

[SLIDE 1]

Traits of Success: Common business leadership traits among Swedes working in Singapore.

Good afternoon everyone, my name is Cheryl Marie Cordeiro, I'm a doctoral student with the Gothenburg Research Institute and the Linguistics Department, doing comparative research on Scandinavian and Asian management styles. For the moment, I'm looking into merging both linguistic and business administrative methods in my work, discovering what both frameworks and analyses might reveal about Scandinavian and Asian management styles.

I was in Singapore earlier this year in February conducting interviews with several Scandinavian, mostly Swedish top-level management people in Singapore trying to find out what makes them so good at what they do. I met with about twenty-eight people and the more I met with them, the more I saw distinct characteristics of them as a group of leaders that made a difference. After a while I began to form somewhat of a theory of who these people were, how they worked and how they thought. So this is the title of my talk today [READ TITLE]

[SLIDE 2]

Broadly speaking, I am currently right here on my research, so to discuss the findings now is premature at best, but what I can do is to share with you some observations that seem to point consistently towards this little bit of orange here, about business leadership characteristics among Swedes working in Singapore.

[SLIDE 3: WHAT IS SUCCESS]

DEFINING SUCCESS

For the context of this talk, “success” is defined as staying power rather than financial success. Staying power in terms of how one is able to function effectively for a period of time, in a foreign environment. I also believe that the financial success of the organization closely correlates to the group that has the most staying power, where they are long enough in the environment to network and get their contacts going for themselves and for the organization.

Most Swedish expatriates have a 2 1/2 to 3 year contract in Singapore, after which they can choose to extend their contracts. So success in this context would be to be able to get settled and comfortable in the new environment or if you can't get comfortable, you still need to work effectively, gain respect from your new and foreign colleagues and keep profits coming in for the organization in that tight frame of time. One Swede told me a story about his ex-colleague, also a Swede, who just couldn't stand being in Southeast-Asia in general and he had a need to travel back to Sweden every two months or he felt as if he was going insane.

I asked also if 2.5 to 3 years was enough to do a good job for the organization and some thought it was alright and others thought that perhaps a slightly longer contract term should be established since people generally spend the first year settling into the new environment and the second year concentrating on the job and the third year just when they're getting to be effective, their contract expires.

In other words, as soon as they learn how to drive on the wrong side of the road, learn how to order local food, extra chilli, no oil, less salt, and

when they can finally put some serious thought and work into the organization, they find they need to leave.

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I also use the term “business leadership traits” instead of “managerial traits” because the word “manager” from a semantic point of view, can sometimes have the connotation of a person who gets things done but not necessarily with passion. If you were to use the word “leader”, there’s a connotation of someone who is passionate, charismatic, rational etc where a whole spectrum of emotions come across in the word “leader” than in the word “manager”.

And indeed it’s mostly true because when I met them and took a tour of their offices, meeting their staff, you can see that they’ve earned an *honorary degree* for themselves from their staff and colleagues; not an easy thing to do considering the numerous cultural and language barriers that need to be overcome.

BUSINESS LEADERSHIP TRAITS

In preparation for this talk, I looked into several sources on leadership because I wanted to know what others are currently saying about leadership characteristics, and thought I’d present to you some thoughts from Danny Cox, an American author on leadership who has his background in the American Air Force. His ten points to leadership characteristics are:

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1. A high standard of personal ethics – honesty, integrity etc
2. High energy – leaders don’t get exhausted by dealing with petty issues

3. An ability to work priorities and not just set priorities
4. Courage – to take risks and accept responsibility
5. Committed, dedicated and hard-working

[SLIDE 6]

6. Innovators who shape tomorrow
7. Effective leaders are Goal Oriented and focused
8. Enthusiastic people that can inspire enthusiasm in others
9. Level-headed people who are realistic
10. Helpful – they desire to help others and create synergy in the organization

I thought about structuring this talk around the above ten characteristics of leaders but I found that I couldn't really do that since I only recognised faintly, these ten characteristic points.

What consistently foregrounded in my data and interviews is not these ten points written by Cox in abstract terms, but rather something that is surprisingly more primal, more basic.

[SLIDE 7: on MASLOW]

If we can briefly take a look at Maslow's hierarchy of needs, you'll find that leadership characteristics are often spoken of in at the level of "self actualization". But in my meetings, what repeatedly appears is the more salient theme of the physiological needs of leaders who work in Singapore and around Southeast-Asia. So leadership was spoken more in terms of this level over here [green area of Maslow's hierarchy].

But why? What makes leadership in Southeast-Asia so physiologically different from perhaps elsewhere in the world?

[SLIDE 8]

Here's an interesting abstract taken from Per Osbeck's book, printed in Stockholm in 1757, entitled "A Diary from an East India Voyage, 1752". He was a student of Carl von Linné who was by the way quite opposed to the East India trading between Sweden and the Far East. Linné was of the impression that what the Far East could offer, Sweden already had and had them better. So the East India company offered to pay Osbeck's research trip to the Far East, an example of early corporate sponsorship? And this is what he wrote about Java on p104 of his book:

[CLICK MOUSE: READ]

"There is no lack of heat here and should rather be totally unpleasant if not for the thick forests that keep the moisture after the rain where all living under the trees could have some shadow and refreshment."

Now, contrast what Osbeck says to this picture you see here of the Singapore skyline today.

[SLIDE 9: SG SKYLINE]

Well back in the 17 and 1800s, there were still rainforests around and today, most cities in Southeast-Asia have concrete jungles that replace the tropical rainforests of the centuries before. So you can imagine the environment, the heat and humidity today. Well, alright, it needn't be so bad, we do have air-conditioning to replace the cool of the rainforest leaves.

[SLIDE 10]

In an abstract from the website “makansutra.com”, Spencer Ball wrote about Singapore:

“The first few days in Singapore were a savage awakening of the senses. The heat was intense, the air thick with sounds and smells I had never imagined could exist. Bizarre perfumes penetrating deep into the subconscious like ethereal double-agents.”

So business leaders posted from Sweden to work in Southeast-Asia not only have to deal with the everyday workings of the organization and family life but they have to do it in a very different environment. I mean, being born in Southeast-Asia is different since you're acclimatized from birth, a lot of university students in Singapore for example think the air-conditioning in the lecture theatres too cold at 22 degC, they carry jackets into the lecture halls to keep warm.

[SLIDE 11]

I asked one Swedish managing director of a Swedish construction organization if he liked it in Singapore and he said:

“I prefer Gothenburg as a way of living. I mean it's too crowded here... we Swedes, we love nature. We go out, we have a walking trail in the forest, sometimes we go swimming there in some lakes, so it's a bit difficult here. We can go out to the East Coast sometimes, but it's so bloody hot also, so you can't really enjoy yourself. This is too hot. It's nice to breathe fresh air sometimes.”

Here's something similar said of another managing director for another Swedish organization:

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“The only reason to be in Asia is for working and nothing else. I never take a vacation in Asia. There's no reason to take vacation in Asia ... because there's nothing better to do.

[SLIDE 13] Here it's hot and everything, you can play golf and working that is okay, but in Sweden you can go out to the forest you can take a walk....”

So what kind of person would succeed if posted to Southeast-Asia to work? Succeed in terms of settling in and getting the job done and not quitting halfway, being fully efficient on the job... Well, for one thing they need to be prepared to be uncomfortable and still work in such an environment.

FOOD

But the climate is one thing. You'll also need to get used to the local environment and another basic aspect of the local environment is food.

The next slide comes from a picture taken at a hawker stall in Singapore that sells fish dishes.

[SLIDE 14: RAW FISH]

Now the point with these fish heads is not that they're on their way out into the trash or for a stray cat party but rather to cook it and make a delicacy out of it, this in fact

[SLIDE 15: FISH HEAD CURRY]

This is what Spencer Ball wrote on his encounter with fish head curry.

[mouse click for Spencer Ball's text. Read]

So to get an idea of how far in the Swedes were settled in Singapore, I was quite wicked and asked what they thought about the local fare and if they had any favourites.

And this next abstract is from an interview with a Swedish MD who has a *passion* for Chinese food. Not only Chinese food but he loves small local coffeeshops in Singapore and Malaysia, not big fancy Chinese restaurants.

In fact, he was so passionate about the food he found in Singapore and Malaysia in general that he spent about twenty-minutes raving about his favourite types of food and where you can go to find them. He gets frustrated when he comes back to Sweden and is unable to find authentic Chinese food.

[SLIDE 16]

“That's about my biggest problem. In my city there are three Chinese restaurants...I went into the first Chinese restaurant and asked them straight up, are you cooking Western Chinese or real Chinese. The lady said, here's the menu. When I looked at the menu I said, forget it.”

He then went on to explain how he had a heated discussion with the owner of the 3rd Chinese restaurant in his city after the owner told him that there was no market for authentic Chinese food in Sweden.

But not everybody is so enthusiastic about Southeast-Asian cooking, here's what another Swedish project manager said when I asked him how he found the food in Singapore and if he had any favourites and his answer was no, he didn't have any favourites, but

[SLIDE 17]

“Sometimes when we get too homesick, we go down to Ikea and buy some caviar for instance you know... typical Swedish things and you find sill, herrings and we eat a lot of hard bread. I just love it.”

After which like the person before, he spent about twenty minutes telling me about the history of Swedish hard bread, how it came about and where it was made, how and why it was made etc.

So this person for example comes across as rather reserved, more careful than just plunging all the way into the food and culture of the local surroundings, going all out instead to find his favourite Swedish food in Singapore.

Let's take a look at another example of a person's relation to food as a gauge to potentially settling into a foreign lifestyle. This abstract comes from a Singaporean lady, she's head of Human Resources for Asia for a Swedish bank, based in Singapore. She's been to Sweden several times now, so I asked her what she thought about Swedish food and this is what she said:

[SGE accent]

[SLIDE 18]

“Depends on what. I don't mind the meatballs, but if you asked me to survive on Swedish food, I don't think I can. I don't like herring, I don't like cheese, I'm not a cheese person. Unfortunately, the first time I got a culture shock was from this trip to Sweden. It was a leadership seminar... they gave me spinach soup, but it was cold.

[SLIDE 19]

Then I said, oh gosh, how to drink ah. But it was actually rude of me, so I tried one spoonful. Okay... thank you very much, cannot take it. The first trip I went there (Sweden), I practically ate nothing, I ate a lot of bread”

Of the 3 people just quoted, you can see that the first was extremely enthusiastic about the local culture, the second was more cautious and the third was quite averse to even trying a new type of food from a different culture.

I wanted to know if subconsciously, this had an effect on how long they have been in Southeast-Asia and whether they intended on staying in Southeast-Asia. It was little surprise to me that the first person has worked for his organization for 13 years based in Malaysia and Singapore, sometimes in Indonesia. The second person has been in Singapore for 3 years and intends on going back within the next two years, it's already planned and the third person... well, she told me not further on in the conversation that she would never consider working in Sweden or Europe.

In the course of my interviews, there were more examples of people who were more accustomed to the local life or who were genuinely interested in the local surrounding and not just being in Southeast-Asia for the job. And *they* tended to be more effective and successful business leaders because they not only possessed the more often writ about leadership characteristics but that they as individuals *wanted* to be out there in a different environment, they *wanted to* experience new things and perhaps a new way of life. They had an open mind about life in general and that things can be done differently from how they've always known, pushing beyond the comfort zone as opposed to keeping the doors closed and having made up their minds about something even before they've encountered it.

Having pre-conceived ideas, feelings and thoughts for example, closes the door even before one can go into a new environment. And how effective can a person be when working in that new environment if they can't get to terms with the basic physiological aspects of it?

“BEING ONE OF THE GUYS”

So far I've talked about the climate and the local environment in terms of food. The third most salient characteristic trait I observed among Swedes who work

in Southeast-Asia and Singapore, and the last that I will present today, is their ability to just “be one of the guys”. This is difficult in a foreign environment because it means you need to earn the friendship and trust of people from completely different cultural backgrounds than your own.

I believe the ability to just “be one of the guys” is a particularly Swedish or Scandinavian trait where Scandinavian countries work towards social equality, regardless of age, sex or social standing.

This ideology is carried through in their behaviour and thinking at work and you get this through the interviews with them when they often talk about “their colleagues” or “coworkers” instead of “their employees” even though they are referring technically to the people they have employed or recruited to be in the company.

Here’s an abstract from a Swedish Director of Sales, on how he connected with his people:

[SLIDE 20]

“...when I'm out in the factory, I normally have my white shirt and black trousers but I'm not afraid, something wrong with the machine, I'm there in the oil, and do everything and my shirt looks like hell but nevermind. So I've had comments many times from my distributor, ah look at that western guy, he was not afraid to get dirty, never happen before. I mean of course I'm there to help them, try to do my best. It's not their fault if I'm stupid enough to use a white shirt.”

Most other Swedes talk about how they partake in the local cultural festivities such as Chinese New Year, where they hand out red packets containing money and oranges as a symbol of good luck and prosperity in the upcoming year to the recipients.

CONCLUSION / LAST THOUGHT

So with that, I hope I've given some idea of the more salient and fundamental leadership characteristics that came up in my interviews among Swedes working in Singapore and Southeast-Asia.

While I can't concretely draw the success of staying power with that of increased profits for the company, I have yet to come across a Swedish MD who absolutely hated being and working in Singapore and was still successful. I have yet to come across a person who can't "take the heat", in all senses of the word – the temperature, the ultra competitive work environment, the spicy food etc – and was still successful.

Most organizations in Sweden today are looking to send young and unattached individuals to Southeast-Asia to work since they cost less to maintain overseas compared to an individual who has a family in tow. But these young and unattached individuals will need to be comfortable not only in their working life but in their social lives as well.

So to get an idea of which individuals will potentially have "staying power", they might want to first consider this picture and social setting.

[SLIDE 21]

Admittedly this is a little extreme but nevertheless it's fun and I'll leave you now with this thought and this picture of a modern day Nonya bride readying herself, all the social implications that lie behind this picture and the question – can the individuals going to Southeast-Asia see themselves working effectively in this world and reality? This picture can be found at the Peranakan Resource Library's website. Thank you.