

OPINION Governmental agencies are promoting ‘Swedish leadership’ as the country’s latest export sensation, although its unlikely to succeed, Finnish professor Alf Rehn writes.



The re-emergence of faith in management in the wake of a global crash stands as a particularly peculiar sign of our odd times. In a situation where trust in and even between corporations has plummeted to an all-time low, one might think that management is poised to be little more than the butt of nasty jokes, but all the while we are witnessing a silent re-affirmation of this most indefinable of professions. And Sweden is an excellent place to see this happening.

With the collapse of the finance sector, a downward spiral further boosted by a global slowdown and environmental uncertainty, it is of course natural that people grasp for something to believe in, and as the history of ideas teaches us, these straws are very often drawn from the same stack that caused the whole mess to begin with. Doubt in organized religion tends to generate cults and charismatics, displeasure with autocratic rule tends to create dictatorships “of the people”. So it follows that a radical upheaval in the corporate world does not create a hankering for a new way to organize the economy, but rather an ever-increasing call for “leadership” and “new ways of managing”.

In Sweden, this call is heard loud and clear. Looking at how the recession has hit Sweden, a strange and difficult to navigate picture emerges. On one hand it is clear that the country has been hard hit by the dismantling and near bankruptcy of the symbolically very important car companies Volvo and particularly Saab. Even though their importance for the country’s economy as a whole is not an issue of life or death, their symbolic standing as icons of an industrial Sweden that now may disappear forever is important in the collective psyche, so their failure stands as testament to an obvious problem for how Swedish management and leadership is viewed.

On the other hand, Sweden has so far managed much, much better than many other similar economies. It has a highly successful sector of knowledge-intensive companies, and a lively creative economy. Looking at evidence such as the success of Swedish companies in the computer games industry one could argue that Sweden is in fact actively developing into a healthy post-industrial economy. Such a combination of failures and successes is of course the perfect breeding ground for a debate regarding management and leadership — one of heroes and villains.

The call for leadership in our contemporary situation is of course primarily an issue of wanting

somebody to come along to clean up the mess that we're now seeing. The argument, simply put, is that there has been something very wrong in how corporations have been managed, and that we now need a new breed of leaders, people who will stand for transparency, ethics, green thinking and a kinder, gentler approach to capitalism. In and of itself, this seems eminently sensible. But the question is: Where are these new leaders supposed to come from? The same old schools, the same old cliques?

If you ask Sweden, at least the political class, the answer is simple. This new leadership can be found in Sweden and in Swedish companies, and the country is prepared to turn this into another export sensation like ABBA, Volvo — only sexier than the latter and less cheesy than the former.

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It might seem an odd thing to try to commoditize and market, but there is a very serious movement, backed up by government agencies, to achieve this. On one level this makes a lot of sense. Sweden still has a good overall brand in the world as a country that stands for equality, sustainability and a sensible work-life balance. Sweden has a history of underdog companies that go on to becoming global powerhouses — like IKEA and Hennes&Mauritz. And due to this, Sweden has had its fair share of world-class leaders.

Still, the leap from this to claiming that there is a particular “Swedish management” that might even be exported, which The Swedish Governmental Agency for Innovation Systems has done, is enormous. Most people will agree that better leadership would be a good thing, but that a general model could be traced to a specific culture and socio-economic context seems like a strange thing to say in this fluid, post-industrial age. Still, the claim makes a lot more sense if we see it in the context of the radical economic changes that Sweden is undergoing.

Like many countries, this one needs to come to grips with a sweeping change in its economic infrastructure, further complicated by a difficult-to-manage tradition of an exceptional social support system, universal health care and all the other bonuses of the Swedish welfare model. In such a situation, it is quite natural to grasp at the things that are at hand, such as the model of management, and through a show of faith hope that something spectacularly new can be salvaged out of the mess of the old. Whether it will succeed, in Sweden or elsewhere, only time will tell.

Oh and yes, Sweden does have such a weird, wonderful and worrying thing as a governmental agency for innovation, however insane that might seem... But we'll look at that in another

“Swedish leadership a doubtful export hit”

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