (2024) found that adding an artificial intelligence teammate often reduces coordination, communication and trust rather than building it, partly because early confidence in artificial intelligence tends to be corrected downwards through experience. This creates what might be called an illusion of collaboration: when each team member uses artificial intelligence separately, the work gets done, but the relational depth and mutual accountability of a real team never develop, leaving something efficient but brittle. Team Academy's dialogue and shared reflection work directly against this, since the trust they build cannot be simulated by a tool. Toivanen (2025) makes a related point: hierarchy was only

ever viable because managers alone held the information needed to lead, so as artificial intelligence puts that information within everyone's reach, decision-making naturally moves towards the team. Teams with strong relational foundations are also better placed to use artificial intelligence well rather than passively. Based on [Zirar et al.'s \(2023\)](#), artificial intelligence can genuinely augment what employees can do, provided organisations invest in three kinds of skill together: technical skill in using the tools, human skill in judgement and conceptual skill in understanding how a task fits into a wider system. Technical skill on its own cannot substitute for the other two; all three need to develop in parallel, supported by ongoing reskilling, for coexistence to become genuinely productive.

At the organisational level, [Bankins et al. \(2024\)](#) found that a supportive culture, modelled by leaders who led by example, made workers more likely to use artificial intelligence productively. Just as tellingly, the same technology produced different outcomes in different settings: in rigid, hierarchical organisations it became an "algorithmic cage", reducing autonomy; in organisations built on professional judgement, it became more of an "algorithmic colleague". This suggests the amount of genuine autonomy already present, the kind Team Academy is designed to build, may decide whether artificial intelligence strengthens a team's independence or quietly erodes it.

3. Case studies from organisations

3.1 Methodology

Three semi-structured interviews were conducted with practitioners who had each introduced Team Academy methodology inside a large organisation outside the education sector. A semi-structured format was chosen because it allows comparison across the three cases while still giving space for each interviewee to lead the conversation into whatever aspects of their own context mattered most. A short set of guiding questions was prepared in advance, covering the interviewee's role, how the methodology was first introduced, which tools or practices had been adopted, any outcomes they could point to, the effect of artificial intelligence on their team and what advice they would give another organisation considering the same path. These questions were used as prompts rather than a fixed script, and the conversations moved freely where the interviewee had more to say.

The three interviewees were purposively selected through one of the authors' existing professional network. All three organisations are Finnish, and the interviews were conducted in Finnish by the author with no prior involvement in these cases, to reduce bias from familiarity with the specific initiatives discussed. Interviews took place by video call between May and June 2026, each lasting between 45 minutes and one hour, and were recorded and automatically transcribed.

The interviews were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis ([Braun and Clarke, 2006](#)), carried out by the authors rather than a coding team. Each transcript was read in full, then re-read alongside the other two to identify patterns that recurred across at least two of the three cases. These themes were then matched against the theoretical framework. This cross-case approach was chosen deliberately because the three organisations differ so substantially in sector, scale and how long the methodology had been present, treating them as three separate case narratives risked obscuring exactly the kind of pattern this article is interested in, namely which elements of Team Academy travel well into organisational settings and which require significant adaptation. As [Flyvbjerg \(2006\)](#) argues, and as [Tosey et al. \(2013\)](#) note in relation to their own single-case study of Team Academy, small-N qualitative research is often wrongly assumed to offer no basis for theoretical contribution; the aim here, similarly, is analytic depth rather than statistical generalisability.

All interviewees gave informed consent and requested that their organisations not be named directly; they are therefore referred to by role and organisational type throughout this article, and identifying details such as specific figures or project names have been generalised where necessary to preserve anonymity while retaining the substance of what was said. Each interviewee was offered the opportunity to review the relevant sections of this article before submission.

The three cases span an industrial technology and logistics company, a telecommunications company, and a financial services and insurance company, and differ in how long the methodology has been in use and how far it has spread from its point of entry. [Table 1](#) summarises each context before the thematic discussion below.

3.2 Theme 1: person-dependent adoption – the “founder problem”

In all three interviews, the presence of the methodology within the organisation traces back to one or two people who trained personally as team coaches, most often through the Team Academy coach training programme, and then carried the practice into their own areas of work. In Case A, the interviewee said that one of his early goals had been to ensure the work was “not dependent on me” and to build a culture rather than a personal habit. Yet after two decades, he still admitted that losing the current group of champions could “wreck” what had been built, because the practice has never been formally owned by any function, even though it now runs fairly deep. In Case B, the interviewee did not know of anyone else in his very large organisation doing the same kind of work; he cited the lack of a peer, or a “pair”, doing similar

Table 1. Orienting summary of the three interview contexts

	Organisation type	Interviewee’s role	Entry point and current reach
Case A	Industrial technology and logistics company	Procurement/logistics leader in large global department	- Started about 20 years ago, alongside the interviewee’s own Team Academy coach training - Has since grown to lead teams in Finland and Italy, with other countries involved in the past - Organisation has 15,000 employees, but the use of TA methodology is used only with the interviewees department and still depends mainly on this one person
Case B	Telecommunications company	Team lead in global hardware/product development	- Started about 15 years ago, after taken part in Team Academy’s coach and business management training - Large global company, but Team Academy methodology only used within his team of 24 people and also applied it at a larger, multi-site scale major cross-location project that required leading a team of 130 people - A few peer leads have since started using TA methodology informally
Case C	Financial services and insurance company (mutual insurer)	HR/learning and development manager, organisation-wide remit	- The interviewee completed Team Academy coach training 10 years ago - She joined the current organisation 5 years ago; this organisation had an existing relationship with Team Academy - Roughly 10% of the organisation’s 400 staff have completed team coach training, which she coached and organised in partnership with Tiimiakatemia Global

work as the single biggest obstacle to spreading it further. Case C is the partial exception: a second generation of practitioners, the interviewee and her manager, took over and continued a practice first set up by a predecessor. This suggests that succession is possible, but mainly when the practice is already built into a formal structure, such as a dedicated learning function or a qualification route, rather than resting solely on one person's shoulders. In Case C, that qualification route was Finland's apprenticeship funding system, which made Team Academy coach training accessible and also carried a formal qualification. She was clear that they would not have been able to train so many people if the organisation had had to cover the full cost of the training. This problem is not unique to the organisations we spoke to: [Toivanen \(2025\)](#) describes Tiimiakatemia Global itself nearly failing when its founder stepped back from day-to-day leadership, and frames his own decade running the organisation as, in part, an effort to separate the methodology from any one person's authority.

3.3 Theme 2: adoption of Team Academy elements

None of the three interviewees described adopting Team Academy as a full, branded system. In each case, specific tools were adopted, renamed, combined with other frameworks or quietly absorbed into normal practice until their origins became hard to trace. Case A renamed the Motorola post-project reflection report "Vexit", after a half-remembered joke about a group of British visitors leaving a session early, and folded reflective practice into routine monthly team and leadership reporting rather than presenting it as a separate Team Academy tool. Case B adopted the learning contract, used in a two-tier, short- and long-term form and a backlog-based approach to breaking work into team-owned pieces, which he linked directly to his organisation's use of the Scaled Agile Framework (SAFe). He said the two sat "very well" together. Case C's interviewee resisted, at some length, any suggestion that her organisation's approach to learning could be neatly credited to Team Academy: dialogue practices, a "campfire dialogue" format for leadership, and an internal "agent model" for change and system rollouts sit alongside design thinking, systemic coaching and other influences. She described Team Academy coach training as "one seasoning, not the main seasoning" in a much bigger, more complex recipe. Across all three cases, the pattern is the same: organisations take the elements that solve an immediate problem and drop, or hide, the branding, rather than importing the whole methodology as a package.

This raises an interesting tension with [Tosey et al.'s \(2013\)](#) contention that Team Academy's coherence as a "micro-culture" means it should be replicated as a whole rather than transferred in component form. The organisational cases discussed here suggest the opposite pattern in practice: none of the three organisations replicated the micro-culture; all three unbundled it, taking the elements that solved an immediate problem and discarding the rest. This may simply reflect a structural difference between an educational institution, which can be built around a single coherent culture from the ground up, and an existing organisation, which cannot import a culture wholesale without first dismantling its own.

3.4 Theme 3: abandoning hierarchical control

Each interviewee described a moment, or a series of moments, when authority was deliberately, and uncomfortably, handed from a manager to a team. In Case A, the interviewee recalled asking supervisors to make their teams three concrete promises, including letting employees set the focus of their own development conversations, and described physically sensing supervisors' discomfort, as if "brick walls" were falling down, when this was announced. In Case B, the shift from project managers fully planning work to designers building their own task lists and schedules within a manager-defined framework was described as "bewildering" to staff at first, because they were used to being told what to do rather than just given a deadline. This "neither side fully in control" period is a liminal state in [Turner's \(1977, 1979\)](#) and [Kontinen et al.'s \(2013\)](#) sense, discussed in [Section 2.1](#): everyday hierarchy suspended and renegotiated. The discomfort described above, in both cases, is what that

suspension feels like from the inside. Team Academy methodology does not skip this stage but deliberately creates it, and the leader's task is to hold the ambiguity open long enough for the team to reorganise around it. In Case C, sharing authority took a more structural form: a multi-year, organisation-wide leadership programme was built together with line managers to define what management means within the company. This deliberately spread the work of defining the leadership model, rather than handing it down from a single function. In all three cases, the interviewees said the handover of control had to be modelled by them personally. Team members tested whether the offer of autonomy was genuine before trusting it, usually at a moment of ambiguity or minor crisis when the leader visibly chose not to step in. Read against [Toivanen's \(2013\)](#) Friend Leadership stages, the pattern across the three interviews looks less like one single handover and more like a gradual passage through the stages he describes: from a leader holding onto the power of the hierarchy, through a genuinely uncomfortable middle period where neither side is fully in control, towards a state where power has visibly moved to sit with the team.

3.5 Theme 4: middle management as a friction point

A striking pattern across the interviews is that resistance to the methodology, where it occurred, came not from frontline employees but from middle managers, specifically when those managers sensed that their traditional coordinating role was no longer needed. In Case A, the interviewee linked an earlier, less successful attempt to extend team working into another department to a lack of real buy-in from supervisors, who were still oriented towards hierarchy and control even while their teams moved ahead quickly without them. Case B gives the clearest single account of this: in a large, multi-site, highly visible product launch run on a SAFe-and-Team-Academy hybrid model, middle management began to "panic" partway through, as they realised their role was unclear, and started, in the interviewee's words, to "apply the brakes". This required active reassurance from within the programme that pulling back at that stage would risk the team failing to meet the deadline. Trust was rebuilt step by step, through visible progress rather than through argument. Case C did not report this kind of resistance, which is notable in itself: her account suggests that when the leadership group is brought into co-designing the model from the start, rather than having a team-based way of working introduced to them afterwards, this particular friction can be greatly reduced, though not removed entirely, since her organisation's own dialogue-based leadership programme took several years to land fully.

3.6 Theme 5: from tacit to explicit knowledge

Where interviewees were asked to name a concrete organisational benefit, the most consistent and least abstract answer concerned making visible the knowledge that had previously lived only in individuals' heads. What interviewees described here is, in effect, [Nonaka and Takeuchi's \(1995\)](#) tacit-to-explicit cycle at work inside an organisation. Case A's interviewee offered this, unprompted, near the end of the interview: under the old, individual way of working, each buyer held private knowledge about products and suppliers that was never written down or shared. When people started working together as a team, through dialogue that knowledge had become visible to the rest of the team so that anyone could cover for anyone else. He named this as one of the most concrete and lasting changes the team model had produced: when people moved on to new roles, the knowledge no longer left with them. Case B described a related effect at the level of attitude rather than information, contrasting an international colleague's view that hoarding expertise increased his personal value to the firm with his own team's view that sharing expertise increased the team's value to the customer. He also linked his organisation's continuous-improvement practices, drawn from Toyota's production methods, to the same underlying logic of small, shared, cumulative learning. Case C connected the same principle to large-scale technology rollouts, where knowledge about a new system was deliberately spread to a network of peer "agents" recruited from the

customer-facing front line, who then taught and coached their colleagues, rather than the training coming top-down from a training function. She credited this approach, used over roughly a decade of system changes, with consistently achieving higher customer satisfaction than more conventional, classroom-led rollouts.

3.7 Theme 6: artificial intelligence's implications for Team Academy

The three interviewees, while all enthusiastic about the underlying methodology, differed in how directly they connected it to artificial intelligence and this difference is itself informative. Case A's interviewee saw artificial intelligence mainly as a productivity tool that could remove lower-value tasks from a team's workload, freeing up capacity rather than threatening it. He suggested, speculatively, that a team might even ask an artificial intelligence system to act as an outside observer or coach on its own dynamics, in the same way a golfer might ask AI to review a recorded swing. Case B gave the most developed account. He described a shift already underway in his own technical field, where artificial intelligence is absorbing more sophisticated rule-based and pattern-recognition work, such as the automated review of test results. This frees engineers and managers and leads to spending less time on scheduling and resourcing, leaving more time for work that feels meaningful to the person doing it. This also enables the leaders to focus on how people communicate with one another and with the systems they direct. He framed the relational, trust-and-dialogue skills that Team Academy builds as the capability that will matter most once artificial intelligence becomes as unremarkable a presence as the internet is today. This supports the view that artificial intelligence is more likely to augment human capability than replace it, while increasing the importance of judgement, communication and other relational skills (Zirar *et al.*, 2023; Schmutz *et al.*, 2024). Case C engaged with the question most openly and reflectively, wondering aloud whether a future "Team Academy" might need to become something more like an "academy of intelligence", and raising the question of what a figure like Peter Senge might have built had systems thinking been developed with artificial intelligence assistance from the start. She was the only one of the three to raise a real note of caution, wondering whether artificial intelligence-assisted dialogue and reflection could deepen collective thinking, or could just as easily produce a more sophisticated kind of noise, depending on whether it is guided with enough care. This concern mirrors the literature's suggestion that artificial intelligence is most effective when combined with human judgement and critical reflection, rather than being relied upon uncritically (Zirar *et al.*, 2023).

3.8 Theme 7: cross-cultural adaptation

All three interviewees described having to adapt the methodology, more or less consciously, to cultural context, but none had turned this adaptation into anything systematic; it was handled case by case, in the moment. Case A's interviewee described, with some humour, an Italian team's habit of greeting colleagues with cheek-kisses each morning, while seemingly saying very little to one another meaningfully during the working day, compared to the much more direct, sometimes loud, dialogue style elsewhere in his organisation. He maintained that the same coaching approach and dialogue format worked "everywhere", but only once given the chance, and only with some sensitivity to how directness is received locally. Case B gave the fullest account of cross-cultural calibration, describing how a colleague from a strongly hierarchical professional background needed clearly different handling, more explicit modelling and more repeated reassurance that decisions genuinely rested with the team, than colleagues who had spent a decade or more inside the Finnish operating culture and had had time to absorb its norms. He also noted that stated job satisfaction scores can be an unreliable cross-cultural signal, since some cultures are simply less inclined to report dissatisfaction on a survey, regardless of the underlying working conditions. Case C raised the broader, unresolved question of scale and ownership structure as much as nationality. In her view, what is adaptable to a 50,000-person, multinational corporate hierarchy is necessarily a

much smaller and more diluted slice of the original model than what is adaptable to a single national mutual insurer with a few hundred staff. She was open about not having a definitive answer on how far the model extends beyond the Finnish and, more broadly, the Nordic organisational cultures she has direct experience of.

3.9 Theme 8: the elements of learning organisation

[Senge's \(1990\)](#) five disciplines, introduced in [Section 2.3](#) as part of Team Academy's theoretical roots, are visible across the three cases, though unevenly. Personal mastery is the clearest: each interviewee described their own development before their team's, from Case B's shift away from being a "superhero project manager" to Case C's continuing personal thread from her own Team Academy background through to designing leadership programmes decades later. Mental models surface at the same points of friction discussed in Theme 4, most directly in Case B's account of a colleague needing repeated reassurance that no one would tell him what to do, only when it needed to be done. Shared vision is clearest in Case B's large, multi-site product launch, where a fixed, undeniable deadline meant the team organised around it with little need to restate it, and in Case A and C's more deliberate, dialogue-built team and leadership contracts. Team learning runs through nearly every theme already discussed and needs no further evidence here. Systems thinking is the weakest fit. None of the three interviewees described mapping their organisation as an interconnected whole; instead, each made a pragmatic choice to work only within the part of the system they could reach.

3.10 Synthesis

Read together, the three cases do not describe one transferable "Team Academy for organisations" model. They describe a repeating pattern of behaviour instead: a committed individual meets the methodology personally, brings a subset of its tools into an area they control, meets resistance exactly where middle management's coordinating role becomes unclear, builds trust through small, visible steps rather than argument and over time produces benefits that are most clearly seen in making previously tacit knowledge explicit. None of the three organisations would describe themselves, unprompted, as "doing Team Academy". Yet all three, on closer look, are doing a great deal of it, mixed with other frameworks and renamed to fit their own context. This combination, a consistent underlying mechanism with a very inconsistent surface appearance, is, we suggest, the main empirical finding of this section. It is also the reason a thematic discussion serves the data better than three separate, parallel case stories would.

4. A proposed framework for applying Team Academy in organisational settings

Based on the theoretical analysis above and drawing on practical experience applying the Team Academy methodology across professional contexts, the following framework is proposed for organisations seeking to use it to support the group-to-team transition. The main research question of this article was: What is the impact of team coaching (Team Academy methodology [Figure 1](#)) in the large organisation? The secondary research question was: How is Team Academy methodology applied and developed in the large organisation? The six phases below draw directly on the practitioner interviews discussed above, as well as on the theoretical principles set out in the literature review. They are presented in the order in which they tend to occur in practice, although, as the interviews show, organisations rarely move through them in a straight line.

4.1 Phase 1: starting from personal empowerment

In every case discussed in [Section 3](#), the starting point for organisational change was not a top-down decision but rather one person's experience with the Team Academy methodology, usually gained through the Team Academy coach training programme. Each interviewee

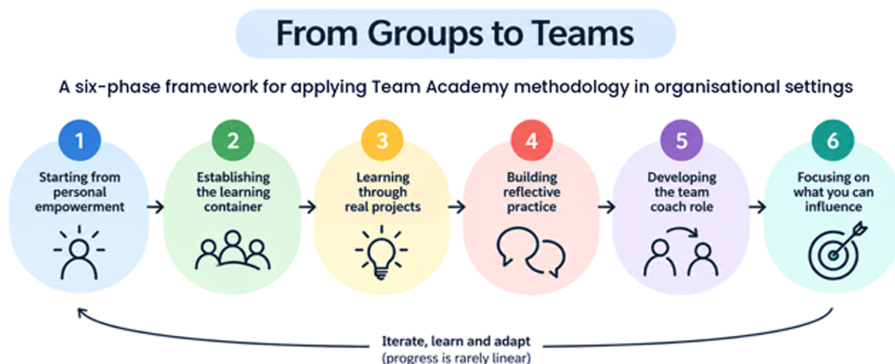


Figure 1. A six-phase framework for applying Team Academy methodology in organisational settings

described this experience as empowering for them before it was useful to the organisation: it gave them a new way of thinking about their own leadership, learning and relationship to authority, well before they tried to apply any of it to their team. This points to a phase that comes before the five phases below, and one that organisations cannot simply commission from outside: someone with genuine authority over a piece of the organisation, however small, needs to have gone through this shift personally, and to have found it convincing enough to want to build on. Organisations that skip this phase and instead try to mandate Team Academy tools from a training function without first growing this kind of personal conviction in the people who will carry them are likely to end up with the tools but not the underlying capacity.

4.2 Phase 2: establishing the learning container

This phase is about creating an environment where psychological safety, trust and genuine team learning can develop. This means establishing a team contract, a shared agreement about values, communication norms and ways of working through difficulty, and introducing regular structured dialogue sessions. It also means inviting individuals into a self-managed learning relationship with their own development, through a personal learning contract negotiated rather than imposed, so that responsibility for learning sits with the learner from the outset rather than being retrofitted later. Critically, it also requires naming and working with the assumptions that team members bring about expertise, authority and what it means to learn together. This phase is often where organisations are most tempted to rush, and where the groundwork for failure is most commonly laid.

4.3 Phase 3: learning through real projects

In Team Academy, projects are not simulations; they are live work with real clients and real stakes. For organisations, this means identifying genuine challenges or opportunities that teams can take on with meaningful autonomy, and structuring project work to maximise collective learning rather than simply maximising efficient output. The role of the team coach is essential here: creating regular reflection points, naming dynamics that the team cannot see from the inside and maintaining the developmental thread across the pressures of delivery.

4.4 Phase 4: building reflective practice

The most powerful and most neglected element of Team Academy methodology is its insistence on sustained reflection. Teams do not simply do; they regularly stop to examine what they are doing, how they are doing it and what they are learning. In organisational settings, this requires protecting time for reflection against the constant pressure of activity, a

cultural shift that leadership must model and reinforce. Over time, teams that build reflective practice into their rhythm develop a qualitatively different relationship to their own experience: they become capable of learning faster, adapting more fluidly and sustaining higher levels of trust under pressure.

4.5 Phase 5: developing the team coach role

Perhaps the most significant structural change that organisations need to make to apply Team Academy methodology effectively is to develop people who can genuinely fulfil the coach role. This is not simply a matter of training; it requires a shift in the relationship between leaders and facilitators and their own expertise and authority. [Hackman and Wageman's \(2005\)](#) three coach functions, discussed in [Section 2.3](#) – motivational, consultative and educational – offer a useful lens on what this shift involves in practice, and the practitioner interviews in [Section 3](#) illustrate all three. Case C's multi-year, co-designed leadership programme did motivational work before it did anything else, building genuine buy-in from managers rather than presenting them with a finished model to adopt. Case B's shift from planning work for his team to letting them build their own task lists and schedules was consultative in Hackman and Wageman's sense: the coach's role moved from directing the work to helping the team develop its own strategy for doing it. Case A's monthly reflection reporting, meanwhile, functioned as the educational function in its most literal form, a recurring, structured mechanism for the team to build and examine its own knowledge over time. Organisations developing team coaches should expect to need all three functions, not just the one, typically educational, that training programmes most readily supply. Organisations that can develop internal team coaches and protect and legitimise the coaching function will be significantly better placed to sustain the methodology beyond an initial intervention. [Toivanen's \(2013\)](#) Friend Leadership offers a useful operational definition of what this relationship should feel like in practice: more than an acquaintance, less than a close friend, a deliberately calibrated peer distance that allows challenge without either dependency or detachment. The practitioner interviews in [Section 3](#) suggest a further, practical refinement to this phase: succession matters as much as initial training. Where the coaching capability rests with a single, personally motivated individual, the methodology remains fragile regardless of how well it has taken root elsewhere in the organisation; where it has been built into a recognised role, qualification route or function, it is far more likely to survive personnel change.

4.6 Phase 6: focusing on what you can influence

The interviews discussed in [Section 3](#) point to a further, practical lesson that sits outside the five phases above but shapes how all of them are actually carried out: in every case, the interviewee's sphere of influence was bounded and the change they achieved was concentrated inside that boundary rather than spread thinly across the whole organisation. None of the three set out to change their organisation's culture as a whole; each focused on their own team, department or area of responsibility, the part of the system they could reach and treated that as the place where change could genuinely take root. Organisations and individuals applying this framework should expect the same discipline to matter; energy spent trying to influence parts of the organisation that are genuinely out of reach is energy not spent building depth where change is possible. This also has implications for pace and patience. None of the changes described in [Section 3](#) happened quickly; in each case, the interviewee had been applying the methodology inside their own sphere for a decade or more, and several of the outcomes they were able to point to with any confidence, in trust, in knowledge-sharing, in team cohesion, had taken years, not months, to become visible. This echoes [Shuffler et al.'s \(2018\)](#) wider critique of organisations treating team development as a one-off event rather than a sustained process – here, the same impatience shows up as an expectation that development can scale quickly, rather than staying small and slow for years before it's ready to spread. Organisations considering this kind of investment should plan accordingly: meaningful impact may not be

clearly visible for three to five years, and a framework of this kind should be judged over that horizon rather than against the timelines usually applied to shorter OD interventions.

5. Discussion

The argument developed in this article rests on a central claim: that Team Academy methodology, developed and tested in educational settings over more than three decades, offers a coherent and principled framework for addressing one of the most persistent challenges for organisations, the transition from a group of individuals to a genuinely high-performing team. This claim is not without its complications.

The most significant complication is structural. Team Academy was designed for contexts in which participants have relatively high autonomy, a shared purpose that they have actively chosen, and an extended time horizon, typically two to three years, in which to develop. Organisational teams often have none of these conditions: they are assembled rather than formed, directed rather than self-organising and under constant pressure to perform before they have had time to learn to function well together. Applying Team Academy methodology in these conditions requires significant adaptation and will always involve a degree of creative tension between the methodology's philosophy and the organisation's operational realities. The three practitioner interviews discussed above illustrate this tension directly: none of the three organisations imported the methodology wholesale, and all three found that the parts of the methodology requiring the most active, sustained translation were precisely the parts concerned with letting go of control. A related practical constraint is scale: all three case organisations invested in longer training programmes such as Team Academy coach training, and not every organisation can realistically commit the time and resources to team development. This raises a question of accessibility that any organisation considering Team Academy methodology will need to address early on.

A second complication concerns measurement. Organisations are accustomed to evaluating interventions against defined metrics, and the outcomes of Team Academy-style development-increased trust, deeper dialogue, more robust collective learning are notoriously difficult to quantify. This does not make them less real or less valuable; it makes them less legible to the systems through which organisations typically make investment decisions.

The interviewees offered partial exceptions worth noting for future research: one pointed to a significantly higher employee engagement score of 10% for his team relative to comparable teams elsewhere in the same organisation, and another pointed to a sustained, decade-long pattern of higher customer satisfaction outcomes associated with peer-led rather than trainer-led technology rollouts. Both were explicit, however, that these associations cannot be cleanly isolated from the many other variables operating on the same outcomes. [Jussila and Fowle's \(2017\)](#) earlier evaluation of SML in a postgraduate Applied Entrepreneurship programme reaches a structurally similar conclusion from the educational side: self-managed learning is best understood and evaluated not as a single intervention with a single measurable effect, but as a portfolio of tools whose value lies substantially in how they are combined. Making the case for this kind of work requires a different kind of organisational literacy, and practitioners who apply Team Academy principles in OD contexts will need to be prepared to have this conversation.

A third complication, which emerged more strongly from the interviews than from the literature, concerns succession and person-dependency. Where the methodology's presence in an organisation depends on the personal conviction of one or two individuals, its survival is precarious regardless of how successful it has been; where it has been deliberately built into formal learning infrastructure, qualification routes or shared services, it appears to be considerably more durable. This is a practical, rather than philosophical, complication, but it may be the single most important one for any organisation considering this kind of investment.

A fourth complication concerns scope. All three organisations are Finnish, which is where Team Academy originated and where its longest-established organisational cases are likely to be found, but it means the article cannot say how the methodology travels into cultures further

removed from its origin, in the way [Section 2.1](#) already showed it adapting into UK, Basque and Tanzanian educational settings. Two of the three organisations are global businesses with international teams and offices, which offered some cross-cultural evidence, as seen in Theme 7, but the practitioners driving the methodology, and the organisational culture it was introduced into, remained Finnish. International case studies and studies of organisations founded by Team Academy alumni themselves rather than adopting the methodology later, would offer a useful comparison: does building around the methodology from the outset produce a different pattern than the retrofitted, person-dependent adoption described in [Section 3](#)?

These challenges notwithstanding, the direction of travel seems clear. As artificial intelligence reshapes the landscape of individual productivity, organisations will increasingly need to find their competitive and creative edge in what people can do together that machines cannot. Team Academy offers one of the most developed methodologies available for building precisely that capacity, and the fact that it has spent three decades being tested, refined and adapted across cultures and contexts makes it a more robust foundation than most OD frameworks can claim.

6. Conclusion

The transition from a group to a team is not a problem that can be solved once. It is a process that requires sustained attention, deliberate practice and the kind of structural commitment that most organisations find difficult to maintain. Team Academy methodology does not offer a quick fix; it offers something more valuable: a coherent philosophy of how people learn together and a set of practices proven to develop the relational and cognitive foundations on which high-performing teams depend.

This article has argued that this methodology is not only transferable to organisational settings but also, at this moment, particularly well-timed. The challenges posed by the adoption of artificial intelligence, the risk of pseudo-collaboration, the devaluation of individual technical expertise and the growing importance of collective sense-making are precisely the challenges that Team Academy was built to address, even if it was not built with artificial intelligence in mind. That alignment is not coincidental: it reflects the enduring importance of the human capacity to learn, think and grow together.

The three practitioner accounts examined here add a further, more sobering note to that argument: the methodology travels well, but it travels unevenly, person by person and organisation by organisation, and its survival inside any one organisation cannot be taken for granted. Further research is needed to test and refine the framework proposed here across different sectors, organisational sizes and cultural contexts. Practitioner-led case studies, longitudinal studies of team development and comparative analyses across sectors would all make valuable contributions. OD would benefit from engaging more seriously with Team Academy methodology. In turn, Team Academy would benefit from the rigour and reach of the OD field.

We are at a juncture at which the question of what teams are for is being asked with new urgency. Team Academy offers one of the most compelling answers available. The task now is to take it seriously beyond the classroom.

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