



Building Extraordinary Leaders at Jotun

How a Strengths-Based Approach Elevated Leadership in a Global Manufacturing Organization

Executive Summary

When global paint and coatings leader Jotun set out to strengthen its leadership pipeline, the company turned to Zenger Folkman's *Extraordinary Leader*™ program to fuel growth from within. Faced with below-benchmark leadership effectiveness, Jotun adopted a data-driven, strengths-based approach to help leaders amplify what they do best—while aligning development with the company's core values of care, respect, loyalty, and boldness.

The results have been transformative. Leadership effectiveness rose from the 33rd to the 50th percentile, the number of leaders with standout strengths nearly doubled, and Jotun achieved record profitability—all while deepening its distinctive, people-centered culture.



Overview

When a century-old manufacturing company decides to bet its future growth on its people, remarkable things can happen.

Founded in 1926 and headquartered in Sandefjord, Norway, Jotun has grown from a small local paint manufacturer into a global leader in paints and coatings, employing more than 10,000 people across 100 countries with 40 production facilities. Operating in four main segments—Decorative Paints, Marine Coatings, Protective Coatings, and Powder Coatings—Jotun has remained under stable family ownership since its founding. That continuity has preserved its distinctive culture built on **care, respect, loyalty, and boldness**.

Rather than expanding through mergers and acquisitions, Jotun's growth has been almost entirely organic—making leadership capability development one of the company's most important strategic priorities. As the organization expanded globally, leaders recognized that maintaining its values-driven culture while achieving ambitious business goals would require an

intentional, measurable approach to leadership growth.

The Challenge: Building Leadership Capability for Sustainable Growth

By the mid-2010s, Jotun's leadership effectiveness data told a clear story. When benchmarked against Zenger Folkman's global database of over 1.5 million leadership assessments, Jotun's leaders were performing below the manufacturing industry average—around the 33rd percentile in overall leadership effectiveness.

For a company that prides itself on long-term excellence and steady organic expansion, this presented both a challenge and an opportunity. Jotun needed a method to develop leaders who could:

- Translate the company's values into visible leadership behavior.
- Drive results while maintaining the “Penguin Spirit” of care and loyalty.
- Build a pipeline of leaders prepared for the company's next generation of global growth.

To meet that need, Jotun partnered with Arcadia Consulting

and Zenger Folkman to implement *The Extraordinary Leader* program—an evidence-based approach that helps organizations strengthen leadership performance using data-driven insights and a focus on amplifying strengths.

The Extraordinary Leader Approach

Zenger Folkman's *Extraordinary Leader* program is grounded in over 1.5 million 360-degree

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assessments conducted worldwide. The data reveals a simple but powerful truth:

Great leaders are not defined by the absence of weaknesses, but by the presence of a few profound strengths.

Traditional leadership development often emphasizes fixing deficiencies. However, research consistently shows that this approach yields limited improvement. In contrast, focusing on strengths—those

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leadership behaviors that already produce excellence—creates exponential gains in overall effectiveness.

Key findings from Zenger Folkman's global research show:

- Two profound strengths (in the 90th percentile) elevate a leader's overall effectiveness to the 74th percentile—a level that would require eight competencies at only the 75th percentile if following a gap-fixing model.
- Organizations that help leaders identify and build on their strengths experience **higher financial performance, greater employee engagement, and stronger customer satisfaction.**
- Leaders who receive data-based feedback and development plans sustain measurable improvement over time.

At the heart of *The Extraordinary Leader* model are 19 competencies that differentiate the top 10% of all leaders worldwide from the rest. These are clustered into 5 key areas of leadership effectiveness:

- 1. Character:** The foundation of trust: honesty, integrity, and fairness.
- 2. Personal Capability:** Technical expertise, problem-solving, and learning agility.
- 3. Focus on Results:** Accountability, decision-making, initiative, and performance.
- 4. Interpersonal Skills:** Communication, collaboration, and the ability to inspire and motivate.
- 5. Leading Change:** Innovation, strategic thinking, and guiding teams through transformation.

Jotun's leaders completed Zenger Folkman's 360-degree *Extraordinary Leader* assessment, which measures 19 empirically validated competencies across these five areas. Each leader received a personalized report identifying both fatal flaws and strengths to leverage, then developed an action plan tailored to their role and business objectives.

Implementation: A Multi-Level Leadership Strategy

Jotun began its *Extraordinary Leader* journey with the Jotun International Management Program (JIMP)—a top-tier



leadership academy for senior leaders. Working with Arcadia Consulting, Jotun integrated 360 assessments, feedback sessions, and development planning into its existing leadership curriculum.

The impact was immediate and visible. Participants found the process motivating and practical rather than evaluative. As Alistair Skellern, Partner at Arcadia Consulting, explained:

“Leaders realized they didn’t need to be perfect. They needed to understand where they could add the most value and magnify those strengths. That mindset shift was transformational.”

Positive feedback from senior leaders prompted Jotun to cascade the program deeper into the organization. The company began using *The Extraordinary Leader* assessment earlier in career pathways, helping emerging leaders in their 30s gain developmental insights typically reserved for executives.

This expansion ensured a consistent leadership language and a clear development framework across all levels—a critical enabler for Jotun’s strategy of organic growth through internal talent development.

Results: From the 33rd to the 50th Percentile

Over a five-year period, Jotun tracked dramatic improvements in leadership performance across its global population.

- Overall leadership effectiveness rose from the 33rd percentile to the 50th percentile, surpassing the global manufacturing benchmark.
- The percentage of leaders with two or more strengths above the 75th percentile nearly doubled—from 18% to 35%, representing a 52% uplift in leadership capability.
- Interpersonal skills, learning agility, and technical and professional expertise emerged as Jotun’s greatest strengths.
- Areas for continued development included making decisions, taking risks, and championing change—competencies that fuel innovation and adaptability.

At the same time, individual contributors also demonstrated measurable improvement, moving from the 25th to the 34th percentile in overall effectiveness, signaling a

culture-wide shift toward feedback, learning, and performance.

Linking Leadership to Organizational Impact

For Jotun, assessments were not merely diagnostic—they became a strategic measurement system. According to Hilde Bettum,

Leaders realized they didn’t need to be perfect. They needed to understand where they could add the most value and magnify those strengths.



Jotun's Head of Learning & Development:

"Assessments allow us to tailor development around the competencies that matter most. They give us evidence, not anecdotes, for how leadership development drives business results."

The data validated what L&D teams observed anecdotally: leaders who actively engaged with feedback and followed through on development plans demonstrated stronger performance and greater readiness for advancement.

By embedding *The Extraordinary*

Leader process into the company's leadership academy, Jotun created a continuous improvement loop—assessing, developing, and remeasuring leaders over time. This cyclical approach fostered a culture where leadership growth is expected, measured, and celebrated.

Importantly, Jotun's President and CEO, Morten Fon, personally participates in the 360 process every 18–24 months and models feedback-seeking behavior across the organization. His visible sponsorship reinforces that leadership development is a shared journey, not an HR initiative.

The Business Case for Strengths-Based Leadership

Jotun's progress demonstrates the measurable impact of combining behavioral data, coaching, and executive commitment. As the company's leadership effectiveness scores climbed, so did performance. In recent years, Jotun has achieved record sales and earnings, including a 26% increase in profit before tax, even amid volatile global conditions.

While multiple factors contribute

to this success, leaders credit their sustained focus on leadership capability as a key differentiator. As Alistair Skellern summarized:

"When you help people see their potential and invest in what makes them great, they don't just lead better—they transform the culture. That's what we've seen at Jotun."

Key Takeaways for HR and L&D Leaders

- 1. Data enables precision.**
360-degree assessments provide quantitative insight into what leadership behaviors truly drive performance.
- 2. Focus on strengths, not flaws.** Leaders who build two or three profound strengths have exponentially greater impact in key differentiating competencies than those who try to be good at everything.
- 3. Start early and sustain growth.** Introducing assessments earlier in careers accelerates readiness and builds long-term leadership pipelines.
- 4. Make leadership visible at the top.** Senior executives must model openness to feedback and continuous improvement.

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5. Link learning to measurable outcomes.

Data from assessments can demonstrate ROI and justify continued investment in leadership development.

Conclusion

Jotun's journey illustrates how a manufacturing organization—rooted in tradition yet competing

on a global stage—can reinvent its leadership culture without compromising its core values. By focusing on strengths, measuring progress, and making leadership development a shared responsibility, Jotun has created a scalable, sustainable system for cultivating extraordinary leaders.

Their story stands as a compelling

example for HR and L&D professionals seeking to build leadership capability in complex, distributed organizations—proving that when companies invest in developing strengths, they build not only better leaders, but stronger businesses.

About Us

Zenger Folkman relentlessly seeks to rise above the inconsistent and sometimes misleading, nature of popular leadership philosophies and beliefs brought on by opinion. The discipline of leadership and those who pursue it deserve better. Our most valuable asset is the expertise of combining hard data and statistical analysis with logical explanations and actionable applications that help individual leaders thrive and organizations succeed.

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