

THE 10 MOST IMPACTFUL LEADERS IN EDUCATION, 2025

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CEO

BREAKOUT GmbH

Katja Zwilling

Breaking Out of the *Ordinary*

COVER x STORY

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“MINDSET FIRST. BUSINESS FOLLOWS.”

Entrepreneurship, education, and innovation are no longer separate worlds. They are merging into vibrant ecosystems where learning, creativity, and collaboration fuel real progress. In this space of constant motion, people like Katja Zwilling stand out for their ability to turn ideas into action and connect vision with purpose.

As the Ecosystem Builder and Founder of BREAKOUT GmbH, Katja describes herself as a catalyst, a visionary, and a sparring partner for organizations ready to embrace change. She helps companies and educational institutions cultivate entrepreneurial thinking, blending strategy with humanity and innovation with integrity.

Whether guiding startups or bridging industries, she reminds people that progress begins when we stay curious, stay connected, and never stop learning.

The Spark Behind BREAKOUT GmbH

Katja's journey to founding BREAKOUT GmbH didn't begin with a business plan; it began with instinct. “It was born from a gut feeling,” she says, reflecting on her decision to build something that could move people, organizations, and systems while letting her bring her own experiences into play. “I felt that we can move more, achieve more, when we are bolder and more adventurous. And since I'm not someone who just likes to talk but prefers to act and make things happen, BREAKOUT was born.”

Growing up in the countryside, Katja learned early what it meant to work hard and stay curious. She began her professional life at just fifteen, combining

education with hands-on experience in administration, leadership, teaching, software product development, procurement, sales, and even a decade running her own film and TV production company. Over the past 17 years, she has also been deeply involved in education. Today, she is connected with numerous communities around the world, follows new technologies with great interest, and loves to draw inspiration also from podcasts to capture impulses from different industries.

“I'm not someone who lives by master plans,” she explains. “I start the journey and I didn't have a clear destination, just a direction that felt right. Maybe because I know things will change along the way anyway.” That philosophy has shaped BREAKOUT GmbH: a company that mirrors her adventurous spirit, her love for challenging patterns, and her ability to push boundaries while staying grounded.

She often recalls a quote from Mark Twain: “*The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why.*” After decades of exploration, Katja found her why. She aims to create the right conditions for exceptional people and organizations to connect, collaborate, and build bridges. Every time she witnesses these meaningful connections take shape, especially across innovation, startups, and the broader economy, she feels an

unmistakable sense of purpose. That purpose extends both locally and globally.

Intrapreneurship as a Force for Change

Katja sees intrapreneurship as more than a concept. It is a mindset that gives life to organizations from within. “It’s about fostering entrepreneurial thinking inside existing systems,” she explains. “In education, that’s crucial.” BREAKOUT also offers its own workshop in the field of intrapreneurship, giving participants practical insights into how to unleash innovation and entrepreneurial spirit within existing structures.

Teachers, researchers, students, and leaders, she believes, all need space to experiment and to help shape the



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future. Switzerland's strong structures and stable values, she notes, offer an ideal foundation for bold exploration. Yet even the best systems can become rigid over time. Her mission is to help educational institutions break through those barriers and build stronger links between learning, innovation, and entrepreneurship. But Katja wants more: she strives to strengthen the dialogue between universities and companies and to promote closer collaboration. In doing so, talents can be specifically supported,

connected, and matched with the right organizations. Her philosophy is simple: *“More Pepper. Less Paper.”* When people are trusted to think and act like entrepreneurs within their organizations, innovation starts to grow from the inside out. Collaboration strengthens, understanding of market dynamics deepens, and motivation becomes intrinsic. Digitalization is increasingly leading to automation and hopefully with it, to more freedom for creativity and entrepreneurship within companies.

“People flourish in these roles,” she says. “And when they do, companies become more agile and resilient.”

But that can only happen when trust is cultivated and supportive structures are modeled from the top down. In her words, “*Entrepreneurship is the art of staying calm while the house is on fire and in today's world, that's a survival skill.*” For Katja, intrapreneurship isn't just an advantage; it's the key to a company's future relevance. When a country is productive, everyone benefits. This is the foundation of a future-oriented and prosperous society.

Leading with Authentic Energy

As the CEO of BREAKOUT GmbH, Katja sees herself as a bridge-builder. She connects people, ideas, and opportunities. Her role is less about hierarchy and more about chemistry: understanding what organizations need and curating the right mix of expertise for every project. She works closely with a network of partners, choosing each collaborator with care. Authenticity is her non-negotiable. “You can't preach Nike-level energy and then send someone Reebok-style laid-back,” she says with a smile. “The team has to live the drive, passion, and vision we promise. Authenticity isn't optional; it's everything.”

That philosophy runs deep in BREAKOUT's DNA. Katja knows her strengths and weaknesses and prefers honesty over pretension. Having survived near-death experiences, she no longer measures herself or her work by perfection but by joy and meaning. “What matters is enjoying what I do,” she says. “That naturally attracts new projects, collaborations, and opportunities.” Her work involves constant trend-watching. She tracks global shifts, translates insights into

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practical steps, and gives organizations the tools to move forward. She smiles when quoting Franklin D. Roosevelt: “*A smooth sea never made a skilled sailor.*” By that measure, she's navigated more than a few storms and come out stronger each time.

She doesn't just want to talk about change; she's ready to roll up her sleeves, make noise and position Switzerland globally. Showcasing its values and strengths while also pursuing collaborations that move the country forward. She lives in Zurich, a thriving economic hub and an exciting place for companies. She is proud to be in exchange with many inspiring people and to truly make a difference and drive change and she says with a wink, “We Swiss are often still just a bit too modest.”

From Tradition to Transformation

When it comes to helping organizations shift from traditional learning models to more agile, entrepreneurial cultures, Katja begins with one thing: mindset. “You have to challenge the old ways of thinking first,” she says. “Only then can you create a culture of learning, experimentation, and action.” For her, a growth mindset isn't a trend. It is a survival strategy, and it requires daily practice.

Breaking away from old structures, even mentally, has a rejuvenating effect. “It's like traveling,” she explains. “If you do the same routine every day, life becomes dull. But when you step into new environments, meet new people, and take risks, your mind wakes up. Over time, that curiosity and adaptability become second nature.”

In this sense, Katja helps teams cultivate habits that make innovation feel natural. Problem-solving becomes faster, collaboration more fluid, and resilience stronger. “That's what agile companies need to truly thrive,” she says. Her approach is refreshingly direct. She finds herself pragmatic as she avoids endless meetings and prefers turning ideas into tangible outcomes.

The Most Rewarding Challenge

Katja measures success in ways money cannot buy. What drives her is watching people shift from fear to curiosity. Small sparks in one person often become long-burning fires that lift teams and institutions. She finds the deepest reward in those subtle, human transformations: when someone embraces a new idea, starts to enjoy the work, and discovers a different version of themselves.

Collaboration is central to this view. Katja has seen too many



people build alone inside silos and end up with work that never scales. Bringing the right partners together, pooling resources and expertise, and thinking beyond short-term gains leads to outcomes that matter. Her aim is to nudge organizations into thinking bigger and planning longer, because the results of smart collaboration tend to outlast individual effort.

Fueling Creativity Through Life and Connection

Energy, according to Katja, is contagious. She meets people with potential, listens to bold ideas, and lets curiosity do the rest. Real-world engagement like conversations, field visits, and unexpected encounters fuels her creativity. A near-death experience at age twelve taught her how precious each day is, and that clarity adds urgency and playfulness to her work.

At home, she manages a patchwork family with five children, a cat, and a dog and sometimes even a foster dog from the animal shelter, until it finds a new family. Routine isn't really part of the picture; daily life is more about constant



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“WHEN CURIOSITY MEETS DIVERSITY, SUCCESS FOLLOWS.”

improvisation between school, kindergarten, and everything in between. Organization happens on the go, and plans are adjusted as needed. Maybe that's the real secret to staying sane when things don't go as planned, which, in a big family, happens quite a lot. Humor and a good dose of calm help her face the chaos with a smile. Life's storms have taught resilience; the ordinary challenges of daily life feel like rain compared with what she has already weathered.

Balance does not capture Katja's approach. She speaks about connection. Work and family are woven together by values that energize rather than drain. Everyone at home is expected to grow, experiment and be trusted; cohesion and fairness are non-negotiable. She wants her children to see work as something joyful, not merely a duty. Curiosity is the starting point: try things, accept mistakes as stepping stones, and focus on what lies ahead instead of lingering on what went wrong. But never forget your roots and where you come from. Perfection is not the goal; That you know your why and dare to follow your path.

A Workshop That Left a Mark

Katja believes big change often starts with small, consistent steps. BREAKOUT GmbH has been quietly creating those nudges. These are interventions that connect institutions, teams, and individuals in ways that alter habits and mindsets. Even modest workshops can shift culture when they are repeated and reinforced.

Early recognition from CIO Views and the steady stream of LinkedIn messages, speaking invitations and project inquiries have been tangible signs that the work is resonating. To Katja, those responses validate the idea that setting small stones in motion builds a long path to lasting impact.

Authenticity as Currency

Authenticity runs through Katja's leadership like a guiding principle. Her background in marketing and film taught her to spot when things become performative. She prefers rolling up her sleeves to contrived ceremony. Anecdotes from shoots, such as running across fields with a tripod or temporarily taking control of traffic lights for a scene, capture her hands-on style. When projects get bogged down in layers of unnecessary process, she pulls them back to what actually serves the outcome.

Early career hurdles shaped that stance. As a young woman she had to prove herself repeatedly, lost projects during pregnancy because of assumptions about capability, and spent nearly three years as a single parent while building a career. Those experiences forged a leader who prizes respect, empowerment and shared values. At BREAKOUT she can be entirely herself, and clients sense the difference. Her message is plain: be real, own your strengths and inspire others by example.



A Defining Moment in the Journey

The turning point in Katja's career didn't come from a major deal or public success; it came from letting go. Accepting that she didn't need a fixed master plan changed everything. "When I stopped trying to control every outcome and started enjoying the journey, my energy shifted," she reflects. "It began to feel like a beautiful adventure."

The most testing period of her life arrived with the births of her two children. Continuing to work immediately afterward while self-employed, and later navigating nearly three years as a single parent, demanded more strength than she thought she had. Those years were exhausting but transformative, teaching her resilience, patience, and the importance of treasuring each day.

Recently, Katja has learned to slow down, listen to what truly inspires her, and follow her instincts. That inner shift has been the most unexpectedly positive change in her professional life. "I'm now increasingly in spaces where I feel comfortable, can fully use my skills and truly thrive," she says. "That's why I stand 100% behind my



company's name BREAKOUT. Sometimes you have to let go, give yourself time and break out to move forward in life."

Advice for Aspiring Changemakers

Katja believes entrepreneurship should feel more like an exploration than a strict plan. Her advice to those starting out is simple yet powerful: don't over-engineer the journey. "Start, experiment, and stay adaptable," she says. "Fail fast, learn faster."

To her, mindset comes before business. With authenticity, strong values, and the right network, any idea can find its way. She encourages them to trust their instincts, know their strengths, and build partnerships that complement their skills instead of duplicating effort.

Katja also stresses the value of humility. "Never think you're better than others," she says. Staying open to new ideas and perspectives keeps entrepreneurs learning and evolving. Courage, collaboration, and the willingness to ask for help when needed are the real tools for sustainable impact.

Staying Ahead of the Curve

Katja stays current by being where ideas collide. She engages closely with universities, cantons, economic development offices and private companies, attends trade fairs and visits events across the globe. She listens more than she lectures, then connects dots between education, technology and innovation. The

goal is practical: surface trends that matter, translate them into actionable steps and help Swiss organizations remain agile while standing on a solid foundation. Her work is about turning signals from the market into tools and opportunities by tailor-made approaches with workshops, project work, coaching, etc., that clients can use immediately.

Katja envisions a future in which courage and responsibility are natural qualities in both education and business. Cross-sector collaboration should be the rule, not the exception. She actively wants to foster closer and more open dialogue between universities and the business world so they can learn from each other in practical ways. Through this collaboration, talents can be discovered, nurtured, and matched to the right opportunities.

She wants the next generation to find fulfilment rather than simply clocking in and out. Because when companies and educational institutions develop talent together, Switzerland becomes even more innovative and future-ready.

Anyone interested in intrapreneurship, innovation, education or entrepreneurship or simply in inspiring exchange – is warmly invited to connect directly with Katja Zwilling on LinkedIn. She welcomes new impulses, collaborations and bold ideas that make a real impact.

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