

Swedish leadership – exporting success



“Staff at Swedish companies don’t find reorganisations and renewals threatening,” says *Olle Wästberg*, Director General of the Swedish Institute

Swedish corporate leaders are far ahead in corporate social responsibility. At the same time, their leadership style is creating informal organisations open to collaboration and innovation. Now Swedish experience is spreading to future leaders in Asia and Europe.

There are many examples of Swedish companies reaping international success. In part, this is down to their leadership style which typically employs flat, informal organisations. Sweden also has a certain amount of job security which results in a positive climate.

“Staff here will speak up and suggest improvements when something doesn’t seem right. They don’t find reorganisations and renewals threat-

ening,” says Olle Wästberg, Director General of the Swedish Institute, an agency that promotes interest in Sweden and establishes relations with other countries.

Wästberg has considerable international experience and believes social conscience will play an increasing role for managers all over the world as the economy recovers.

“Traditionally, Sweden is very interested in sustainability and we’ve made great strides. Swedish companies are also highly experienced in social responsibility—they insist on reasonable working conditions with their subcontractors, for example,” he says.

To share Swedish experience and create a contact network, the Swedish Institute is holding a leadership training course for young emerging leaders from Europe and Asia. One participant is Lotte Tisenkopfa from Latvia, MD of a growing company within ecological cosmetics.

“I see Sweden as a world leader within environment and social responsibility and these courses are like travelling 10 years forward in time. Now I know what I have to produce

and how to do things practically in my own venture. For example, IKEA explained how they produced their Code of Conduct, which will apply to us in a few years,” she says.

The course participants have spent half their time in Sweden in development projects at the top managerial level of Swedish companies. Lotte Tisenkopfa finds Swedish companies to be carefully operated and structured.

“Everything here is analysed first and then the work goes smoothly. In my country, decisions are made quickly which results in more bother later on. Business in Latvia is young, but Sweden has experience,” she says.

Another course participant is Slava Semenikhin from Russia. He is a personal investment and finance manager for a major investment bank. He finds the Swedes attentive and good listeners.

“They listen to each other and often, things are done on a handshake with no contract needed. Trust is an excellent foundation for business,” he adds.

In Swedish companies, it is usual for everyone to eat lunch together. Another very Swedish thing is taking coffee together in the afternoon. This reduces distances within the company and opens the way for collaboration and sharing of ideas.

After the first course, Lotte Tisenkopfa redesigned her company’s canteen so that more people would have room to sit and eat together.

“I think it’s a sign of maturity when you don’t need to distance yourself as a leader,” she says.

All told, over 120 managers have taken the training at the Swedish Institute. They are now using their knowledge to develop successful, socially responsible companies whose key strengths include mutual understanding, self-motivated staff and fresh thinking.

SMART LEADERSHIP KEY TO COMPETITIVENESS

It is increasingly important for companies to have an organisation that makes the most of expertise and manages staff experience and innovative capacity. A good foundation for this is Swedish leadership, whose style is action-orientated with implementation coming soon after well-grounded decisions. VINNOVA holds various programmes examining how the Swedish tradition works in a globalised economy and how it can be developed and passed on by rubbing shoulders with different traditions. One place where the results will come into their own is the Swedish Institute’s training courses for foreign leaders.

» Lotte Tisenkopfa and Slava Semenikhin have gained valuable experience about corporate social responsibility at the management course led by Åsa Bjering (centre). They have also seen the Swedish way of building bridges and opening up to new ideas within a company – all over a cup of coffee.

