pre-Christian religion, beliefs and legends of the Swedish people. In the following we will have a brief look at stories of creation, the first humans, prominent gods, and the eschatology in Sweden before Christianity took hold during the eleventh century AD.

Creation and Human Beings

The Norse creation story begins in the borderland between two cosmic regions, the frozen world of ‘Nifelhem’ and the hot realm of ‘Muspelhem’, a setting recalling the ice age and its ending, icy terrain and volcanic activity, but also freezing hostile winters and agreeable, life-bringing summers. Five frost giants including Ymer and Bure, emerging from the interaction of the two regions, ruled the cosmos. Bure’s three grandchildren – Oden, Vile, and Ve – eventually killed the cruel Ymer, and his body was transformed by the three cooperating creator gods into the world as we know it.

The Norse creator gods had the power to breathe life into objects and created the first man and woman, Ask (meaning ‘ash’) and Embla (‘elm’), by giving life to a pair of tree trunks. The three creator gods told Ask and Embla that it was their responsibility to look after the plants and creatures, and the couple settled down at Midgård (‘the middle farm’) to nurture their realm and start their family.

Gods and Demigods

As in Greek mythology, the Norse deities were easily recognizable to people by their distinctively human traits of emotion, bounded rationality, risk- and loss-aversion, and overconfidence. The familiar struggles for power and prestige among the gods led to continuous fights between deities and between the two divine ‘clans’.

The first clan were the ‘Asar’, the sky gods, who included the three creator gods. The second were the ‘Vaner’ who were gods and goddesses of fertility, and presided over the sky and the Earth. There was prolonged and very destructive warfare between the clans, which were ended by a truce, where saliva was mixed in a bowl and peace was guaranteed by a hostage arrangement (two gods from each group would spend part of the year with the other group), as well as intermarriage. Although the two clans lived peacefully after the truce, they remained suspicious, thinking that the hostages were spies. A violent act on the part of the Vaner (cutting off the head of the hostage Mimer, who refused to tell them the secrets of wisdom, and sending it back to the Asar) paved the way for the triumph of the Asar, due to them now possessing all the wisdom in the world. Over time, the defeated Vaner gods of fertility, health, wealth and luck were assimilated into the tribe of their rivals, the Asar.
Oden was the wandering and philandering head of the Asa-clan. A complex, pondering character, he was the god of war (helped in battle by his two wolves Gere and Freke), poetry, as well as the dead. Oden decided to first give up one of his eyes for one sip of wisdom and then hang himself on (and later pin himself on to) the trunk of the world tree Yggdrasil for nine days and nights in exchange for knowledge. Having clutched the secret rune letters on his way down, he was now an expert on performing magic spells and could change his shape. In the arts of peace, Oden was helped by mastery of the runes and by the two ravens Hugin (thought) and Munin7 (memory) who whispered into his ears what was happening in the world. He also picked up expertise in fortune telling from women, and practised it although it was seen as unmanly and led to the other gods teasing him. Frequently, he walked among the humans in Midgård incognito, dressed in a slouch hat and a wide coat, putting him distinctly in touch with common people and their reality.

The most revered god among common Swedes however, was Oden’s son, the violent and moody ‘Tor’. Interestingly, he was etymologically and functionally more or less identical with the Vedic god Indra. A sworn enemy of the giants, he rode through the sky in a chariot with his mighty hammer ‘Mjölnér’ which had been forged for him by dwarves, and which he used to crush his enemies and bless those he wished well. His chariot was pulled by two goats, and Mjölnér produced thunder and lightning when hurled at enemies. Tor’s bad temper often complicated his life and led to spells of serious regret and anguish. Psychologically, Tor was a relative simpleton in comparison to his father Oden, but he was often called on by ordinary Swedes to bring order out of chaos.

It seems appropriate in this context to mention the women and their roles in Norse mythology. In general, females in Norse mythology take ‘the back-seat’, but are instrumental in planning and pulling strings behind the curtain, while other female beings watch over the fate of individuals and clans. The most prominent goddesses are Freja and Frigga. Freja was the symbol of fertility, beauty and seduction, in touch with the powers of the earth and thereby the underworld. Frigga was the stable wife of Oden, a very knowledgeable but secretive mother and governess of the Asgård property. She, in spite of protecting marriage, lived in a separate dwelling. Other very prominent females were the three Nornor which sat at the roots of the tree of life, Yggdrasil, and watered it as well as spun the threads of life, thereby determining the fate of all living beings.

Folk Tales: Beings of the Dark Woods of Sweden

Over time, some aspects of Norse mythology have passed into Scandinavian folklore and have survived to modern times. We will briefly describe some
beings of the dark forests of Sweden and their often complex and vague properties and characteristics, still influencing popular beliefs.

Potential ‘helpers’: The Tomte and the Will-o’-the wisp
The Swedish word ‘Tomte’ roughly corresponds to ‘gnome’ or ‘elf’. The Tomte is small, about the size of a seven-year-old boy, has a long grey or snowy beard and an old and wrinkled face. He wears grey clothes and a pointed red cap, and lives on haylofts, looking after the farm and the animals. He is shy and often not visible but it is of utmost importance to treat the Tomte well. If so, he will help the farmer to bake, carry chopped wood, clean out the stable, and spread the manure on the fields. At Christmas time, people reward him with a big plate of porridge with butter. A Tomte has no sense of humour, so he must never be made fun of, as he may move to the neighbouring farm and take the farmers’ luck with him.

A similar helper is the Will-o’-the wisp, a translation from the Swedish name ‘Lyktgubbe’, which means ‘old man with a lamp’. During dark nights a flickering light can be seen at old moss, rivers and lakeshores or where there used to be an old path. Coming too close to the short little ‘man’ wearing grey or green clothing might lead to illness or disorientation, but he can be nice as well, and help those who are lost in the forest in the middle of the night if asked kindly. If not thanked profusely he will confuse people to not find their own door even if standing right in front of it.

The allure of beauty and quick fixes: the Water Sprite and the Wood-nymph
‘Näcken’ or the ‘Water Sprite’ is mentioned in the old Nordic folktales as early as in the eleventh century. ‘Näck’ in Swedish means nude. In the most common tales about the Water Sprite, he is a naked man – a very sensuous being – sitting in a stream, playing the most beautiful music on his violin. The Water Sprite is a solitary being and tries to entangle humans with his music close to bridges and water mills. Many fiddlers have told that they have learnt how to play the violin from the Water Sprite, but only by making sacrifices. Others can see the fiddler as a lost soul, and occasionally the fiddler cannot stop playing until someone comes and sets him free. The Water Sprite is especially dangerous to women, whom he tries to seduce or entrap at the bottom of lakes or streams where they are never to be seen again.

Deep in the Swedish woods lives the Wood-nymph, the most beautiful of women. The Swedish name ‘Skogsrå’ indicates that she is the caretaker of the woods and the wild animals. For a hunter it is very important to treat her well, for example, sacrifice some food, for successful hunting. However, male hunters and charcoal-burners that have fallen in love with the Wood-nymph after following her into the forest lose their soul. She distorts their vision, and
changes shape from the most exquisitely beautiful woman to the most repulsive creature. If one takes a closer look, her back is a rotten tree-stump and she has a tail, of which she is very ashamed. By grabbing the tail, and holding on to it, one might be able to keep her at a distance and save one’s soul.

The ‘neighbours’: the Trolls and Giants
Unlike most other forest beings, ‘Trolls’ like company and live together in groups. Trolls also like being around human beings, who they unfortunately abduct if given a chance. They live underground or inside mountains and are rarely seen as they hate sunlight, which can kill them. They are very greedy and hoard gold and silver. If running into a Troll, courtesy is law, unless they are angry in which case only a quick run to the closest church will save a human.8

Giants, or ‘Jättar’, are a tall family that lived on earth long before humankind. Most of what we see in nature can be seen as traces of the age of giants. Round holes in rocks for example are giant cooking pots. Giants are not always nice, but they sometimes offer their help if properly rewarded. They are able blacksmiths, and because of their size, work is done quickly and the quality of their forged tools is excellent. Giants are tall, but not very clever, and they can be lured into helping humans with construction. If the building contractor can guess the giant’s name before construction is finished, the giant goes unrewarded.

OVERVIEW OF SWEDISH LEADERSHIP

‘Swedish-style management is profoundly different from what’s practised elsewhere in the world’ exclaim Dearlove and Crainer (2002: 21). In the same breath, they quote Jack Welch as observing that ‘pound for pound, Sweden has probably more good managers than any other country’. The question then becomes: what characterizes Swedish leadership? We have chosen to approach this question with broad brush-strokes identifying five essential leadership themes, detailing nuances and highlighting contradictions within each theme and illustrating them with Swedish leadership profiles. The Swedish leadership themes are:

1. knowledge, common sense and action;
2. collaboration, consensus and conflict avoidance; and
3. empowering, independence and control;
4. universalism, fairness and pragmatism;
5. walking, talking and silence.
Knowledge, Common Sense and Action

Brought up in a meritocracy, Swedish leaders *par excellence* are not selected on general knowledge but on expertise competence believed as essential for leadership success. Before the latter half of the twentieth century managers were often internally recruited engineers from a very small group of individuals with a similar educational, social and cultural background (Maccoby, 1991). Being a manager is slowly being perceived as an occupation, and this together with a growing market demand has led to increased recruitment from business schools. However, the typical leader profile still features strong technological skills, paired with a large portion of common sense, often unabashedly applied when making and taking decisions. In Swedish media, outstanding Swedish leadership has been associated with ‘doers’, rather than ‘thinkers’, who display a strong performance-orientation and an entrepreneurial approach (Holmberg and Åkerblom, 2001). To say that someone is good at getting things done or possesses ‘the power of action’ (which is one word in Swedish – ‘handlingskraftig’), is more than highest praise in a recruitment recommendation.

Collaboration, Consensus and Conflict Avoidance

One of the important Swedish cultural beliefs is the superior efficiency and results of cooperation and collaboration in comparison to competition and confrontation. Cooperating, or connecting subordinates’ interests with superordinates’ interests, was expressed as a Swedish value as early as 1809 (Linnell and Löfgren, 1995). Individualistic rather than collectivistic work values were however, identified for Sweden (Hofstede, 1980, 1984), leading Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (1993) to talk about ‘social individualism’, that is, individualism rooted in a collectivistic value system. In the Globe study, Sweden was found to be both extremely collectivistic and extremely individualistic, leading Holmberg and Åkerblom (2001) to conclude that Swedes were ‘socially concerned individualists’.

Self-managing teams were used to organize work in Swedish firms in the 1970s, for example Volvo’s production plant in Kalmar (Gyllenhammar, 1977) and experiments continued into the 1990s, when autonomous teams of skilled workers assembled whole cars without an assembly line in the Uddevalla plant. Twenty years later, Swedish multinational companies’ web-based home pages detour readers from technicalities to emphasize how working in teams is a part of their corporate culture. Future leaders are recruited based on their ability to create, manage and be part of teams. According to Kenneth Bengtsson, CEO of the Swedish retailing group ICA Ahold AB, the uniqueness of Swedish business is based on how ‘Swedish leadership tends to focus primarily on cooperation and teamwork. Managers put a lot of effort into
getting everyone in the team involved’ (Bengtsson, 2003). Correspondingly, Swedish employees consider that their managers should encourage cooperation and make the employees feel part of a team, acting similarly to a coach (Zander, 1997). Outstanding Swedish leaders should have ‘a great ability in building, integrating, coordinating, and sustaining a team whose members collaborate in a collegial and egalitarian way’ (Holmberg and Åkerblom, 2006: 322).

If collaboration and teamwork are the preferred *modus operandi* in Swedish organizations, consensus is the preferred decision-making vehicle. A consensus-based process involves all concerned parties so that when a decision finally is taken it has been well aired, discussed from all parties’ perspectives and agreed upon by all involved. This time-consuming process at its best facilitates a smooth, fast and (importantly) conflict-free implementation phase. Conflict avoidance characterizes Swedish culture in general and the importance of agreeing is exceptional. The strong belief in consensus decision-making could be seen as a reflection of this (Daun, 1986; Holmberg and Åkerblom, 2001). A typical Swedish reaction when differing opinions are expressed is that ‘there is no use in discussing this as we disagree’ (Zander, 1999, 2001), disagreement seen as leading to that dreaded confrontation. Skilled conflict avoiders are sought-after as leaders, as there is a strong belief that conflicts are ineffective and will hamper processes rather than energize and inspire them (Jönsson, 1996).

**Empowering, Independence and Control**

Egalitarianism, one of the important Swedish cultural values, has influenced and shaped life in Sweden in general and Swedish management in particular. Equality in the workplace in the form of employee influence and participation in decision making at all levels is legislated in Swedish law. The egalitarian vision has also been pursued in society by abolishing the extensive use of titles and formal way of addressing people in the latter half of the twentieth century. Remaining gaps between groups are difficult to identify as in Swedish culture it is important to be modest and downplay one’s achievements. Overt display of status, authority or wealth is abhorred (Lawrence and Spybey, 1997). There is a social requirement not to stand out, not to believe in any way that one is special, as expressed in an old Swedish saying: ‘any one person is as good as any other person’.

In parallel to the development of the egalitarian vision in Swedish society, Swedish companies have been transformed from hierarchical organizations to flat decentralized structures, with participatory practices following governmental policies (Gyllenhammar, 1977; Zander, 2002). As predicted in a low power distance society (Hofstede, 1980, 1984), Holmberg and Åkerblom (2006) identified the participative dimension as distinctive to Swedish leader-
ship in the Globe study. From the late 1980s and onwards Swedish Percy Barnevik’s (then CEO of ABB) leadership style has inspired many leaders around the globe (Kets de Vries, 1998). Barnevik declared that he was obsessed with decentralization, and he pushed authority, responsibility and accountability down in the organization with a maximum of five people between the shop floor and the CEO (Kets de Vries, 1998). Not only participation in consensus processes, but also actual discretionary authority has been delegated to Swedish employees at lower levels (Lawrence and Spybey, 1997). Swedish employees want their managers to empower them, that is, delegate responsibility to them, give them the opportunity to share decision making, to participate in strategy discussions, and appreciate their initiatives and their advice (Zander, 1997).

COMMENTARY BOX

Pehr G. Gyllenhammar, Former Group CEO of Volvo (Multinational Producer of Cars, Commercial Vehicles, and Power Systems)

Participation actually demands better leadership, as well as more self-discipline from everyone involved. Some foreigners talk about Sweden as if management control, in the traditional sense, may be lost in the new industrial environment [that is using work teams instead of assembly lines in Volvo auto factories]. Participation demands more work, not less, from everybody … the manager who is reluctant or just gives lip service to the idea of participation can hold back employee-based changes that are actually in the best interests of both the corporation and its employees. (from Harvard Business Review 1977: 112–13)

Lars Renström, Group CEO of Alfa Laval (Global Provider of Heating, Cooling, Separation and Engineering Solutions). Swedish Leader of the Year 2007

Good leadership is characterized by being able to make a team move up one level and reach extraordinary results. It is not always the team with the best players that wins. With good leadership, a team of lesser skilled players can win because together they surpass themselves. (from Affärsvärlden, 2007-11-06)
Annika Falkengren, President and Group CEO for SEB (North European Financial Group). Ranked in the Top 10 of the Financial Times 2007 List of Powerful Women in Europe

Leadership is very difficult to explain … Of course you need a message of where you want to go and why employees should feel that this is a fantastic target and a goal we would like to achieve … It is very much about communication: to communicate with the employees all the time how you think, what you want, and what they have done well and less well. (IMD CEO video interview 2006-09-05)

‘Management by objectives’ is praised and favoured by Swedish leaders as well as by subordinates. The importance of independence and self-reliance, that is autonomy, is expressed not only in the desire for empowerment, but also in the limited appreciation of supervision (Zander, 1997; Holmberg and Åkerblom, 2006). In general, supervision is seen as an expression of a manager’s distrust in the employees’ ability and competence. Far-reaching delegation of authority, questions instead of orders, and vagueness signal egalitarian beliefs and trust, ‘See what you can do about it?’, is not an uncommon leader expression (Edström and Jönsson, 1998, p. 167 translation in Holmberg and Åkerblom, 2001). Lack of supervision does not however mean lack of control. Formal control is sparse, but informal personalized or culture-based normative control is practised both at organizational and individual levels (Selmer and De Leon, 1996).

Universalism, Fairness and Pragmatism

Swedes are occasionally referred to as the Prussians of the North to emphasize their strong organizational skills, a typical Swedish characteristic articulated in the beginning of the twentieth century (Linnell and Löfgren, 1995). Swedish leadership discourse builds on rationality, reason, logic, facts, function and order, as these have been valued in the Swedish context for a long time. Leaders should excel in using ratio-based ‘modern’ arguments, as emotionally-based arguments signal incompetence as well as the dreaded ‘all words but no action’ type of leadership. Leaders are expected to embody these fundamental organizing principles produced by a very successful implementation of ‘The Modern Project’ (see Toulmin, 1990). To Swedes, being ‘modern’ is essential for future development (Daun, 1992).

In Swedish organizations there are relatively few rules and regulations, as
could be expected given the Swedish low uncertainty avoidance score (Hofstede, 1980, 1984), but the few must be followed similarly to policies, procedures and decisions (Smith et al., 2003). Both Swedish society and organizations are governed by universalistic principles (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars, 1993). People do not expect leaders to make particularistic exceptions to rules and regulations, and ‘cries’ of unfair treatment will echo if practices and procedures are not applied universally. Non-transparency does not lead to suspicion of shady practice, but to the belief that something unfair is going on. Fairness being vital in Swedish society and organizations, leaders who are not perceived as fair will not be held in esteem for long.

Swedish leaders are expected to apply universalistic principles but there is still ample room for pragmatism (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1993). Pragmatism, one of the central aspects of outstanding Swedish leadership, involves a readiness to listen to others, to compromise if need be, and to realize practical solutions (Holmberg and Åkerblom, 2001). Drawing on, and learning from, experience and knowledge coupled with common sense, pragmatism will always dominate over theory and ideology in leader behaviour. Indeed to be rational, reasonable, pragmatic, and possessing excellent organizational skills were identified as representative for outstanding leadership portrayed in Swedish media (Holmberg and Åkerblom, 2001).

Walking, Talking and Silence
Non-Swedish managerial colleagues have much to their astonishment found Swedish managers walking around and talking with employees at different levels in the organization, equally comfortable at the shop floor and in the laboratory, personifying the ‘management by walking around’ concept. ‘The ‘floors’ are our best schools’ according to Ingvar Kamprad, founder, owner and executive chairman of IKEA (Hall and Nyman, 2004: 80). For Swedish leaders this is essential for being ‘in-the-know’, coordination and informal control, as well as for decision making and consensus seeking. Jan Carlzon, famous for his turn-around of Scandinavian Airlines System (SAS) in the 1980s and his published reflections about tearing down the pyramids, explains how effective communication creates a sense of responsibility, eases control and the need for instructions, leading to motivated and empowered employees (Hall and Nyman, 2004). Alvesson (1992) notes how leaders in a Swedish computer consultancy company focus on communication in both formalized meetings and informal settings and encourage the personal dimension in the interaction. Swedish employees correspondingly prefer frequent communication with their managers about both work and personal-oriented matters (Zander, 1997).

Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, silence and shyness are seen as something positive in the Swedish culture. According to an old Swedish saying,
‘talking is silver and silence is gold’. Swedes in general are often experienced as ‘reserved’ or ‘stiff’ with a limited, if any, capacity for cocktail-party-type socializing and small talk (which in Swedish is translated into ‘cold talk’). However, these national cultural values also shape specific leadership skills such as excellence in international negotiations, where the Swedes’ silence can make others nervous and give Swedish leaders the upper hand (Laine-Sveiby, 1987).

SYNTHESIS AND GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS

Traces from the Past

At the onset the creation myths and the stories of gods and demigods populating Norse mythology seem far removed from contemporary Swedish leadership ideals, but a closer look reveals intriguing similarities with contemporary rhetoric and practice. Examples are the focus on and significance of teamwork, knowledge/expertise, and empowering. Pragmatic solutions to avoid conflicts and ‘management by walking around’ also shine through in the mythical tales. In addition, the folk tales of beings of the dark woods of Sweden give hints as to what to expect regarding Swedish leaders’ work values and attitudes towards their subordinates.

Norse mythology’s influences on contemporary Swedish leadership

In a Swedish context, the world would not have been created without teamwork. By cooperating, Bure’s three grandchildren managed to kill the cruel frost giant Ymir and transform his body into the world as we know it. Creation is based on coordinated activity of a group of individuals rather than the bravery, strength or wits of one individual alone. To this day, an obsession with and belief in the virtues of teamwork remains a prominent feature of Swedish leadership. It is seen as the key to organize work and continuously stressed by Swedish leaders. Fostering teamwork attitudes starts early with an emphasis on group activities in the educational system from the very early years all the way to the University level, where in some cases even exams can be written in groups. An interesting question of course becomes: what is the leader’s role in this team-oriented approach? Just like in the ancient Norse tales, there is a clear realization that the leader acts as a primus inter pares due to special talents, knowledge and a grasp of the art of inspiration. He or she also has a clear mandate to lead and organize work by empowering and distributing roles and responsibilities among team members. In addition, the focus on management teams is prominent in contemporary Sweden. Management teams in Sweden are regularly involved in common problem solving activities, finding
solutions by way of discussion, active participation and dialogue (Edström and Jönsson, 1998; Jönsson, 1996). In such teams leadership is usually vague and imprecise, allowing team members to retain a certain degree of autonomy and ‘freedom-under-responsibility’.

The thirst for knowledge among the Norse gods was great. The Vaner-clan broke the treaty of truce due to a failed attempt at obtaining knowledge, and Oden (head of the Asa-clan) gave up one of his eyes and suffered considerably in exchange for knowledge and wisdom. Stories of leaders that make extraordinary efforts to become knowledgeable run through Swedish mythology, and correspondingly contemporary leaders in Sweden should possess expertise and are selected upon being knowledgeable. Both specialist knowledge and common sense (or wisdom) are essential. In fact, Oden’s informed and wise leadership seems to be very close to that aspired to by Swedish leaders today. Tor, son of Oden, with his mighty hammer, called upon to bring order in chaos, could be seen as another archetypical leader also prevalent in today’s Swedish society. The need to drastically and often dramatically shape up organizations usually involves recruiting a Tor-like leader, a ‘hatchet man’ for the purpose, who with a figurative hammer or hatchet will implement changes with the speed of lightning, and often the sound of thunder. Turn-around management on a somewhat less dramatic and slower time-table, in the Swedish mind still needs a ‘Tor’ type rather than an ‘Oden’ type of leader to be effective.10 Like in Norse mythology, women are influential, powerful and creative. Unfortunately, like in the myths, they do not yet figure as prominently at the top of Swedish organizations as the high female participation in the workforce would suggest.11

Pragmatism as a theme is recurrent in mythology known by Swedes. A typical pragmatic solution to avoid further destructive conflict was the treaty between the two clans of gods, the Vaner and the Asar, which involved yearly exchanges of two gods as hostages and encouragement of intermarriages. The story of the two clans of gods also emphasizes the belief that conflict is inherently destructive and should be avoided at any cost.

After the Norse gods had blown life, senses and intelligence into the two first human beings, they empowered them. The humans were given the responsibility for plants and creatures and the opportunity to settle down and start a family in their own world Midgård. To empower, to give independence and to delegate decision-making throughout the organization are of utmost importance to both Swedish leaders and to Swedes who are led. Similarly to successful contemporary Swedish leaders’ ‘management by walking around’, Oden frequently walked among the humans in Midgård disguised as an ordinary man in order to keep in touch and to stay informed.

Folk tales: the complexity and vagueness of beings
Swedish folk tales about beings of the dark woods tell a consistent story about
the workings of the world. Unlike other Germanic people, Swedes seem totally at ease with the complexity, vagueness, and opaqueness of the inner nature of humans and other beings. Instead of fully-fledged ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys’, including superheroes and super-villains, Swedish fairy-tales, folk tales and stories are full of people and creatures that can be either good or bad, depending on how one treats them. Interestingly, this view of human nature is very close to Voltaire’s view that was promoted during the Age of Enlightenment. The idea that all of us can be both angelic and bestial and should constantly cultivate ourselves is quite different from the Hobbesian idea of ‘man as man’s wolf’ and Rousseau’s idea of ‘the noble savage’. Rousseau’s teachings have been very influential in Sweden during the twentieth century when promoted and applied by Social Democrats in their attempt to reengineer society, but it is quite clear that the ancient (and more nuanced) view of human nature has recently made a comeback.

The implications of this view of the world for leadership are straightforward: treat subordinates with respect and kindness, and reward them in a fair way for their efforts. Just like the Tomte and the Will-o’-the wisp, employees expect to be treated decently, or they will leave for other jobs or even turn on the leader to make his or her life miserable. The loyalty and services of a Swedish subordinate can never be taken for granted, but must be earned by the leader on a recurrent basis. Tales of creatures like the Water Sprite and the Wood Nymph tell a story of the dangers of being enchanted by beauty and what can be seen on the surface of things. Both Swedish leaders and subordinates are suspicious of sweet talking, slick personalities, and are not impressed by quick fixes. Work should be done properly and thoroughly, often at considerable personal cost. Stories of Trolls and Giants, finally, corroborate the observation that not even notoriously wicked creatures are consistently bad. Greedy and stupid people exist and need to be handled, but a skilled leader can outsmart them and make them work by motivating them properly.

Transition and Change

The idea that leadership ideals would remain the same for thousands of years despite immense changes in human societies and learning on part of the generations of people involved is clearly absurd. In essence our reasoning around transition and change is that leadership beliefs in Sweden are affected by two major waves of novel ideas: Christianity and the Modern Project. However, Swedish leadership still seems deeply rooted in stories told thousands of years ago, which in turn were based on the human condition in this northern outpost. Ancient stories seem to survive in the background and are brought back into both discourse and practice, in hybridized, reformulated and re-contextualized format.
The first fundamental change in Swedish society is from ancient Norse polytheism to monotheism and Christianity around the year 1000 AD, and the second is the eclipse of the Christian world view caused by the slow but stable progress of the Modern Project, starting approximately at the time of the assassination of the French king Charles IV by the redhead villain Ravaillac in 1610 (Toulmin, 1990), and arguably reaching its peak in Sweden with the Social Democratic government modernization projects of the 1960s and 1970s.

In ancient Swedish society, it seems plausible that people lived at ease with the idea that their gods were more or less just like them, for good and for bad. Society was organized in clans where leaders constantly bought loyalty and appealed to kinship. The arrival of Christianity through the travels of the Vikings constitutes the potentially greatest change to Swedish society of all times. The idea of a single, all-knowing, perfect god and his son was brought back to Swedish shores by Viking tradesmen and warriors who were full of admiration for the wealth and achievements of foreign civilizations. Their leaders rapidly realized the potential of a religion where power was given to them by a single, immaculate god. The change was as revolutionary in the Swedish context as anywhere else in the world and, as any major change, it was initially endorsed by a few and mainly manifested in language, discourse and symbols.

The coming of Christianity, heralding ideas about the possibility of perfection and almightiness, paved the way for a central authority, for example a king, who ruled with powers given by God. Although Sweden’s long history of parliamentarism, Swedish kings to this day remain well-known leadership figures and stand statue in most cities. The king usually referred to as the founder of Sweden as a united country, Gustav Vasa (Gustavus I), in the sixteenth century broke with the Catholic Church, declared Sweden a protestant nation and confiscated all property of the wealthy monasteries. For the following 300 years, Swedish kings and queens engaged the country in more or less constant warfare, temporarily turning the Baltic Sea into an all-Swedish ‘lake’. Having lost the ‘empire’ and the belief in autarchy and the gains of warfare, Swedes increasingly turned to more peaceful activities and constitutionally prohibited the monarch from initiating aggressive wars (Moerk, 1998).

The next round of dramatic changes in Swedish society, the coming of modernity and industrialization, added rationality, control through logical and exact science, and machine metaphors to the leadership story.

In Hofstede’s (1980, 1984) study, Sweden scores very high on ‘femininity’, that is endorsing values such as nurturing, caring, focus on personal relationships rather than more materialistic values. Forss et al. (1984) comment that no one would characterize Swedish managers of the early twentieth century as ‘feminine’. Instead, words like strength and assertiveness fit the history of
Swedish industrialization. It is suggested that ‘perhaps the idea of relatively equal, and strong, men united in battle under a commander who is only “primus inter pares” has been wrongly taken as sign of a submissive leadership style’ (Forss *et al.*, 1984: 37).

We believe that the historic autarchic leadership style underwent substantial changes under the Social Democrats’ long era of reign, starting in 1920, due to major efforts to extend voting rights and democracy. The role of a caring and nurturing leader picked up by Hofstede proved to be compatible with rational ideas of expertise, control and universalism promoted in the modernization of Swedish society, and was curiously emulated on the ‘patriarch’ of the early raw material extracting industries where the owner (and leader) supplied workers with basic lodging, schooling, health care, and often provided a shop for basic needs where the monthly bill could be deducted from the wages.

As to recently made allegations of Sweden being a country on the cutting edge of cultural change, social innovation and post-modernization (Tengblad, 2006), we agree that Swedish society in general, and its leaders specifically, have handled the often painful sense-making exercise related to major societal and ideological change in a (typical) pragmatic way. Sediments of Christian and Modern Project ideas are important parts of Swedish leadership, but mythology remains a basis for understanding beliefs, language and behaviour of today’s Swedish leaders.

**PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS**

The complex nature of leaders and other characters in Swedish mythology echoes in contemporary Swedish leadership, leaders have blind spots, weaknesses to external eyes that are paradoxically often viewed as strengths in the Swedish context. Birkinshaw (2002: 11) exemplifies Swedish leadership’s main strengths and weaknesses by describing Sven-Göran Eriksson, the famous Swedish coach of the English national soccer team recruited after his success in Italy as follows: ‘He comes across as a rather unlikely leader – modest, understated, a man of few words. But at the same time he is evidently very successful’. Associating Eriksson’s leadership style with Swedish culture, Birkinshaw (2002) argues that it all boils down to empowerment, teamwork and consensus-based decision-making.

What Birkinshaw (2002) refers to as the ‘modest and understated’ is in our view a reflection of egalitarian values and the importance of not standing out, tightly related to the relatively flat organizations, the lack of overt displays of hierarchical level, and the leader as being perceived as a team player while in fact being the person in charge. In the Swedish culture, these are among the
most appreciated leadership strengths, often expressed as ‘she or he is just one of us’, while at the same time being acutely aware that this is not completely the case. Internationally, this is often valued when understood but in our experience, this is where most non-Swedes go wrong even if working for many years in Swedish organizations in Sweden. It is undisputedly very difficult to realize that there is an existing, almost invisible, hierarchy based on both level and expertise, and to understand how it plays out in everyday operations. Similarly, role and task boundaries are vague, but Swedes know exactly where these are and how they work. Metaphorically one can speak of infrared lines criss-crossing the organization salient to varying degrees depending on the non-Swedes’ cultural lens. Those who come from explicit, almost tangible bureaucratic organizations and societies have problems in detecting those infrared lines. One problem is that bureaucracy in its original Weberian sense assumes a monocratically organized hierarchy. Individuals from a background encompassing this belief often have trouble when trying to locate ‘the pyramid’ and identify the one leader, as there is seldom one person holding all the power. Instead, discretionary authority is distributed and delegated in the Swedish organization based on expertise as well as position.

The action-orientated Swedish leader spurred by challenges is indeed a person of few words. Verbal acrobats and strong debaters are viewed with the suspicion that the person is superficial, hiding something, or is ‘all talk and no action’ (Zander, 1999, 2001) whereas a silent person is a good listener, who thinks before speaking and when speaking reflects good judgement and a balanced opinion. This strength in the Swedish context also renders Swedes internationally advantageous diplomatic and negotiating skills. However, there is another side of the coin, a blind spot to many leaders. Non-Swedes often perceive Swedish managers as indirect and unclear in their communication and they are often referred to as ‘managing by nods and winks’ (Hedlund and Áman, 1984). For example, at international meetings, some non-Swedish subsidiary managers have a problem understanding what, if any, decision was taken, while others do not grasp that a decision actually had been made. This has led some scholars to view Swedes as the Japanese of the North (Daun, 1986). The bottom line is that it is difficult for non-Swedes to capture not just the subtleties but often the main message conveyed. Again, the success in deciphering Swedish communication depends on the non-Swedes’ own cultural communication patterns. Those who are used to elaborate (large quantity), as well as direct or confrontational communication styles will have more communication problems than those from other types of cultural background, noting that communication style preferences also vary across the same spoken language (Zander, 2005).

The empowering, the teamwork and the consensus aspects of Swedish leadership are strengths that also may be frustrating but are quite explicit and visible
and thus easier to grasp for non-Swedes. For example empowering can be seen as pushed ‘too low’, or carried out with employees who are ‘too young’ or ‘too inexperienced’. Being expected to be a team player can exasperate those from a culture where competition and individual achievement are rewarded. Teamwork can be experienced as inefficient, seen as generating an outcome of the ‘least common denominator’ type, rather than ‘a sum that is larger than its parts’. Consensus-oriented decision-making is perceived as slow and cumbersome leading non-Swedes to view their Swedish managers as indecisive (Hedlund and Åman, 1984) and lacking both clout and power.

It is the implicit, tacit, invisible, modestly downplayed and understated hierarchies, role and task boundaries that are exceptionally difficult to comprehend and relate to for many non-Swedes. Swedish leaders do not in general perceive these as weaknesses, which make them serious blind spots. Adding communication preferences based on silence, conflict avoidance and action rather than words, is a recipe for unnecessary confusion, complication and communication disorders among many non-Swedes. It may even be the case that non-Swedes in Swedish organizations draw the conclusion that there is no leadership exercised, which is (almost) always wrong.

How then can non-Swedes interact with Swedish leaders in a successful way? The apparent starting point is to know that there are differences and that often these are not visible; neither in the physical environment (for example, department lists of names are usually in alphabetical order without titles), nor in written documents such as policies, rules and regulations as these are scarce. Swedes will seldom point anything out verbally as this is seen as improper and rude. However, Swedish leaders do not mind answering questions and can go to lengths to put a person into the picture.

Taking time for informal talks at the almost compulsory coffee breaks and lunch hours but also when bumping into each other in the corridor is key to understanding the on-goings in Swedish organizations. Given conflict avoidance, this is also a means for non-confrontational exchanges of opinions and partial settling of issues before formal meetings take place. Substantial teamwork is carried out in informal settings and not just in designated formal meetings. Informal conversations also lead to participation in consensus-making processes, staying informed and being able to slowly decipher the flat but existing invisible hierarchies, role and task boundaries. In other words, learning by doing, learning by participating in informal as well as formal settings, and situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991) are the most promising paths for non-Swedes to take.

The vague role and task boundaries are also fluid and the importance of volunteering or responding positively to unexpected requests, when troubles arise cannot be overestimated. Reminiscent of historical times, when Sweden’s harsh geography and climate led the relatively few people that lived...
there to help each other out, responding to calls for ad hoc assignments requiring immediate action in today’s organizational life is often a fast track to becoming an insider and to learning more about Swedish leadership.

In the informal, invisible, almost incomprehensible realm of Swedish leadership, we in essence recommend non-Swedes to initiate communication, embrace situated learning, and engage in action above and beyond the call of duty as key to successful interaction with Swedish leaders.

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NOTES

1. In addition, of course stories about where we all come from and daily encounters with the social workings of our family (our first observations of the structure and dynamics of a [semi-]formal organization) define our thoughts and behaviour for longer than we might want.

2. Norse mythology is the best preserved version of the older common Germanic paganism, in turn developed from earlier Indo-European mythology. The mythology was orally transmitted in the form of poetry and had not one set of doctrinal beliefs. Some aspects of Norse mythology have passed into Scandinavian folklore and have survived to modern day times.

3. As creation explains the origin of all things, this mythology reflects deep-seated philosophical, religious, cultural and social beliefs about the nature of reality and the unknown, being and non-being and the relationship between all things. Hence they are in most societies regarded as the most sacred of traditions.

4. In the following, the Swedish forms of names will be used consistently, as the English counterparts only have slightly different spelling.

5. To emphasize the fatalism (but also a messianic message) in Swedish mythology, all the major male gods were mortal and would die fighting at the time of ‘Ragnarök’, the final great destructive battle. This battle was only survived by a handful of less important gods, the world tree Yggdrasil, and hidden within it, the two human beings who would found a new human race in an idyllic world of goodness and happiness. The new world would be governed by Oden’s flawless second-born son Balder, the god of light, innocence, beauty, joy, purity and peace. He would be brought back to life together with his formerly blind brother, the god of winter and darkness, Höder, who would help build the new world.

6. This view of deities is in stark opposition to the later dominant single, all-seeing, all-knowing God introduced to Sweden over a period of 300 years beginning in the ninth century through monotheism in the form of Christianity.

7. ‘Munin’ is the chosen name for the first Swedish nano-satellite, its scientific objective is to be able to collect data on the auroral activity in both the Northern and Southern hemisphere, the data on magnetospheric activity is to be made available online to be used for space weather predictions.
8. In the genre of paleofiction, Kurtén has entertained the theory that Trolls are a distant memory of human encounters with Neanderthals by our Cro-Magnon ancestors some 40,000 years ago. A perhaps more plausible explanation for the Troll myth is that they represent the remains of a forefather cult, where a custom was to sit on grave-mounds in order to make contact with the deceased (or mound-dwellers). With the introduction of Christianity, the religious elite sought to demonize the pagan cult and denounced the ancestors as evil trolls.

9. Understanding Swedish cultural values and attempting to trace their origin historically has peaked the interest of not only academics but also practitioners as witnessed by recent popular management books (see for example, Johansson Robinowitz and Werner Carr, 2001).

10. There seems to be an ongoing specialization of roles among Swedish leaders, where an important minority specialize in and are known and admired for their hard-handedness. Like in other societies, the main reason for these types of leaders to become ousted scapegoats is that they have not been tough enough in their creation of order.

11. There is a striking lack of top Swedish women leaders in our discussion above. Sweden is internationally known for its comparatively large percentage of women in the salaried workforce (about 80 per cent). However, there is a notable gender imbalance across hierarchical levels (Höök, 1995). In Sweden’s 70 largest firms, a mere 3 per cent of top management and 4 per cent of the board members are women. Women at the top have not yet reached an iconic status although many, notably Annika Falkengren (President and CEO of the bank SEB), Antonia Ax:son Johnson’s (owner and chairperson of the Axel Johnson AB Group) and Christina Stenbeck (chairman of Kinnevik) are soaring to this position as witnessed by their rankings on prominent international lists such as Fortune’s Global Power, Forbes list of the 100 most powerful women in the world, and the Financial Times list of powerful women in Europe.

12. Although the Christian cross soon made it on to rune-stones and churches were built, people for hundreds of years to come snuck into their secret hideouts to worship the familiar Norse gods when darkness fell on Swedish farms. Likewise, the ideas of logos and ratio promoted by the modern project over time eroded the hegemony of Christian thought, while religious beliefs were still held by the silent majority.

13. Interestingly, freedom fighters like Engelbrekt in the fifteenth century are also immortalized.


