Level Up – What is Levelling-Up at NCAB?

We have high ambitions in NCAB – our vision is to be the no 1 PCB-producer wherever we are, we have values that put **quality first**, always, and we have a **growth strategy** with challenging targets for expansion. But what does this mean for the people who work here? **What could it mean for you?**

Working in a company with high ambitions is both **challenging** and full of **opportunities**. When the company becomes better at quality and growth there is more for you to learn. When you learn more, the company performs better. This is **a positive cycle** that we should take good care of.

This positive cycle is not new to NCAB, we have been growing and learning for a long time. And as we grow, it becomes more and more important to have a common language for how to move forward – how to level up. That common language is the purpose of this course.

So, what do we mean by levelling-up? Well, we don’t just mean expanding the company, we can also level-up as teams and as individuals. In many areas in life, when we have a **mind-shift**, there is so much more we can do.

*An example: When kids learn to play football, they first practice running back and forth and kicking the ball. After a while, it’s time for them to level-up - they learn to* ***read the game****. The mind-shift is to* ***notice*** *opportunities and run to the right spot, instead of just running faster. They still have to run and kick, but when they do, they can achieve much more by also noticing opportunities.*

The good news is that, wherever you are, there is **always** a next level to aim for. It can be about technology, cooperation or service to customers – or some interesting combination. What’s **your** next level?

Depending on where in NCAB we work, we start from different levels, and that’s fine – this is not a competition; we’re all on the same side. What’s important is that we all keep levelling up from wherever we start. This course wants to give you some ideas on how to find your way forward together with your colleagues.

Level Up – From noticing to doing

To level up, you have to **make up your own mind** to do it, to take an initiative. So, let’s talk about initiatives.

This ladder of initiatives show seven different types, from low to high. The initiatives I’ll talk about here happen **outside** your everyday tasks.

Imagine, for example, that **you notice** a problem in an area where **we all** share responsibility, such as the printer running out of ink. What can you do? We start at the low-initiative-end.

You can ***Complain***. “Why does this always happen to me? Forget it, it’s not my job to fix it.” Negative energy, vaguely accusing others, no solution.

You can ***Wait*** – Discreetly turn back and decide to print later. There is less negative energy, no accusations, but… no solution. (Still, sometimes, complaining is better – at least then others can become aware of the problem).

On these two rungs, the work won’t get done, but it seems to be someone else’s problem.   
Let’s move up; what can you do?

You can ***Ask*** somebody – “What should I do now?” Then you haven’t given up, but you expect others to provide a solution.

You can ***Suggest*** – “Someone should change the cartridge!” You haven’t given up, you provide a solution, but you expect others to make the decision and do the work.

So, on these two rungs, you take **some** responsibility by not giving up, but you hope the problem will be solved by other people.

Now we **level-up** to where work actually gets done:

You can ***Start acting*** but ask when possible – (To the manager) “You weren’t here, so I couldn’t ask, but I changed the cartridge. Was that OK?” You are unsure of the solution but did not lose time by waiting for an instruction.

You can ***Act, inform regularly*** - (To the manager) “Here’s what I did this week…”. You update now and then.

You can ***Just go ahead*** – No time spent on asking, waiting, or updating.

You may have more challenging things to do than changing cartridges, but the principles of initiative are the same. For example, if customers don’t respond well to your calls, you can complain about it, or suggest that customers change their attitude, but you won’t get results until you level-up and do something different.

I’m sure you can see how slowly things move at the lower end of the ladder, and how much quicker things get done on the higher levels.

Of course, there are times when asking or suggesting is the right thing to do. But it is different if someone asks or suggests in order to push responsibility to others (as in the printer example) or if you ask to **learn,** and suggest to **discuss ideas**. Also, ‘just go ahead’ is great sometimes and unacceptable at other times. No place on the ladder is perfect for all situations.

But as a rule, most of us could spend more time higher up on the ladder; to go **from noticing to thinking to also doing**. When there is a more productive level for us, the right time to go there is usually sooner than we think. And we learn more up here.

A learning mindset

The previous lesson was about initiatives and going from **noticing to** **thinking to** **doing**. But **noticing** what? This lesson is about **looking for opportunities.**

When **all** we can see is things-as-they-are, that’s called a **fixed** **mindset**. There is nothing wrong with being observant, the problem is if you believe that there are no other alternatives, and there’s nothing you can do about it.

To level-up, we must go beyond the fixed mindset – like the football player, if you remember, who thinks about a good spot to run to rather than mindlessly running after the ball. Levelling-up is **not** about working harder – it’s about **getting more out of the effort** we put in. To figure out how, we need a **learning mindset**.

A **learning mindset** is when you can **see** how-things-are, but **also** what they could **become.** You see a problem and figure out a way to prevent it from happening again. You see a way to do something that our customers would appreciate. You think of a way to make things easier for our factories, or to save time for your colleagues, or something else that improves the way we work. So, the **first step** from a fixed to a learning mindset is **openness**, as in widening your focus and **noticing** opportunities.

A good way to open your mind is sharing knowledge and ideas across functional and geographical borders; **meeting, sharing and collaborating**. Different backgrounds, viewpoints and experience are known to improve problem solving and creative thinking. So, call someone you don’t know!

So, the first step in a learning mindset is openness; the second step is to do something – leveling up to exploring your ideas so you can **evaluate** them and learn something new. We may not all invent the next iPhone, but **we can all find ways to improve our work,** large or small.

**What could this mean for you?** In NCAB, we want people in all countries, from all functions, to level-up. Turn on your **learning mindset openness** and when you notice something interesting, **level-up and explore it**. This is an opportunity, don’t miss it.

Level Up – Blue Ocean strategy

In this lesson I’ll explain what **Blue Ocean and Red Ocean strategies** are and why they are important to NCAB.

The metaphor is, that an ocean becomes red when too many sharks fight over a prey, just like companies ‘bleed’ when they have to fight over customers by lowering margins. When suppliers’ offers are the same, customers will go for the lowest price. So, a **Red Ocean Strategy** is when you offer the same thing as your competitors: you get a shark fight.

But if one company breaks away and follows a different strategy, and customers **like** that offer, price becomes less important. If it’s something that competitors **can’t do**, the sharks will be left behind, at least for some time. A **Blue Ocean** **Strategy**.

There are two ways to find a Blue Ocean. One is to come up with a big idea - an invention (like the iPad) or a business idea (like TikTok) or mittens in five colors (do the course “Our ;USPs” on NCAB-Academy to understand that one, it’s a good course). The other way is to be **a little bit different in many aspects** (better factory management, customer relationships, support from techs … many good things). Even if none of the factors may be unique by itself, the **combined** effect can get us into a Blue Ocean. (This is called a combined USP.)

So, in a Red Ocean, all companies do the same thing (maybe they have a fixed mindset!) and then someone with a learning mindset breaks away to do something different in a Blue Ocean.

When a Blue Ocean strategy is successful, competitors **will** copy it sooner or later. It may take longer or shorter for them to catch up, but they will, so we have to be in constant movement to stay away from the sharks. We must paddle all the time.

**You** can paddle, wherever you are, by noticing large and small **improvements**. When you think of a way to solve a problem, or make a customer or supplier happy, or make something easier, you should **level-up** and **explore** it. **Every** time you **explore** and **learn** something from it, you keep NCAB moving forward.

For a competitor, the **hardest** thing to copy is **culture**. A **level-up culture** where people in **all** functions find improvements – that’s **very** hard to copy. This is why **you** are **so** important – you’re not just doing your job (which in itself is pretty good), you can also help NCAB **paddle** **away** from the sharks. **Everyone can paddle.**

Level Up – Examples

Once you start looking, level-up-examples are everywhere. You can get the job done on a basic level, and you can **level-up** to create opportunities. Some examples:

Let’s look at NCAB’s values first:

With **Quality first** you can just **meet the specs** – and at times that’s all the customer wants – but sometimes you can also **add value** by levelling up and noticing an opportunity that the customer didn’t see.

**Strong relationships** Customers will appreciate that you are **friendly**, but if they can also see that you are **interested** in what they need, that really builds loyalty.

One way of taking **Full responsibility** is to **deliver as promised**, but we can take even more responsibility if we also **prepare** for future business, maybe by preventing misunderstandings or lining up logistics.

By levelling up we create opportunities **and** get the job done. More examples!

In the last lesson, we talked about strategy and how we can do the same thing as everyone else **or** paddle into a Blue Ocean (while still keeping an eye on the sharks).

In NCAB Academy, all courses are about leveling-up and I hope you will see them all!

For example in *Negotiation*, you can argue in the price corridor **or** learn how to create a **dance floor,** where win-win agreements are possible.

In *Complaint handling*, you can avoid an angry customer **or** learn how to lean in, control your dinosaur impulse and build a strong relationship.

And in the *Heed the need*- course, you learn how to – not just say goodbye – but end a phone call in a way that **prepares for new business**, by levelling up to agreeing on a **next step**.

Leveling-up is a principle that can be used on anything – from business strategy to how to end a phone call. Notice three things in the examples:

**Levelling up starts with an initiative**…you have to make your mind up to do it.

**When you level up you expand your perspective**…from just getting-the-job-done. Usually this involves understanding another person, maybe even a customer.

**You level up to create opportunities for the future**… you increase your odds of success without knowing exactly how it will turn out.

So, when levelling up, there is no precise plan. It’s a bit unpredictable; it’s exploring. And that’s what the next lesson is about.

Level Up – The exploring process

What **is** exploring? Exploring is actively trying to find a better way of doing something – sometimes in large projects, but usually in quite small, but many, steps forward. **Exploring is paddling.**

The difference between exploring and just checking-something-out is that exploring is **systematic**. Not complicated, but systematic. The purpose is learning, and being systematic makes it easier to draw conclusions.

There is a simple process for exploring; it’s six questions:

1. What opportunity or problem do we see?
2. What are some ideas on how to capture the opportunity or solve the problem?
3. How can we test key factors of the idea in a simple, inexpensive way?
4. Who else may want to be involved? (This question can come any time in the process, earlier is often better.)
5. How can we evaluate results from the test?
6. What did we learn?

An example: In NCAB Group Functions, Cecilia Snell was 1) frustrated by the amount of e-mail in her inbox every day. A lot of it was internal, so she 2) thought up an idea of a simple e-mail policy that could, potentially, fix the problem for good. She 3) decided to test it and 4) asked her colleagues in NCAB UK and Norway if they would participate, and they agreed. After two weeks she 5) asked for feedback. It was 6) positive, so the policy was implemented with some adjustments, and now our colleagues in UK and Norway save valuable hours.

Ideas don’t have to be huge, technical, or mind-blowing. Exploring can improve the company on any level. **Everyone can paddle**.

Be aware that exploring is unpredictable. Most ideas don’t provide the expected results – it’s too hard to think of all aspects in advance. That’s why testing **early** is important, so go for it as soon as you have some ideas. Then you learn sooner, and can decide to go forward, to try again with some adjustments, or to forget about this idea and spend your time on something else.

Cecilia could have spent months working on the perfect policy; instead, she tested it to get quick feedback. Way to go, Cecilia!

So, are all areas open for exploring? In principle, yes, but there are some practical limitations.

With some things, it is important that they are done in **the same way** all over the company. Examples are accounting, logotypes, IT-systems, etc. These are factors that help us **benefit from our size**. It’s difficult to explore changes in a global system locally. And suggesting things for others to explore, that’s not exploring at all.

However, most things evolve better through many different explorations. Just make sure to involve other functions and locations - contacts across borders will increase your chances of finding something useful, and it will spread your learnings to others. **Meeting and sharing.**

And remember: Exploring can be useful even when the outcome is not what you wanted. **Exploring is successful when you learn something.**

Level Up – When should we explore?

In many organizations, it makes sense to leave exploring to managers so that everyone else can focus on getting the job done. This works fine when problems (and opportunities) turn up every now and then. But when many things are changing for some reason (because of growth, customers and/or suppliers change, etc…), things turn up all the time and managers become overwhelmed. If managers are the **only** ones that explore new solutions, the organization will have to wait and wait for decisions and instructions what to do.

At NCAB, we grow rapidly in a complex market. This means that we have a lot of issues, big and small, in all corners of the organization, so we can’t leave all problem-solving to managers, and we don’t. We have been quite good at handling changes in the past, but we should expect an even higher pace going forward. Therefore, both managers and non-managers have to explore **more** than we do today. **Everyone can paddle.**

But isn’t it better to focus on getting the job done, and explore when we have to?

Actually not, and these are three reasons to do it often:

1. To learn more. Exploring is challenging, and those who don’t do it often **won’t be good at it**.
2. To keep problems small. Problems grow for those who wait, and small changes draw less cost, time and energy.
3. To capture **opportunities**. Exploring is not just for problems, we also want to notice good things.

So, make exploring a habit! Then your team will always have some testing in the pipeline.

More exploring will give us a huge advantage – the company can move forward at a speed that would be exhausting if managers had to initiate and evaluate all improvements in a top-down manner.

So, don’t leave all problem solving to managers; they are competent, but they are too few. We’ll get more done if everyone is paddling.

Challenging? Yes, but interesting and rewarding. Imagine how much stuff you will learn; you’ll be impressed by yourself. We’ll all be impressed.

Level Up – How change works

Think of an example when you wanted to make a change. How did people react? Let me tell you how my family reacted when I wanted to rearrange the furniture in our house.

1. Oh no! Why? I like it as it is, why should we change? Maybe we’ll scratch the floor!
2. Where will I watch TV? Do I have to help carrying things?
3. How should we do it then? Do you have a plan?
4. If we move the piano, we’ll have room for another armchair!

This is a typical change reaction with four **phases.** It starts negative and ends positive. This curve symbolizes how it’s uphill at first, and then turns to go almost by itself. So let’s look at the phases:

First the ***Why?*** Why should we change, what’s the purpose? At the start it’s easier to see the risks than the possibilities.  
Immediately after the ***Why?*** it’s ***What about me?*** Will I, personally, be better off after the change, or worse? Before we have an answer to these two questions, it is hard to participate in a change with any enthusiasm.   
Then it’s ***How?*** Now we are more interested, maybe even willing to help.   
The fourth phase is ***If…then!*** where we start noticing opportunities with the change, so now we get the energy to engage fully in it.

Our brains don’t like change. It’s much easier for the brain to stick to a routine than to do something new. And since the brain is built to focus on risk, new ideas tend to look bad at first. Of course, some changes **are** bad, but right now we focus on changes that are just different, or maybe even good. Interestingly, everyone goes through these phases in the **same sequence**, even if some go quicker than others – it can take two seconds or six months. Going through the curve is a skill that can be learned.

So ***Why?*** are we talking about this with you? In NCAB, with our high ambitions, there **will** be a **lot** of change, so it is useful to know the psychology behind it. ***What about you?*** Well, f you are negative about a change suggested by others, it’s a good idea to examine your reasons; are you in a phase or is it really a bad idea? And when **you** suggest a change, maybe after some successful exploring, it’s good to know that others may be negative at first.

So, ***How?*** should you handle change when you want others to participate? In the first three phases, dialogue is **much** more effective than one-way-communication. If people feel that they have some influence, they will trust the process and not worry so much. When people get to the ***If…then!-***phase, they are energetic – maybe even creative. Change is more fun in this phase.

Therefore, a common mistake when driving change, is to try to get everyone to ***If…then!*** right away. That doesn’t work, unfortunately – you can’t rush past those first steps, that will just slow things down. People will keep sliding back to the ***Why?*** and you will feel that you start over again and again. But if you invite them to participate in the planning of the change, they may start discovering possibilities and reach the productive ***If…then!***-phase sooner.

Change is an important skill in NCAB, and there will be many opportunities to practice. Have fun with it!

Level Up – The learning zone

In an American study comparing quality between health care teams, researchers expected teams who made few mistakes to provide the best quality. Researchers were surprised to find that teams who **reported more mistakes** saved **more** patients.

When they studied this closer, they found that in fewer-reports-lower-quality teams, people hesitated to point out problems because they didn’t want to be blamed, or to be seen as negative. Only the most obvious mistakes were reported, so there were few opportunities to learn from.

In contrast, in teams who reported many mistakes, there were positive attitudes around finding mistakes or problems – it was seen as an opportunity to learn and make improvements. All team-members **searched** for problems, discussed them with each other, and reported **anything** that could become a risk for patients. They had plenty to learn from.

The successful teams had what is called **psychological safety**. In this environment, people felt comfortable talking about problems and mistakes, asking questions and sharing thoughts. This clearly made them different form the less successful teams.

There was also another difference: **Ambitions** were high in successful teams, so people were prepared to make the effort to learn and make improvements. When ambitions are low, things will just stay as they are, because it’s easier.

Let’s leave the health care research and think about NCAB. When we combine these two factors we get four zones:

* The **passive** zone, where ambition and safety are both low.
* The **comfort** zone with low ambitions and high safety – a nice place, but not much action. This is a Red Ocean place.
* When ambitions are high, people want to explore, but if the psychological safety is low, they will be **very** uncomfortable doing it – that’s the **anxiety** zone. This is an unhealthy place; we don’t want that.
* Finally, the zone that combines high ambition and high safety. The researchers coined the name “**learning zone”** for this mental environment where the **highest** quality can be achieved, and improvements are constantly made. Sounds relevant for NCAB, doesn’t it? A Blue Ocean place.

I’m sure you can see how the **learning mindset** fits right in. That everyone must paddle is a high ambition, and we don’t want people in the anxiety zone. We need high psychological safety at NCAB, for **openness** and **exploring**, or there will be no paddling.

Creating this safety is **everyone’s** job. Without thinking about it, someone can easily make their colleagues feel less safe just by making fun of an idea or a question, even if they mean no harm. Instead, you can make others feel safer by, for example, admitting a mistake you made or asking for advice, by openness and exploring. **Your** behavior will make a **big** difference.

It’s quite difficult to speak openly about problems without making people nervous and defensive, but it’s an important success factor for a team. And it cannot be handled by the manager alone – everyone must help.

Level Up – Summary

Time to conclude - why are we talking about levelling up?

At NCAB, we want to increase opportunities for the company and for everyone who works here. A positive cycle where **you** can develop your skills and NCAB can grow. We can achieve this by levelling up as individuals, as teams, and as a company. **Everyone** can paddle.

Levelling up is **noticing,** **thinking and doing** - all are needed to turn a possibility into a practical solution. **You** are encouraged to explore your ideas – to test them and learn from the tests. You are also encouraged to **support** your colleagues in their exploring. Be aware of the **learning zone** and the **change curve**. Everyone can **support** those who paddle.

Putting **Quality first, always** and taking **Full responsibility** are high ambitions. **Strong relationships** with colleagues add to the psychological safety. Our values prepare us well to paddle into a Blue Ocean.

There’s one more thing I want to point out before we’re done – it’s the relationship between levelling up and **cooperation**.

When levelling up, you make up your own mind and follow your own ideas. If many people do that without cooperating with others in the company, their exploring will take them to **different places.** That’s not what we want.

On the other hand, if people agree with everyone on everything, there won’t be much independent thinking, so no exploring. That’s not what we want either.

So, **you** need to find a **combination** here. The more you **explore**, the more important it becomes to **cooperate** across borders of all kinds, to get input from other viewpoints. Then, the chances are much higher that you’ll find a solution that also works for other functions and locations in NCAB.

It’s more fun too! Our surveys constantly show that people at NCAB **very much enjoy cross-border contacts**. They would love for you to contact them!

I’m glad you decided to stay to the end, well done. As you have seen, the company has high expectations on you, and I’m convinced that you will play a big part in NCAB’s success.

Good luck with your work. I’m proud of you already.