

leadership in practice: how student organizations at aelo swiss academy shape future managers

On a Thursday evening in October, a seminar room at AELO Swiss Academy fills with twelve students, one laptop, and a spreadsheet that has already been revised twice. The question on the screen is simple and, for the people in the room, serious. Should the semester's remaining budget go toward one large spring event, or three smaller ones spread across the term? There is no professor present. There is a treasurer with a color-coded file, an events lead with strong opinions, and a decision that, once made, will actually bind them.

I have advised student organizations at AELO Swiss Academy for several years, long enough to notice a pattern I did not expect when I started. The frameworks students cite in interviews come from lectures. The judgment they show when those frameworks meet reality comes from rooms like this one: a small budget, a group of peers who do not have to be polite forever, and a deadline that refuses to move. Management, it turns out, is less a subject than a practice, and the practice happens after class.

A small budget is a better teacher than a big case study

The budget meeting I described went longer than anyone planned. The treasurer had built the file carefully: fixed costs for the room and insurance at the top, printing and signage below, and a line for the deposit already paid to a caterer for the large event idea. The events lead argued that one memorable evening would raise the academy's profile more than three modest gatherings. Two first-years pushed back, quietly at first, then firmly. Their point was reach. Most students would attend something free and close, once. Very few would attend the same thing three times, but three formats would touch three different groups.

The vote came out seven to four, with one abstention. The compromise, drafted on the spot, was one flagship evening plus two low-cost formats: a workshop night and an alumni coffee hour. What stayed with the students was not the outcome. It was the texture of the decision. Every yes was also a no. The caterer's deposit, already spent, pulled toward one option for reasons that had nothing to do with merit, and the treasurer named that trap out loud, which is more than many working teams manage.

Case studies are useful, but their numbers arrive clean and agreed upon. In a real budget, the numbers have to be built, defended, doubted, and rebuilt while people watch. Students who have sat through that process recognize the feeling the first time a manager asks them to "just quickly" rework a forecast. Nothing about it is quick, and they know it.

A club is a small firm with friendlier shareholders

The entrepreneurship club offers a different kind of lesson, because it deals with people outside the academy. Two years ago the club ran a pop-up stand at a Saturday market in the old town. The preparation looked mundane and was anything but: a permit application to the city with a modest fee, a supplier for pastries and coffee, pricing that had to survive contact with actual customers, and a weather risk nobody could hedge.

The morning delivered the weather risk. Rain held off until just after noon, foot traffic stayed thin, and the stand served perhaps sixty customers across the day. The net result, calculated that evening on the back of a sign-up sheet, was roughly 180 francs of profit. The club's debrief was more honest than most board meetings I have sat

in. They computed their effective hourly wage, laughed at the figure, and then voted to do it again the following semester, because the return they were chasing was the learning, not the margin.

What impressed me most was how roles emerged without anyone assigning them. One student guarded the cash box and the change float as if it were a national reserve. Another handled the supplier and absorbed a Tuesday phone call moving the delivery window, which meant renegotiating the setup schedule on the spot. A third ran the social posts and learned, in real time, that a post published at the wrong hour reaches nobody. This is division of labor in miniature, and the students discovered the same truth every operating manager knows: the idea was never the hard part. Coordination was.

Where it goes wrong, and why that is the point

Not everything succeeds, and the failures do more teaching than the wins. A cultural festival committee once planned for 250 guests, booked a hall on the strength of optimistic sign-ups, and then lost two of its five leads to midterm pressure in the same week. Attendance projections collapsed. The vendor deposit was nearly forfeited. The event was scaled down, over one stressful weekend, into a film evening with a food table that drew about eighty people and stayed within budget.

The postmortem was uncomfortable and valuable. The committee identified its own early warning signs, the kind that are obvious in hindsight: a task list with no owner next to half the items, a lead who had stopped answering messages for four days, a timeline with no buffer between the promotion deadline and the event itself. They also learned the phrase for a problem every organization carries: if one person disappears and the plan collapses, the plan was never real.

My own discipline as an advisor is part of this design. I wait 48 hours before stepping in, unless safety or money compliance is at risk. That rule costs goodwill sometimes. A partner or a parent may find the near-miss alarming. But a rescue teaches the rescued nothing, and the cohort that follows inherits a better process precisely because the previous one was allowed to wobble. Students remember the feeling of a near-miss far longer than they remember a lecture slide about risk.

There is an edge case worth naming: title collectors. A few students each year take a role for the CV line and delegate everything, and student organizations are vulnerable to this because nobody gets fired. The academies' countermeasures are simple and cultural rather than punitive. Budgets are open to all members. Each event ends with a short written report. Any officer can be asked to explain a decision at the general assembly. None of this is perfect, but it shifts the incentive from holding a title to having a decision trail, which is what actual management roles will demand of them later.

The same competency often gets taught twice at AELO Swiss Academy, once in a course and once in a club, and the second version tends to stick.

| Competency | In the classroom | In the student organization |

|---|---|---|

| Negotiation | Roles are assigned and stakes reset each session | The counterpart remembers you next semester |

| Feedback | Graded by someone paid to be fair | Given by a peer who still has to work with you |

| Planning | The deadline is the exam date | The deadline is a booked hall that will not refund |

| Accountability | A grade affects you alone | A decision affects forty people who trusted you |

The quiet skills that transfer

The skills that end up mattering most rarely appear on any syllabus. Facilitation is the clearest example. A second-year student I will call Mara took over a stalled committee meeting last year after two louder members talked past each other for twenty minutes. She suggested a round: each person speaks once, without interruption, then the floor opens. The meeting ended twenty minutes early with an actual decision. Months later, during an internship, her project team circled the same question for most of an hour. She proposed the same round. Her manager adopted it for the rest of the summer. Nobody had taught her facilitation as a subject. She had simply been in a room where it was necessary, and she had tried it.

Follow-through is the second quiet skill, and it is deeply unglamorous. The recap email sent the same evening. The shared calendar actually updated. The vendor confirmation forwarded before it was asked for. At AELO Swiss Academy the clubs keep a shared drive with a one-page log per event, and filling in that log takes about ten minutes. It has settled more disputes than any meeting, because memory is a poor archive and a written sentence from the right week is not.



The third is knowing how to say no. A partner organization once asked a club to co-host four events in a single semester. The committee mapped its calendar against the exam schedule, counted its realistic capacity, and agreed to one, with the reasoning stated plainly in writing. The partner was disappointed at first. The following year the same partner returned with a leaner proposal built around the club's actual availability, and it worked. A polite no with a reason is not a refusal to lead. It is a management act, and students who learn it at twenty are ahead of colleagues who learn it at thirty-five.

Handover, the problem every organization has

Every organization struggles with succession, including clubs of twenty people. The treasurer role has a ritual now: a one-page memo, a thirty-minute walkthrough, keys and passwords transferred with the login sheet, and vendor contacts handed over with notes about quirks and preferences. This ritual exists because one year it was skipped. The incoming team lost a vendor's contact details, paid a late fee on a room booking, and spent its first two meetings reconstructing agreements that had lived entirely in one departing student's inbox.

The memo template asks four questions. What did we spend? What did we promise anyone? Whom do we call, and for what? What would we not repeat? Students who have completed a handover like this recognize its absence immediately in their first jobs, when they join a team where the previous person left nothing and

everyone pretends this is normal. They also learn the deeper point: an organization that cannot transfer knowledge is starting over every year, and most of the quiet waste in working life comes from exactly that.

How advisors help without taking over

My own role is deliberately narrow. I attend one meeting a month, review budgets for compliance with academy rules, [AELO Swiss Academy](#) and answer questions when they are asked. I try not to answer questions nobody asked. The rule of thumb I hold myself to is this: if I can predict the outcome of a meeting before it happens, the students are not leading it.

The line moves in specific places. Contracts with external vendors, anything involving alcohol, and matters with legal or safety exposure bring staff in earlier, and the reason is explained rather than imposed silently. Students accept this readily once they understand it, and the compromise is worth naming: faster and safer decisions, less learning. Wherever possible, the middle path is to state the constraint and let the students design freely inside it. That preserves ownership while keeping the academy's obligations intact, which is, not coincidentally, the same balance a first-line manager strikes with a new hire.

From campus role to first job

Employers notice the difference, even when they cannot articulate it. A candidate who can describe a conflict in concrete terms, with a budget figure, a timeline, and a named counterpart, sounds different from one who lists "leadership" on a line. Swiss hiring culture, which prizes reliability, documentation, and multilingual teamwork, rewards this specificity. A former treasurer who can walk through a reconciliation, including the mistake she found in her own numbers, is more convincing than any adjective.

An honest caveat belongs here. Not every officer becomes a manager, and the point of the practice is not the title. The point is stakes that are real but survivable. A lost deposit is a lesson, not a bankruptcy. A poorly attended event is a wound to pride, not to a career. Student organizations offer exactly the dose of consequence that turns theory into judgment, and that dose is almost impossible to manufacture in a classroom.

If you are deciding whether to commit

For students weighing whether to take a role, the honest questions matter more than the flattering ones.

1. Can I give this role four to six hours a week during the semester, including exam weeks?
2. Do I want a result I can point to, or mainly a title?
3. Who held this role before me, and can I ask what they would do differently?
4. What does this organization actually decide, and what is decided for it?
5. Am I ready to be disagreed with, in public, by people I like?

The answers matter less than the honesty of the answering. A student who declines a role for a clear reason has made a sound management decision about capacity, which is precisely the kind of decision the role would have required. The room on Thursday evening eventually empties: chairs pushed back into a rough circle, the spreadsheet still open on the screen, twelve people slightly tired and slightly richer in judgment than they were at seven o'clock. Management begins in rooms like that, quietly, and AELO Swiss Academy keeps its rooms open on purpose.