

INTERVIEW

You can't ignore stakeholder management – and don't come here in October!

British Nick Adams is Vice President & Strategic Consulting Director at the Reputation Institute and former Global Communications Manager of Danish Novo Nordisk, a leading global company in diabetes care. In 2004-2016, while at Novo, he led three departments focusing on branding and communication. Nick Adams moved to Sweden in 1996 and joined Novo Nordisk via jobs in Swedish and Danish advertising agencies where he worked mainly in Health Care. He lives in Sweden but works in Denmark.

What did you know about Scandinavia before moving here?

Not much except for the general stereotypes: snow, cold, ice, large forests. Scandinavia was not as much in the limelight back then. My knowledge of Scandinavia was very limited.

What are the biggest differences between working in British and Scandinavian organizations?

Management and leadership. And I would differentiate between Swedish and Danish leadership. The British and Danish are much closer to each other than the British and Swedish. In Sweden they make decisions. But then again, they don't. Because it can emerge that another meeting has been held on the subject, people have chatted in the corridors and the decision you thought was firm turns out not to have been a clear decision after all. So, we always end up holding another meeting in Sweden. I found that very frustrating initially.

In Denmark, people are more straightforward about what they mean. And once a decision has been made, it's made. That doesn't mean decisions can't be revised. Novo Nordisk has a strong debating culture and a willingness to share with each other, but generally speaking, in Denmark people say what is top of mind for them. And we make decisions and get things moving. That suits my British background better than the Swedish way.

What is most difficult to understand in a Scandinavian organization?

That you discuss and share so much. I can see how people around me, outsiders like me, struggle with it and are confused when their superiors directly suggest that you share your ideas on how to solve a task with a colleague. Your colleagues ask how projects are going and what progress is being made. That surprises many people from outside: "Why are you asking me how the task is going? I'm doing my job, aren't I?"

I think it stems from a Scandinavian work ethic that is about "together, we're stronger" and have more power if we can play ball and bounce ideas off each other. Here there's an overriding ethical faith that two heads are better than one. A very large aspect of the Scandinavian work culture is

about sharing, discussing, and processing together. From a British perspective, it's strange. In England, we present our ideas to other people when they are ready, when we've solved the task ourselves.

It can be tough joining a culture where you're expected to share your knowledge. It's a learning process for people who haven't grown up in that culture.

How would you describe the social tone in Scandinavian companies?

The work culture here is very strong. Work in Scandinavia can be very business and that's it! The atmosphere at work is certainly characterized by humor and a sociable tone, but if you want real social interaction, you must book it in the calendar.

In England, someone always says: "Well, we could always just pop into the pub after work for a drink." In Scandinavia, we're at work – and we've allocated Friday evening in the calendar for social activities. From a British viewpoint, you can meet colleagues at the pub from Monday to Friday.

How do you see the relationship between management and employees?

Employees are probably not as scared of their bosses as they are in the UK, where it's much easier to lay people off than in Scandinavia, especially in Sweden. This reflects a slight loss of power for a boss. In Scandinavia, respect for superiors is linked to them bringing something to the table that makes you a better employee, a better person.

My job gives me the opportunity to study leader types in many other cultures, for example in the US, where it can be difficult to recognize the person hiding behind the fantastic CV. That kind of thing doesn't work in Scandinavia. I haven't met many Scandinavian leaders who have become leaders without being good leaders.

What surprised you most when you settled in Scandinavia?

The silence! The winter. Not the cold but the silence, especially in winter. I still joke about it every year in October: "Wave goodbye to your neighbours now – you won't see them again until March."

In Scandinavia, people disappear in winter. You hibernate in your houses and no one sees you again until spring, when you start pottering about in the garden. In the UK, we are very good at dealing with winter. Some of my best experiences with my colleagues in the UK involved: "OK, let's go down the pub and beat the winter blues!" It surprised me that you like to be left in peace in Scandinavia in winter.

One of my former colleagues, a Brit who has worked all over the world, came from a job in South America to work and live in Malmö. He came at the beginning of October and the poor man was totally floored. He came alone as the autumn set in when everything shuts down. He left again after spending months trying to get to know people. I kept telling him: "Wait until summer and they'll all come out! Then it'll be party time!" If he'd come in April or May, he would have loved the place and been prepared for winter.

I'm not asking Scandinavians to be more open. But there is a huge difference in mentality here in the summer and winter. And I can see how people from other countries struggle with the tendency to retreat from the dark and hibernate indoors for the winter. I have explained this to my new neighbour, who is Australian, and who arrived in September: "You came at the wrong time, mate!" I don't know if anything can be done about it, but non-Scandinavians should be aware of it.

What is most annoying about the culture in a Scandinavian organization?

That decisions are not always made, even when you think they are. It's so frustrating, viewed from the British approach: When a decision has been made, we move forward. Here you move, too. And then you realize that people are not on board after all. Some processes are very lengthy.

Several years ago, we had a global diabetes conference in Copenhagen that coincided with a major Novo Nordisk campaign at Copenhagen Airport. I was in charge of designing the campaign and I set up all the relevant groups and committees. Everyone had opinions! And even though it was a very good process, we were very close to the deadline when some new opinions cropped up. I solved that by convening a meeting with my two superiors and telling them straight out: "I've heard an awful lot now and it can't continue. We must make a decision now and I think we should do this. I need you to say what you think about that." That's how it was. And some people were cross about that. They felt they hadn't been heard. I had heard their views – but just chose to base my actions on something else.

Stakeholder management is incredibly important in Scandinavia. The most important thing for people here is to be heard. That can work to a certain extent. But there is a limit. Getting things through the system in Scandinavia can be a very long process.

I'm not saying it's bad because you get a lot of input, but the meeting culture in Scandinavia is very strong. I'm still surprised when I arrive at a meeting and think: "Why are there so many people in this room? Why are ten people here when only three will be making a decision?"

Sometimes I tell people that one person too many in a meeting room is one person not doing his job. There is a tendency to think you can take part in everything here. The meeting culture and CC culture with emails can drive me crazy!

Have you noticed there is always a Scandinavian solution to all the world's problems?

Yes, and that is really being tested now with refugee crises and migration. The Scandinavian welfare model is a combination of the best from all the countries, an excellent model, but is the model future-proof? I'm not sure. What Scandinavia is most proud of in relation to its openness is really being tested at the moment. Perhaps they are a bit naive, but the Scandinavian notions of openness and democracy are also beautiful. They help make Scandinavia special, and I see that people here are still proud of being Scandinavian.

Your best advice for people coming from outside to live and work in Scandinavia?

Come in the summer! And be ready for stakeholder management – everywhere ... left, right and center.

Make sure people are heard and give them recognition for their successes. Involvement is a very large part of the Scandinavian work culture, and it must be an integral aspect of how you work. But it takes time. All outsiders notice the number of meetings required to get things moving here. You may well arrive with grand ideas – but you'll have to meet 50 people before you can get to implement them. Be patient.