



Forum for talere

September 2007

Colin Moon

Are Swedes really *that* normal?

To communicate effectively cross-culturally the first thing you need to realise is that someone somewhere in the world probably sees you as really quite strange.

That may be difficult for some Swedes to swallow. How could anybody in their right mind consider normal, efficient, level-headed Swedes as strange?

Of course we are normal!

After all, the Swedish starting point is 'we are normal'. Indeed, Swedes have a tendency to think they are a little more normal than others. They believe they are quite sensible, and logical. They are often unaware that the rest of us, their international business partners, may have a different opinion. We think they are amusing, entertaining and, at times, really quite odd.

Take business life for example. Swedes attend meetings. Lots of them. Three things in Sweden are certain: death, taxes and more meetings.

Mötet gick bra

When Swedes say '*Mötet gick bra*' (*the meeting went well*) what exactly do they mean? There were heated discussions? The meeting went on for ages? The incredible number of decisions that were taken? I doubt it.



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meeting is to produce decisions. Swedish meetings, on the other hand, are held to find out whether or not you are at the meeting to decide when the meeting will be to decide when you will meet to talk about what happened at your meeting.

Swedish meetings are short but many. They are arranged to give Bengan, Maggan, and Lasse a chance to say what they think. If you want to reach a decision then you'll have to arrange another meeting because in the meantime Bengan, Maggan and Lasse have to go back to the office and ask Ninni, Kicki and Titti (yes, there are girls of that name) what they think.

Process

This, in Swedish, is called the *förankringsprocess*. If Swedes mention the word 'process' then it's better not be in a hurry. There's a process for everything. This one means getting everybody involved in everything.

Everyone voices an opinion and everyone listens. Then they compromise. The word compromise is music to a Swede's ears. Everybody gets something. Not too much and not too little. Nobody wins and nobody loses. They may agree to disagree but what they will agree on is the exact time and date of the next meeting.

Agenda

Swedes stick to the agenda. They tick off each point after everybody has taken turns discussing it. They have to move quickly through the agenda as they all have another meeting planned ten minutes after this one has finished. They intensely dislike the last point on the agenda which is *övriga frågor*, 'any other business'. No self-respecting Swede wants to be guilty of causing the meeting to run over time. There is a distinct danger that 'any other business' could drag on and flexibility is not a Swedish strong point.

Decision time

Swedes rarely say yes or no. This means that instead of saying ja or nej they say nja which means 'yes-but-no-but-yes-but'. You see, saying 'yes' or 'no' can lead to conflict



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so Swedes avoid these words and replace them with 'it depends', 'maybe' and 'I'll see what I can do'.

Foreigners may get heated, irritated or even angry. Swedes call this hysterical behaviour. Hysteria is abnormal and uncomfortable and should preferably not occur in office hours. If, on the other hand, a Swede ever tells you to go a place called 'hellsicke', then, take my word for it, you've upset him.

You may wonder how on earth they ever make a decision. Business Swedes themselves have sometimes called this *beslutsimpotens* – which, I suppose, means not having the balls to decide one way or another.

Milk and no sugar

Someone once said that if the Swedes gave up their coffee breaks they could retire five years earlier. Coffee is an integral part of any meeting, either as an on-going self-service affair during the discussions or as a separate break. The coffee break is not to be confused with the briefer, more frequent leg-stretcher. Or 'bone-stretcher' as they sometimes call it. The Swedish word for leg and bone is the same.

Work/life balance

Most Swedes are dedicated to finding a healthy work-life balance. They might say they work hard; it's just that they are not often at work to do it.

Look in a Swedish diary and you may get the impression that no one in this country is ever at work. Try to get hold of someone on a Friday afternoon and this will be confirmed. Swedes will start to ask you about your plans for the coming weekend as early as Wednesday afternoon. By Friday lunchtime they have mentally *gått för dagen* 'left for the day'.

Red days

The Swedes have a fair share of public holidays. In a good year they take as many days off in May and June as most Americans take in a year. And they still have their five weeks vacation to take out when it suits them. Not only do they have 'red days' as the Swedes call their official holi-



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days, but they may be given half the day off before, just to get them into the holiday mood.

If they've planned it well they can take out a *klämdag* or two, which are odd days between a holiday and the weekend. Come May, June, July the weekends and public holidays more or less combine into one long vacation with the occasional day at the office.

However, fair's fair - when they're at work they're very effective. But not before 8.30 as they have flexi-time, and not after 4 pm, thank you, as they have to pick up the kids from play school, and not after 2 pm on Fridays, if you don't mind, and preferably not between 1 May and 10 August.

So, there you are Swedes. A short, sharp lesson in how to realise that you are not quite as normal as you think you are.

And thank goodness for that.