



**LUNDS**  
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**Captain of leadership**  
**How to cross international waters**  
**-A qualitative study of cross-cultural leadership**

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## **Abstract**

The theoretical framework of the present study was the GLOBE study, Hofstede's four dimensions and Sveningsson's and Alvesson's approach to leadership. The purpose was to examine the personal experience of Swedish leaders. The focus was on the influence of cultural factors on the leadership when the leaders worked with a foreign team. Six Swedish leaders who had been working with foreign teams in USA, India, Germany, Denmark and China were interviewed. Thematic analysis was used. Results showed five themes in the leaders' stories, "Claiming and gaining trust, Offering and accepting independence, Identification with the role as leader, Private and work-relations and The need to communicate". Leaders experienced that employees in the different countries all preferred an assertive leadership, whereas the Swedish leaders preferred to practice a leadership based on an informal and coaching role that leaves space for own initiatives. In conclusion cultural difficulties appeared mainly when the leaders wanted to show that they trusted the employees by giving them freedom in their work while the employees refused to reciprocate this trust by not accepting the additional space. Need for assertiveness summarizes the most prominent cultural difference, and the one that the leaders found hardest to overcome.

Keywords: culture, Swedish leadership, thematic analysis, cross-cultural leadership.

## **Referat**

Det teoretiska ramverket för studie var GLOBE-studien, Hofstedes fyra dimensioner och Sveningssons och Alvessons förhållningssätt till ledarskap. Syftet var att undersöka den personliga upplevelsen hos Svenska ledare. Fokus var på hur kulturella faktorer påverkade ledarskapet när ledarna arbetade med ett utländskt team. Sex svenska ledare som hade arbetat med utländska team i USA, Indien, Tyskland, Danmark och Kina intervjuades. Tematisk analys användes för att analysera resultaten. Resultaten visade fem teman i ledarnas berättelser, "Att begära och få förtroende, Erbjudna och acceptera oberoende, Identifikation med rollen som ledare, Privat- och jobb-relationer, och Behovet att kommunicera". Deltagande ledare upplevde att alla medarbetare i de olika länderna föredrog ett bestämt ledarskap, medan ledarna föredrog att praktisera ett ledarskap baserat på en informell och stöttande roll som lämnar plats för egna initiativ. Sammanfattningsvis förekom kulturella skillnader främst när ledarna ville visa att de litade på medarbetarna genom att ge dem mer frihet i arbetet, medan medarbetarna tackade nej till förtroendet genom att inte acceptera lösare tyglar. Behovet av bestämdhet summerar den främsta kulturskillnaden, och var den som svenska ledare hade svårast att överbrygga.

Sökord: Kultur, svenskt ledarskap, tematisk analys, tvärkulturellt ledarskap.

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## Introduction

The need for global leaders is ever increasing as the business world is now a global one and companies expand into multiple countries. To be competitive, organizations need global leaders who understand the individual cultural values of the countries within which they operate (Hofstede, 1982). Even though the globalization is creating many benefits for companies, it also creates new challenges. A survey that investigated the Fortune 500, showed that the most important factor in running a successful global company is having a competent global leader. The same survey also showed that 85 % of executives reported not to have enough global leaders, and over 65 % proclaimed that their current leaders needed more cultural skills and awareness in order to meet key requirements. These high percentages are slightly alarming as trade between nations is expected to exceed the transactions within nations before this century is over. In other words, global leaders are the key to successful global business (Javidan & House, 2001), and companies need to adapt to this as fast as possible.

Experts on global business agree conclusively that the key to be successful in business globalization is that the leaders learn to understand and adapt to how other cultures do what they do, and why, even if that might differ dramatically from what the leaders are accustomed to (Javidan & House, 2001). This raises the question of how the leaders are supposed to learn how to be global. Two of the most recognized studies in culture and global leadership are the one conducted by Hofstede (1982) and the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavioral Effectiveness (GLOBE) (House, 2004) research project.

Hofstede (1982) investigated managers in 40 countries to find out whether there was an existing system for cultural factors and whether those were solid over time. His results showed four dimensions: individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity/ femininity. His results pointed to the fact that the dimensions were not only found in all of the researched cultures, but they also showed significant correlations with demographic, political, economic and geographical indicators. Minkov and Hofstede (2012) later added a fifth dimension and hence completed the work with help of the results that Bond, Akhtar, Ball, Bhanthumnavin, and Boski (1987) found.

The Globe Research project later continued to expand the research in culture and focused on how it manifests in leadership. They concluded, as Hofstede had, that organization managers could be considered a prototypical member of a society (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, &

Gupta, 2004). The GLOBE study has investigated leadership in 61 countries around the world, and defines culture as shared motives, values, beliefs, identities and practices that are the most common in a particular society (House et al., 2004). According to GLOBE, Swedes are very keen on not being too competitive at work. They prefer a relaxed relationship with their boss and do not like to take a dominant position. Swedes are in fact the most anti-dominant people globally (Koopman, Hartog, Konrad, & al., 1999). Leadership can, according to Yukl (1989), be described as having the influence to make a group attain a certain goal. However, influence stands in right proportion to which extent the followers perceive the person as a leader. This is based on the theory that we choose our leaders based on how well they fit the prototype for the group (Hogg, 2001). Sveningsson and Blom (2011) further argue that they refer to this type of leader as “the equal/ one of the guys”. The leader fits the group values and does not stand out to the other members. He or she embodies what the socio-cultural group regards as good leadership and creates trust and identification. This type of leadership that almost merges with the group increases the leader’s ability to represent the group as a leader. According to Holmberg & Åkerblom (2006), there is a specific norm for what a Swedish leader is like, and this influences the practice of leadership in foreign teams. Hogg (2001) also argues that Swedish leaders are best suited to a country that matches these prerequisites, especially in the dominance-spectra, or assertiveness, as it is also called.

However, Swedish leaders are sent not only to our assumed culturally close Nordic countries but all across the world. Although the Nordic countries are the most common for Swedish leaders to work within, China, the USA, Germany and India are places to where Swedish companies expand and hence need leaders to run the foreign teams. All of these countries present a completely different cultural context to the one that Swedish leaders are used to. As many other leaders across the world, the Swedish leaders face the challenge to operate in a context of multi-cultural complexity. (Holt & Seki, 2012) The problem is that the leadership is rarely practised, the actual person called the leader has very little effect alone. Instead, there are many different forces that influence the decisions that are taken, such as the board, the culture and the followers’ response to the leadership. The leadership is therefore rather created in the actual context where it is supposed to take place (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012).

According to Alvesson & Sveningsson (2012) there is not only the person carrying out leadership, but first and foremost it's the context that produces the regulatory ideals for what

leadership is supposed to be, to which the individuals adapt, vary and improvise. This means that a key source of leadership is the cultural context, consisting of the templates, assumptions and norms made by the both the group, the individual and the actual industry. In this study, I will therefore consider leadership as something that is pursued within this context.

Cross cultural management is now considered popular topics in academic research (Nguyen, Umemoto, 2009). Previous research of leadership and how it develops within a context show that there are certain prerequisites that can damage or facilitate a successful collaboration in a new country. But the focus is still on the process of the leadership, not on the individual leaders. What is missing is a closer study into how GLOBE and similar cultural and contextual leadership research compares to what is actually practiced within leadership in a foreign context, not only within the leaders' home country. For example, effectiveness in corporate governance practice is determined by cultural factors and can be explained by Hofstede's cultural dimensions (Cheung, Chan, 2012).

There is a need to investigate the possibility that there are different ways to research leadership, more than just in terms of skills, techniques and personality traits. Today's research of cultural leadership could benefit from a qualitative angle that emphasizes the personal experience of the person carrying out the leadership (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012). Hence, this study hope to contribute to the Swedish part of research on cross-cultural leadership by interviewing six different leaders about what it is like to be a leader in a foreign culture and what that context does to their leadership.

# Theory

## Hofstede's dimensions

*Hofstede (1982) writes: The nature of management skills is such that they are culturally specific: a management technique or philosophy that is appropriate in one national culture is not necessarily appropriate in another ( p.81).*

In the early 1980's Hofstede (1982) provided a theory about cultural consequences in his theoretically-based, four dimensions model of national cultures. Hofstede's book (Hofstede, 1982) Culture's consequences consist of cross-cultural studies from 40 countries, where data was collected both in 1968 and in 1972. These gathered data from over 116.000 questionnaires answered by employees of a large multinational company. During his research he did not include China in the results. Hofstede's four dimensions were; individualism versus collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and finally masculinity versus femininity (see Table 1).

The first dimension, Individualism/Collectivism, refers to if a society generally has loose or strong relations, and if members rely on others. The second dimension is Power Distance, which refers to what extent a society accepts that power is distributed unequally. The third dimension is Uncertainty Avoidance, which addresses to what degree a society accepts and prepares for an unexpected future. The fourth dimension is Masculinity vs Femininity, which refers to whether the society strives for “soft” goals such as those built on relations and care of others (feminine) or if it is more focused on “hard” goals such as profit and power (Hofstede, 1982).

Hofstede also added a fifth dimension called long- and short-term orientation, LTO, in 1991 (Hofstede, 1991). Hofstede adopted the dimension, originally discovered by Bond et al., (1987) through investigation into 22 countries with Chinese Value System (CVS). Bond called the dimension Confucius Work Dynamics. CVS turned out to correlate with nationality growth and hence Hofstede decided to make it his fifth dimension and renamed it LTO. The dimension mainly addresses matters of pride, religion and honor and is especially prominent in East-Asian countries (Bond et al., 2004). Hofstede found that the dimension correlated with national educational success, especially in mathematics, as well as economic growth from 1985-1995 (Minkov & Hofstede, 2012).



**Table 1.** Hofstede's four dimensions. Five countries in the ranking of 40 societies (Hofstede, 1982).

<b>Dimensions</b>	Sweden	USA	Denmark	Germany	India
Individualism/ collectivism	10	1	9	15	21
Power distance	6	9	3	11	37
Uncertainty avoidance	3	9	1	20	7
Masculinity/ femininity	1	27	4	31	21

High rank= 1, Low rank=40

Individualism/collectivism: higher ranking indicate more individualism, Power distance: Higher ranking indicate lower power distance, Uncertainty avoidance: Higher ranking indicate more uncertainty avoidance, Masculinity/femininity: Higher ranking indicate a more feminine culture.

Hofstede (1982) claims that humans are programmed with values and culture. This programming rule our behavior and can be passed down from birth, or learned when we are young, when the mind is still “empty” of previous programs. As an example, he mentions the American people, who, in spite of their multitude of genetic roots, can still very easily be distinguished from a non-American in terms of how they behave, and what values and norms they project. Hofstede also claims that organizations, groups and societies have a very potent way of passing on collective mental programs, or social norms, that can easily be underestimated. Social institutions such as educational system, politics, family and the country’s laws, reinforce these norms.

Hofstede (1991) considers the culture to be like the layers of an onion. The first and outer layer consists of “symbols”. These are easy recognizable for those who share the culture and can be observed. Examples of these are hairstyles, language, expressions, status symbols and flags. The second layer is “heroes”, people who works as a role model in a certain culture. These possess characteristics that are highly appreciated in the culture and hence work as a role model in terms of behavior. This does not have to be an actual person, but might as well be a cartoon, such as Batman in the US, Asterix in France or Pippi Longstocking in Sweden. The third layer is “rituals”, actions that serves a mostly ritual purposes but that still are an important part of the culture. This relates to manners within a culture, for example greetings, paying respect to others, and social or religious procedures. The fourth and last and most inner layer is “values”. The

previous three layers are observable and carried out and therefore referred to as practices. Values, on the other hand, are more deeply set and hence harder to grasp.

Hofstede (2007) defines values as the general preference for a certain state of something over another. For example, we have values such as what is moral and immoral, dirty or clean, irrational and rational, how a society defines these values can be very different. The values in a society form social norms, which shape parts of the collective programming of that particular society. The management of companies in the culture is hence subject to the values in that specific culture. Values may differ between different societies, but they appear to be very stable within the society over time. This is the reason behind why Hofstede claims that management, as a part of culture, is different if you look at the difference between societies, but is stable over time in a particular society, such as Sweden. Finally, Hofstede proposes that leaders need to have more cultural sensitivity, which he defines as:

*Hofstede (1982) writes: "Cultural sensitivity means understanding the mentality of others, but it means, even more, understanding our own mentality as it comes across to others." (p.48)*

## **The GLOBE Study**

The central position in GLOBE was that 1) the things that distinguished the culture from another is displayed in the organizations as well, and 2) the behaviors and attributes showed by leaders in the organizations is considered the most accepted in the specific culture (House et al., 2004).

GLOBE, led by Robert House as the principal investigator, consists of 150 scientists who have been exploring societal culture, leadership and organizational culture from 18 000 middle managers from 951 organizations in 62 countries around the world (Javidan & House, 2001). The results of the GLOBE project correlate with the previous findings from Hofstede (Leung et al., 2005), but the GLOBE study adds a more complex and bigger picture with its nine dimensions (see Table 2). Thanks to the extensive data that includes not only questionnaires, but also research focus groups, interviews and analysis of media, GLOBE provided a complex analysis of culture and leadership.

**Table 2.** The GLOBE dimensions (Javidan & House, 2001)

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
Assertiveness	How much the society encourages people to be outspoken and dominant versus modest or tender. High score: the US.
Future orientation	Planning for the future and investing in the same. High score: Singapore and Switzerland. Low: Italy and Russia.
Gender Egalitarianism	How countries take into consideration the role of gender, for example gender differential practice meaning in that women have a higher status in decision-making. Low: Denmark
Uncertainty avoidance	How the society rely on procedures and social norms to alleviate the unpredictable future. High: Sweden
Power distance	If power is to be unequally shared or not. Low power distance equals that less noticeability between those with power and those without. Low: Denmark
Social institutional collectivism	How much the society encourages individuals to be part of social economic processes and groups for example child-care institutions for working parents. High: Sweden
In-group collectivism	How much people take pride in their families and close friends but also in their employing organization. High: China
Performance orientation	Defines how much a society reward group members' performance, competitiveness and effort. High: Germany
Humane orientation	Refers to being fair, altruistic and kind to others, paternalistic relationships are highly valued High: Malaysia and Ireland.

*Assertiveness.* Assertiveness is the extent to which a society encourages people to be tough, confrontational, assertive and competitive, versus modest and sensitive. Societies high in assertiveness such as the US and Germany tend to value competition and have sympathy with the strong. Societies low in assertiveness such as Sweden and New Zealand value a warm social climate and sympathies with the weak and emphasize loyalty and tenderness (House et al., 2004; Javidan & House, 2001)

*Future orientation.* This dimension refers to the extent to which a society encourages and rewards future-oriented behaviors such as planning, investing in the future, and delaying gratification. Examples of countries high in future orientation are Switzerland and Denmark. They generally postpone gratification and plan ahead for the future. Countries with lower future orientation are for example Italy and Russia, who reach for shorter goals (House et al., 2004; Javidan & House, 2001).

*Gender egalitarianism.* Gender egalitarianism is in the article by Javidan and House (Javidan & House, 2001) called Gender differentiation, but was later re-named Gender egalitarianism when the study was published (House et al, 2004). It refers to the extent to which a

society maximizes gender role differences. In countries such as Denmark and Sweden, women tend to have higher status and are given more power in decisions. Women also represent a larger percentage of the labor force. Countries such as India and China are among the lowest on gender egalitarianism. Generally men are found to have higher social status, better education and higher positions than women (House et al., 2004; Javidan & House, 2001).

*Uncertainty avoidance.* This dimension refers to how the members of the society seek order, follow rules and aim for security in their everyday lives. Sweden, Denmark and Germany are high on Uncertainty avoidance, and answer to structure, straight procedures and a structured lifestyle, whereas societies such as Greece and Russia are quite the opposite and gladly bear the uncertainty and generally do not follow rules or procedures (House et al., 2004; Javidan & House, 2001).

*Power distance.* Power distance defines to what extent people try to maintain an unequal society and mark the difference between those with higher and lower power, status or wealth. The need to seek and maintain prestige and material possessions are other things that mark power distance. Among the lowest on power distance we find Netherlands and Denmark, where Russia and Spain proves to be high on the dimension (House et al., 2004; Javidan & House, 2001).

*Social institutional collectivism.* This dimension refers to the extent to which members are encouraged by society to participate in group activities within society. Public organizations and institutions emphasize this by introducing and economically supporting activities and membership that contribute to the sense of belonging in a group or society, such as child care for working parents, senior citizen programs or non-profit student organizations. In these societies, the group is more important than the individual. Decisions are often made by groups instead of individuals. The companies also look to the best interests for the employee. Germans tend to value individualism whereas Sweden and Denmark are found in the most collective ranks, where people in the culture prefer to be equals and work as a group rather than to work alone towards individual goals. The US is found in the middle sector (House et al., 2004; Javidan & House, 2001).

*In-group collectivism.* This refers to how the members take pride in being a part of their small circles, such as their close friends, family and workplace. Societies high on this dimension tend to take pride in their organization where they work. India and China are examples of the highest on In-group collectivism, as they value family and close friends very highly. It is not

uncommon in these societies to recommend a close friend or relative for a position at the company, if that is an option. In contrast, Sweden and Denmark do not bend rules or care extra for close friends and family in work-related matters, nor do they expect to be treated differently. House points out that Sweden is unusual in having such a high score on collectivism and among the lowest on in-group collectivism. Swedes have extraordinary high taxes, to pay for the struggle to belong in a context, but still Sweden have the largest number of single households in the world, compared to the population (House et al., 2004; Javidan & House, 2001).

*Performance orientation.* The members approve of a can-do-attitude and reward initiatives and effort. They prefer direct communication and to have things done as soon as possible. They value performance and continual education. The US are in the top, whereas Russia and Greece score among the lowest. They do not approve of feedback and avoid situations where performance is valued (House et al., 2004; Javidan & House, 2001).

*Humane orientation.* This indicates to which degree a society encourages its member to be kind, altruistic and rewarding to others. Human relations, sympathy and support are highly valued. Ireland and Malaysia are found to be the most Human Oriented, Germany and France among the least. In these societies, power and material possessions motivate people, who in turn are supposed to solve their own problems. Sweden and the US turn up in the middle-sector (House et al., 2004; Javidan & House, 2001).

## **Definition of leadership and culture**

Culture is, according to Hofstede, “*collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another*” (Hofstede, 1982, p. 21).

According to the GLOBE research team (House et al., 2004), societal culture usually refers to the commonality of language, ideological beliefs (including religion and politics), ethnic heritage and history. For the purpose of the Globe study, this is divided into two categories: a) the commonality (agreement) of the members about said indicators and b) the commonality of practices that manifest these, such as schools, families, economic systems and work organizations. Measurements are made by response to questions that apply to “what is” (practices) (see Table 3) and “what should be” (values). In Table 3, only the countries that apply to the present study are included.

*Leadership*; Yukl argues that the numerous definitions of leadership that have been proposed have nothing else but the title “leadership” in common (Yukl, 1989). In his article, Yukl explains what different leadership theories there are at the time of publishing of his work, theories that are still valid but none the less, very different. He argues that one of the many controversies in the concept of leadership is if that there really is such a thing as leadership as a concept. There are two different arguments on this. The first explains leadership in terms of having influence over others and making the followers want to follow. The leadership emerges in the interaction with others and in the context where it is practiced. Leadership is hence something that emerges in the process. A leader who has to force her followers is no leader according to this perspective. The second argument focuses on the sole leader, here, the group needs differentiated roles and the leadership role cannot be shared without jeopardizing the future of the group. He concludes with that leadership can be defined as the process in how a leader influences other towards a specific group goal (Yukl, 1989). Recently, most of the research regarding leadership has focused around it as an interactive process, something that is impinged upon others and how they respond to it.

**Table 3** GLOBE ranking of practices among the 61 countries. Ranking from 1 (high) to 61 (low). Practices refer to “As is” (House et al., 2004)

	<b>PO</b>	<b>FO</b>	<b>GE</b>	<b>AS</b>	<b>IC</b>	<b>PD</b>	<b>HO</b>	<b>UA</b>	<b>SC</b>
<b>Sweden</b>	48	8	9	61	60	51	28	2	1
<b>USA</b>	11	16	33	11	51	49	26	30	32
<b>Denmark</b>	25	7	6	49	61	61	14	4	6
<b>Germany</b>	22	12	44	10	55	29	61	5	54
<b>China</b>	13	34	48	51	9	41	17	10	7
<b>India</b>	23	14	50	53	4	16	10	29	26

PO: Performance orientation, FO: Future orientation, GE: Gender egalitarianism, AS: Assertiveness, IC: In-group collectivism, PD: Power distance, HO: Humane orientation, UA: Uncertainty avoidance, SC: Social collectivism. Higher ranking (lower number) indicate greater expression of that dimension in the culture.

In summary, U.S. is in the highest sector on the dimension assertiveness and performance orientation. In the other dimensions they are found at the middle segment. Germany has got among the highest rankings on assertiveness and uncertainty avoidance, but the lowest rating on humane orientation. Sweden is found to be among the highest on uncertainty avoidance and institutional collectivism, but among the lowest on assertiveness, family collectivism and gender differentiation. Sweden is in the middle on both performance and humane orientation (see Table 3).

A fundamental concept in GLOBE is the Cultural endorsed Leadership Theory (CLT). According to the CLT-theory, individuals have certain assumptions, prejudice and values concerning the concept of leadership and how people in the culture distinguish an effective leader from an ineffective one. The hypothesis that the GLOBE research team wanted to examine was if the societal culture impacted on the CLT, and if it influenced the leadership behavior. They came to the conclusion that there is a connection between culture and CLT. They also noticed that CLT influence leaders attributes and behavior. Finally, there was a linkage between how well the leaders attributes and behavior matched the CLT. The better the match, the more likely that the leader acceptance and the effectiveness is potent (House et al., 2004). Sveningsson & Alvesson's (2010) work is based upon Social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) that explains how people understand themselves and identify with different groups. When talking about organizations, the company or the own unit might be an important source of identification. The individual might consider her or himself as being an employee of a specific organization or as a member of a certain team. But one can also emphasize nationality, gender or ethnicity when introducing oneself to others (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2010).

Sveningsson & Alvesson (2010) explain that for some individuals profession might be a central identity. Physicians and university teachers can consider the professional group or scientific community as a way more important source of norm and identity than the organization at which they happen to be employed. According to Sveningsson & Alvesson, it can lead to an "us and them"- way of thinking, often in a way that strengthens the feeling of being of a specific nature and feeling superior. Social identities often have a set of qualities that might regulate how we think and potentially even feel and respond towards others.

When attracted to a group and feeling like a part of it, humans consequently seek what are the special characteristics for it, to be able to modify the behavior to fit and to exaggerate the feeling of inclusiveness. When looking for the prototypical behaviors, it is most common to look to the leader of the group. Hence, as previously stated by House et al., (2004), the group chooses the most representative in terms of attributes and behaviors, to be the leader.

If prototypical attributes such as gender, language, clothes, attitudes and values are an important source to identification for the members of the organization, it might be hard for people that do not match those criteria to be seen as and chosen to be the leader of the organization (Jackson & Parry, 2008, referred to in Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2010).

As recognized by many social scientists, media plays an important part in the shaping of views of social phenomena, and leadership is no exception (Holmberg & Åkerblom, 2001). If the definition of culture is accepted as the experience common to its members, such as history, language, political and economic realities, religion etc. (Holmberg & Åkerblom, 2006; House et al., 2004), media regulates what is considered “Swedish leadership” to a large extent, since media provides what society uses as it’s most common frame of reference.

Since media displays guidelines on what successful leadership is and what a good leader is like, the Swedish leaders incorporate these assumptions and expectations and make up their own mind of what a good Swedish leader is and how organizations operate or should operate (Holmberg & Åkerblom, 2001).

According to Edström and Jönsson (1998), managers demonstrate their trust in their co-workers by leaving them enough space to figure things out by themselves. Swedish leadership is imprecise and vague, but it is built upon a common understanding of the problem. The downside is that if the information is misread or lost, the team might go on working on projects that in reality are unwanted or simply wrong (Holmberg & Åkerblom, 2001).

The GLOBE research project showed that the line between public and private life is emphasized in Sweden whereas in other countries the two are inseparable. Independence and solitude are thought to be important for the Swedish people in general (Daun, 1998; Holmberg & Åkerblom, 2001). Hence, Swedes are mainly individualists in their private time, but collectivists in the public areas, what is referred to as “the socially concerned individualist”. Swedes love their coffee breaks but get a bit stressed if they don't get to go home on time. The line between office



and home should never be crossed and after-work is mainly an opportunity for networking for the young professionals, not mandatory as in other parts of the world (Daun, 1998).

According to Daun (1998) the Swedes are also a very consensus-concerned population. It is important that everyone is in agreement. The development of the consensus-culture is according to Daun thanks to the unusual homogeneity of the Swedish population. The major part of Sweden share the same history, language, religion, and the difference between the groups are relatively small. It is important to keep in mind that this is many years ago. Today, the Swedish culture is broadened and the description mentioned above is no longer regarded as an absolute truth. But still, consensus is a strong belief among the Swedes, we listen and try to understand different opinions as much as we can, and consider every point of view valuable because it might help to solve a problem (Holmberg & Åkerblom, 2001). The problem of consensus is that the actual problem usually makes a good second place. First solve the consensus, then the problem. By doing that, everyone is regarded as being just like “everyone else”, which is to most people's liking since difference in status is undesired in Sweden (Holmberg & Åkerblom, 2001). Hence, the aversion towards conflict is caused by the willingness to maintain a good climate for discussion.

### **Further research in the area**

This study is focused on how culture affects leadership, based on the previously mentioned theories. The demand for cross-cultural research is steadily increasing (Nguyen & Umemoto, 2009), and to give a more complex picture of the phenomena cross-cultural leadership there is further research that is important to acknowledge. Further research has been made both with and without the results from GLOBE, Hofstede and Sveningsson and Alvesson. The further research in the area that is mentioned below focus on particular aspects of culture and leadership, mainly on country-specific level. These studies can both provide a richer insight in how the chosen theories previously has been used and also show what different studies there has been in the field of culture and leadership that are valuable for the present study.

Skipton et al. (2012) argues that many interventions in today's leadership concern giving feedback, but they stress the fact that many feedback strategies rely on western traditions. In many Asian countries, feedback is seen as offensive and is rarely given in public due to the risk of “losing face”, and since they regard group harmony higher than conflicts, Asians will avoid

conflicts (Skipton et al., 2013). Jepson (2010) continues by arguing that research in the leadership area is not only based on western examples, but also has its academic roots in Anglo-Saxon history. This produces an issue when researching organizations in non-English speaking countries, since their discourses are based on national cultures and values that are not necessarily Anglo-Saxon. This leads to Ritter and Lord (2007) that found that employees use previous leaders as a measurement for the new one. The more the two are alike, the greater the chance that the new leader will be accepted. If the new leader does not share the same culture and hence practice a different leadership the acceptance might be harder to achieve. This is especially important in Asian countries. For example, Conte and Novello (2008) discuss that it is helpful to take interest in the Chinese employees or executive's personal relations because this is the key to understand why that person act the way he or she does in a business situation. It is hence important to nurture the relations that the previous leader has built. When engaging in the relations, the leader opens up a route to communication. Due to the informality of the organization, high-ranking people are expected to get more confidential information. The authors emphasize the fact that China is more collectivistic and holistic than other countries, so when dealing with Chinese, they propose to practice a great deal of cultural sensitivity to gain the most of the informal culture and to be as direct as possible in terms of how decisions affect the employee (Conte & Novello, 2008).

In Germany, close relationships are not as valued, instead the competence is important for a successful leadership. Jepson (2012) found in her study of German and British leadership, that German employees tend to appreciate a supportive and listening leadership on basis of a constitution of right person on the right position. Germans are, according to Jepson, very clear that they value expertise and functional competence, and it is important that although employees might benefit from some space to perform, it should be the leader who makes the decisions. What is worth noticing in recent studies is what Ferdman and Sagiv (2012) argues, that the field of organizational diversity and cross-cultural work psychology can gain from each other. Unfortunately, this is most often researched by quantitative measurements. Zander and Romani (2004) address the criticism towards labeling and focusing on comparing nationalities in the global world and propose that there might be co-existing sources of identification. They compared results from fifteen countries and tried the hypothesis that groups such as “middle managers” of a certain age would have more in common than people from the same society. This

proved to be false, employees do still identify more strongly with nationality than their group and prefer leaders that are coherent with the ruling values of the society (Zander & Romani, 2004).

Other research focused on identity is Cooper and Thatcher. They follow up Ashforth and Mael's (1989) identity theory and propose that the extent to which the person identifies with the organization depends on the attributes that the person consider their own. The more attributes that the leader appreciates correlates with the organization, the more effective the leadership will be. They also acknowledge the self-concept orientations theory that states that people have different ways to how they identify with different groups. A person with a collective orientation will identify himself in terms of the groups he belongs to, for example the workgroup or the football team. A person with relational orientation will identify herself in terms of her social relations. Cooper and Thatcher continue by saying that people with a relationship self-concept orientation tend to be more faithful in keeping their relationships than those with a collective or individual self-concept orientation (Cooper & Thatcher, 2012).

Collective orientation is connected to Hofstede's fifth dimension LTO originally named in 1991. Hofstede and Minkov (2010) wanted to try out whether or not it was still valid, and therefor they replicated the study with a new test, the WVS (West Value Surveys), which contains items that matched the dimension LTO. The results showed that LTO was still valid, and could predict national economic growth. This is an important finding especially in China, where LTO is very high. Smith et al. (2003) studied Nordic leadership styles and found that their results matched with Hofstede's dimensions, but also that the leaders in the Nordic cluster are more reliant on rules and their coworkers, than on their own higher leaders. It's more common to make decisions in agreement with their co-workers in the north than in other European countries in general.

The need to belong is strong all over the Nordic cluster, and can be related to Gonzalez and Chakraborty's study of identity and organizations. They propose that fulfilled self-expression in an organization strengthen the relational and personal identity, and that this increase the identification with the organization or collective (Gonzalez & Chakraborty, 2013). This might be especially tangible in Sweden, where social collectivism is extremely high. According to GLOBE, Sweden is the most careful country when it comes to following rules, and Swedes form their beliefs of what is right on the foundation of what is considered right in society and enjoy a culture of formality and equality. This is tangible in the leadership as well. Holmberg &

Åkerblom, (2006) investigated whether there is such a thing as actual Swedish leadership and what attributes those leaders might possess. They found that the top three factors that were considered to contribute to outstanding leadership in Sweden were the scales inspirational, integrity and visionary. According to GLOBE (House et al., 2004), those are all attributes associated with charismatic leadership, and hence universally endorsed. The Swedish leaders should preferably engage and inspire their co-workers to do their best, and also be trustworthy and honest (Holmberg & Åkerblom, 2006).

In summary, the previous research of cultural leadership has done a great deed in trying to understand the essence of the different dimensions of leadership and culture, and naturally there has been a need to form criteria to explain them both. Even though the continuous work with said dimensions is never ending, in that it would be profitable to look for an integrated picture of the leadership concept. It is time to accept that leadership is complex and hard to grasp as it emerges in the context through a complex mixture of acts and interpretations that are sometimes misunderstood (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). This study aims to contribute to the complex picture of culture and leadership, and hopefully add to the research that is focusing on the smaller picture. According to Alvesson and Sveningsson (2012), the research of cross-cultural leadership needs to consider the possibility that culture, leadership identity and context is interconnected in ways that need to be researched not only by numbers but also by asking the actual leaders about their opinion on what leadership is in their specific context.

## **Purpose**

The purpose is to examine the personal experience of six Swedish leaders due to cultural factors and its influence on their leadership when they have been working with a foreign team.

### **Research questions**

- What was prominent in their stories that can be connected to culture?
- What common and different cultural differences did they experience?
- How did the culture in the country simplify or complicate their leadership?

- In what way did the culture change or strengthen their leadership during the experience?

## **Method**

### **Design**

This research was made with a qualitative approach where face-to-face interviews with six Swedish leaders were undertaken in order to identify their experience of leadership in light of the culture in the specific work context.

### **Instrument / Interviews**

Unlike a regular conversation, a research interview has a specific purpose, and refers to a particular conversation with a participant to obtain a description of the participant's experience (Kvale, Brinkmann, & Torhell, 2009) in this case, the experience concerning leadership and culture. The researcher has a methodological awareness during the conversation that is different to an everyday conversation (Kvale et al. 2009). Questions for an interview template were constructed in accordance with the purpose of the study and the previously mentioned literature (see Appendix 1). The questions were divided into two parts, challenges and surprises associated with culture, and changes in the own leadership due to culture. The questions and subquestions were formed openly but with the aim to keep the interview around the subject of the research questions of the study. The interview template was used as a guideline for the interview rather than an actual template to make sure that the interviews followed the story of the participant but it also ensured that important information was included.

In the present study the interview was initiated with an open question “ *Will you please tell me about your experience of leading a foreign team...* ” The focus of the questions was the experience of culture and their own leadership, which were followed by sub-questions based on the STAR-method. STAR stands for Situation, Task, Action, and Result ([http://www.quintcareers.com/STAR\\_interviewing.html](http://www.quintcareers.com/STAR_interviewing.html)). It is an interview model where the participants are asked to illustrate their behavior by describing a work-related situation they have been an active part of. The follow-up questions about the named situation target facts about the

situation, which task the participants were assigned, what actions they took, and the results that came from their behavior.

### **Confidentiality policy**

The data was transcribed on a password-secured computer and made anonymous, to secure the confidentiality of identities. Since leadership in the culture is the main focus, quotes and alike has been kept with specific country included, though company names was agreed to be coded if they appeared in the results. The leaders are referred to as pseudonyms in accordance with gender. The actual area of business is specified since it was agreed to play a part in the leadership. The participants were asked if they wanted to read quotes before publishing, but none found that necessary since their identity and the companies was confidential to readers. The study complied with ethical procedures according to Swedish law ("The Swedish Code of Statutes: Act concerning Ethical Review of Research involving Humans," 2003), and the Declaration of Helsinki ("World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki: Ethical Principles for Medical Research Involving Human Subjects." 2013). Participants were informed that the participation was voluntary and they were free to withdraw at any time. They were assured of strict confidentiality and secure data storage.

### **Procedure**

Ten possible participants were invited via telephone or mail and each received the same information concerning the purpose of the study, the secrecy of the data, the recording device, which would take part in the study and the length of the interviews. Participants were informed that the main-focus of the interview was the personal experience of culture in different situations during their time as Swedish leaders of a foreign team. The participants were approached through contacts that worked or knew someone at a larger international company. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews of 35-45 minutes each, all following an interview guide (see Appendix 1). The data was recorded on a mobile device secured by a password, and then transferred to a dropbox account, also secured by a different password. The data files were stored in the same place, which could only be accessed by the author.

## **Participants**

The sample aimed to be 5-7 Swedish leaders who had led a team or group based in one of the previously mentioned countries that are common outposts for Swedish leaders and therefore subject of interest for the present study. The inclusion criteria was that the leaders had worked during at least three months with continuous contact with the team members to be able to experience the eventual difference or similarity in culture. The leaders should also have been responsible for the team members in tasks such as project management, coaching, taking decisions and perform changes in the team in matters of employment or tasks. Four contacted leaders declined participation due to the inability of take part in a face-to-face interview or fulfilling the inclusion criteria. The six chosen participants had been leading teams from USA, China, India, Germany and Denmark, which is regarded as a very good sample according to the sample desired by the author. The participants were from both larger and smaller cities in Sweden. The participating leaders were 48-67 years old, two women and four men. Before their employment as leader for the foreign team, all of the leaders have had previous experience of leadership. The companies that the leaders were employed by were all focusing on either engineering or science, and they all had an academic background and further various educations in leadership and economics. The leaders that were interviewed were Hedvig, leading an Indian team from the Swedish office whilst living in Sweden, Gunnar, leading a USA team whilst living in USA, Tommy, leading a Chinese team whilst living in China, Charles, leading a Chinese team whilst living partly in China, Alfred, leading a German team whilst living in Germany and Rakel, leading a Danish team whilst living in Sweden. Three of the interviews took place at the companies, one at the authors home, another at the home of the participant and one at the Department of Psychology, Lund University, in Lund, All interviews were conducted at the locations due to the request of the participants.

## **Data analysis**

The method of analysis used is thematic analysis following the recommendations of Braun and Clarke (2006). Due to its flexibility, it can be used for different methods, such as the essentialist or realist method, the constructionist method or, as is the case of this study, the contextualist method, which falls between the two previously mentioned. The contextualist method acknowledges the ways in which individuals take meaning of their experience and pays attention

to the way the person relate to and interact with their surroundings (Willig, 2008). Thematic analysis is a well-known and commonly used analysis in psychological research (Tierney & Fox 2010; Fielden, Sillence, & Little, 2011). The analysis was interactive and included line by line analysis of transcripts, refining emerging codes into themes or units of meaning, which then was compared and coded through a process of pattern matching. Themes and relationships was re-examined and recoded by the author of the preset study in a manner that gradually went deeper into the analysis. The analysis was conducted following on the five steps of Braun and Clarke (2006):

*Phase 1.* Since the interviews in the present study were conducted by the author face-to-face, there has already been a slight comprehension concerning what the themes might be before starting the analysis. Still, Braun and Clarke stress that it is important to thoroughly know the data. First the data in the present study was transcribed verbatim and second the text was read and checked with the recording. Thematic analysis does not require the same detail in the transcripts concerning pauses and such, as for example conversational analysis, so the transcripts hence consisted of the sole words and were 34 pages in total.

*Phase 2.* In the case of the present study, the questions the analysis was theory-driven, since the analysis was made with focus on the cultural aspect of leadership. Braun and Clarke (2006) propose that the analysis is different if it is data or theory-driven: if the coding revolves around the data, which is what gives the themes. Otherwise, the data is coded with special questions in mind as in the present study. After being checked for matching with the recording, the text was read and exposed to the first analysis by use of highlighting pen and annotations in the margin.

*Phase 3.* Thereafter, another reading took place where smaller parts of the text that could be a part of the same theme were coded and separated by a blank line and marked with the first letter of the pseudonym of the leader. Those small pieces will from now on be referred to as codes. Afterwards, the papers with the codes were printed out and the copies cut into smaller code-pieces and put into separate piles individually. There were 538 codes in total. The order when cutting and analyzing the codes was randomized. The codes in each pile were thereafter once again re-read to divide the incoherent data, and to put it in another suitable pile, in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) recommendations. The codes were thereafter put in a scrapbook, each pile separated with a clip and summarized with a sentence that worked as a



guideline for interpreting the themes. It is recommended that some sort of visual help is used to analyze the themes and how they might be interconnected, and hence a mind-map was constructed to help with the analysis and facilitate the search for larger themes.

*Phase 4.* The named piles, or smaller themes, were then analyzed to see patterns, summarized and written down on computer. The codes and themes were consistently controlled along the way to ensure coherence, and trying to match as many as possible of the themes to larger ones, all in accordance with Braun and Clarke (2006) who stress the fact that the themes should be consistent and that there should be a clear distinction between them.

*Phase 5.* Searching for sub-themes that can help to illustrate the complex themes and provide an understanding of a possible hierarchy within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes discovered during the analysis were distinguishable but related and hence they needed to be broken down into three subthemes each, to facilitate the comprehension of the different aspects of the themes. As the larger themes formed, the analysis showed five coherent and distinguishable themes and that each had three subthemes. The subthemes were all important to tell the story of the theme. The themes were all considered as a part of the larger story as well as individual themes, to ensure that all of the themes made sense in the context.

Finally, the themes were given titles and were illustrated by adequate quotes that summarized the theme and the subthemes. In both the quotes and the analysis all of the leaders are referred to as pseudonyms along with the country in which they operated.

## **Results**

All participants told their stories in a way that resulted in a rich level of data. The participants told their story in Swedish and the chosen quotes were then translated to English. A native English-speaking translator examined the quotes to ensure that the meaning in the sentences was correct. The analysis of the text provided several codes, 15 sub-themes and finally five main themes emerged (see Table 4). Note that verbatim quotations are used to illustrate the themes.

The five themes were:

1. To gain and show trust
2. To offer and accept independence
3. Identification with the role as leader in a different culture

4. To be a part of a group
5. The need to communicate

The themes are hierarchically described in descending order throughout an interpretation of them as more or less prominent in the stories.

**Table 4** Results of present research, main themes and sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes
To gain and show trust	To be on the employees side To give coaching To set goals
To offer and accept independence	To give space To handle employees' wanting directions To handle employees' fear of making mistakes
Identification with the role as leader in a different culture	To change the leadership to fit the culture To identify with the culture To be the leader that the culture desire
To be a part of a group	To build the team To gain membership To be on the inside
The need to communicate	To have one-way communication To need opinions as leader To communicate with the leader as employee

### **To gain and show trust**

“To gain and show trust” was interpreted as one of the main themes, with its subthemes “to be on the employees side”, “to give coaching” and “to set goals”. The theme in the stories was indicated by how the leader shows that they care for the employees’ best interests and how the leader demonstrates that he is on the employees’ side. In all of the stories this was indicated in different ways, but with the common underlying intention of gaining trust from the employee by showing that they could rely on the leader caring for their career goals.

In Gunnar’s (USA) story, the theme was evident due to the reappearing references on how the leader considered it his duty to make the employees flourish in accordance with their ambition and talent. He also emphasized the importance of giving them proper goals and feedback, and to help them find a more suitable position if the agreement between the employee and leader did not work out.

*["I set a goal that takes them in the direction we agreed on. /.../ I have a commitment or a responsibility to support the person to accomplish this. I am concerned with their career and it works." ]-Gunnar, USA*

In China, leaders report that trust was also gained by a request from the employee to know that the leader supported the employee in his career and took action to help him in his personal development constantly, although it was not as common with coaching as in the USA-story. In the Chinese leaders' stories it was, as in USA, important to care for the employee's career by making sure that the employee could move on to another company if that was necessary. It was also mentioned in one of the stories that if the employee does not trust the leader to be on his or her side, he would quit.

*["They need to know that there is a possibility for them to advance, they must constantly learn new things, hence it is important that they feel that they have a leader that supports them in their progress." ]-Charles, China*

Hedvig (India) was continually returning to the need for trust in global teams and experienced it hard to demonstrate that she trusted her team, since she usually demonstrated it by showing giving her employees freedom. In her position she reported that she tried to earn the trust of the employees by being as flexible and compliant as possible to heed to their need for trust, so that the team would work better together even if she experienced it as hard.

*["I think leadership is about explaining, be expressive, present goals and support. I stand behind and provide, encourage and coach." ]-Hedvig, India*

Rakel's (Denmark) story shows that she experienced a more organizational form of trust that did not build on the relation but on the agreement that the employee had with the company and which was undeniable. Also Alfred's (Germany) story showed trust as an organizational phenomenon that emerged in the company as a whole, in situations such as paying attention to the work of the employees. The American and Chinese employees were perceived as positive when the leaders attempted to make contact, but on the contrary, the German employees regarded the leader's attempts to get to know his employees as way to control them by monitoring their work.

*[" I talked for a while and saw what they were doing to gain an opinion of who they were and get to know the ones I was going to work with"]-Alfred, Germany*

The theme trust was also shown when making contracts and agreements. In America, the leader reported that agreements are made by two parties with the intention to be upheld, while Rakel (Denmark) reported that an agreement is more of an overall decision that the leader then convinces the team of employees to agree with. In Germany, the leader's story show that the deals were always monitored by two other persons apart from the two signing the contract, which he explained as a sign of distrust that he did not recognize from Sweden. He also reported that the German office of the company he worked for went so far in their distrust of others as to suspect him of being a spy for the company's American office since he was the only one not from Germany. He found it a bit hard to cope with the lack of trust that his coworkers and employees showed him in the beginning by being so deliberately distant and suspicious.

### **To offer and accept independence**

The theme "To offer and accept independence" had the subthemes "to give space", "to handle employees' wanting directions" and "to handle employees' fear of making mistakes". The theme was shown in the stories as the willingness among the leaders to offer space to the employees. It also stems from the leaders experience of the employee's reluctance towards offered independence, which in the stories manifests in the descriptions of the employees as having a need for precise direction from the leader, a fear of trying new tasks and not wanting to take own initiatives.

*["Sometimes it would have gone faster to just try but risk failing, rather than to ask me first. I often felt that I was making decisions for the sake of making a decision. Germans are extremely effective, but they need a plan" ]-Alfred, Germany*

All the leaders' stories involve an experience of that employees prefer a clear leadership where definitions and frameworks of what is expected of the employee is identified. This was one of the few things that was common in all of the stories, regardless of the country where the leader had operated. To "point with the whole hand" and to make clear demands was appreciated by the employees and is explained as a crucial indicator for better work performance. Alfred (Germany) explained this as that it is important who makes the decisions, it should always be the leader regardless of the situation. He also explained that the definition of what is to be done is of utter

importance to the employees, because they are used to being punished if they make mistakes. According to Alfred (Germany), this is due to the hard and strict school systems. Hedvig (India) explained that this need for detailed instructions was something that surprised her in the beginning, that even if she'd been warned that her Indian employees would want specific instructions, she could never imagine that they would be that specific. She also found it very frustrating to not being able to let her employees find out solutions by themselves, as compared to the Swedish employees she met when working in Gothenburg, who gladly accepted her given space.

*["They are very passive. They need more security maybe, an indication that they're not doing wrong. Of course that is frustrating." ]-Hedvig, India*

Gunnar's (USA) story was focused mainly on the employees' difficulties with accepting insecure goals and more degrees of freedom. The leaders working in India, Germany and China on the other hand, addressed the theme "To offer and accept independence" as a problem in regard to the lack of own initiatives among the employees, which made the leaders a bit restless. Gunnar (USA) who significantly pointed out that he saw the career of their employees as his responsibility also reported doing more specific work in trying to make the employees more independent and accepting the uncertainty regarding goal setting.

*["I had to convince them that it is perfectly fine to reach good results, their goals, get a raise, their career and their bonus even if they don't have everything written down. As soon as they understood that, they saw the benefits." ]-Gunnar, USA*

Gunnar (USA) described that a clear focus on how the task would satisfy the employee's more long-term goals made the employee more adaptable to the new terms of goal setting. He also mentioned the environment, that at a pharmaceutical company, the degrees of freedom are necessary for research and that he therefore encouraged his employees to accept independence. Tommy (China), Rakel (Denmark) and Gunnar (USA) all report that they assume that parts of the need for detailed tasks and goals is caused by that the employee wants to see clearly how the given task and long term goal benefit the own career. They also agreed that it might cause stress for the employees to not know which way and in which direction their career is heading. Alfred (Germany) and Hedvig (India) reported that they thought the need for specified assignments was a consequence of a strong fear of making mistakes among the employees.

*["You don't question the leader, just as you don't question the teacher. One doesn't run around and ask, you want to be competent."]-Charles, China*

Tommy (China), Charles (China), Hedvig (India) and Alfred (Germany) reported that education is a strong part of the behavior that the employees present, and due to a rigid and hierarchic educational system in society that leaves very little room for mistakes which is also demonstrated in the work-environment. In Gunnar's (USA) story, he describes that there is a norm concerning the possibility to work your way up, and that it is you yourself who is responsible no matter what.

### **Identification with the role as leader in a different culture**

The theme "Identification with the role as leader in a different culture" had the subthemes "to change the leadership to fit the culture", "to identify with the culture" and "to be the leader the culture desired". The theme is interpreted in the stories as how the leaders identify with the culture in the country in which they operate. The theme also addresses how they describe their attempts to adapt to the leadership role that the culture encourages and how the leaders identify with the role as leader in the specific country. The stories were centered on leadership values, how their own personal leadership style fits the culture and how the leaders experienced it when their Swedish leadership identity met the foreign expectations. For example, Alfred (Germany) considered a cheaper company car more suitable since the company at that point laid off many employees. He thought it would only be fair to show that the board did cutbacks as well. To his surprise, this idea was immediately dismissed at the German office.

*["They explained to me that as one of the highest managers that on top of that would represent the company towards other global customers I could not drive around in anything else than the very best, because in Germany the car represents who you are."]  
-Alfred, Germany*

All of the leaders other than Rakel (Denmark) mentioned the fact that although the employees were skeptical in the beginning to the Swedish way of leading, they appreciated it as soon as they got used to it and saw the benefits. Alfred's (Germany) story showed that he had a mental picture of the Germans as stiff, but he realized that they actually appreciated his use of

humor at work as soon as they got used to it. He therefore projected a more informal approach towards the employees than what is common in Germany.

Alfred also reported that German employees are very well educated and that he felt a societal expectation to be able to keep up with intellectual conversations when invited to dinner parties and social events. Gunnar (USA) describes how he wanted to take the best of two worlds, to keep the strive and ambition from the American side, but keep the open communication he cherished from his previous leadership experience. There, as in Germany, the Swedish leaders both found that their leadership turned out well as soon as both the leader and employee had made proper adjustments to the new way of leading. Both Hedvig (India), Tommy (China) and Charles (China) report that they found it hard to get such little interaction with their employees, and reported to continuously endeavor to make the employees act more Swedish in matters such as speaking their mind at meetings. Rakel (Denmark), Charles (China) and Tommy (China) found this hard to accomplish and realized that a leadership better suited for the social codes worked better for both them and the team. Rakel (Denmark) reported not having to make any bigger adjustments when leading the foreign team apart from that she was surprised by the lack of coffee breaks and had to adapt to the Danish way of work culture. Neither Gunnar (USA) reported having to change his leadership. Both Gunnar (USA) and Alfred (Germany) said that the leadership values in the country suited them, both as persons and as leaders, while Hedvig (India) reported the opposite. She said that she did consider some aspects of her leadership as being incoherent with her image of herself as a leader, neither did they fit her values of what a leader should be like. This manifested in situations such as when she had to “point with the whole hand”.

*["It is against my core values as a leader to be that controlling. But I realize that it is how it's got to be and it gains results"]-Hedvig, India*

However, Hedvig did like the consequences of her adapted behavior and due to that she did not find it as hard as she thought she would. She was the one who most of all emphasized the fact that when adapting to a new culture, she found it useful to weigh in the fact that Sweden is very unique in its ways, and she advised to remember that the Swedish way of leading is not always right. Hers, Tommy's (China) and Charles' (China) stories point to the conclusion that it

might be easier for a Swedish leader to change than to change the mindset of the employees in the countries that are based on such a dominant culture and history.

*["They are incited by other things than we are. They have so much history and culture, that it might be harder for them to adapt to us rather than the other way around."]-Hedvig, India*

Tommy (China) explained the leadership role in China as being “grand”. His story describe that the leader take on many roles, such as being parent, coach, caregiver and visionary. All of the leaders but Rakel (Denmark) connect their leadership role to their own personality. Hedvig (India) reported that she enjoys working with people and being involved, and therefore wanted to give them space to be their very best meanwhile coaching and bracing them.

*["I applied for my first job as a leader because I wanted to be able to make a change. I felt that I wanted to be involved, and I believe that everyone wants to be involved and feel it."]-Hedvig, India*

Tommy’s (China) story, emphasizes the importance of relations, also describes that his ability to build relations is his most valuable strength. His story is also the one that contains the most references to relations. He describes his position as well suited to his personality and due to that, very enjoyable. Alfred (Germany) describes that he liked the straightforward style in matters of communication, relations and argumentation alike. He also found his ways of leading suitable to the country in which he operated.

*["First and foremost, they Germans are straight up. It suited me perfectly"]-Alfred, Germany*

*["I found it very enjoyable in that way, it somehow suited my persona and my strength."]-Tommy, China*

Rakel’s (Denmark) story showed that she cared extra for new parents in her team, since she remembered how hard it was to be a young parent herself, in the new Danish company. Hence, her story highlighted the fact that when asked about her leadership role she mentioned a situation where her own values clashed with the Danish ones. She tried harder to maintain the perception of herself as a leader who cares for her employees in the different culture, something that is more valued in Sweden than in Denmark.

All of the leaders agree that they had a more managing position that they would take on in Sweden. Hedvig (India) and Gunnar (USA) particularly pointed out that they thought a leadership



model with more leading and less managing was preferable if it was possible, since they considered it more valuable for the companies over all to give employees more freedom and help them find their own solutions.

Rakel (Denmark) is the only one not to mention a difference between a Swedish leader and a foreign one. She did not consider herself as leading any differently as a leader in Sweden than what she did in Denmark, apart from her devotion to new parents, which was unusual in Denmark. The other stories all bring up the concept of the Swedish leader as quite unwilling and casual about the leadership role. Both Hedvig's (India), Charles' (China) and Tommy's (China) stories contain values regarding leadership more in terms of wanting to lead for the sake of uniting a team, not for the glory in the leadership role.

*[" In Sweden it is very much like you can be a leader and get a lot of responsibilities and that is nice, but you might not get that much of a raise. But it is still desirable to have that responsibility and to feel that people trust you" ]-Charles, China*

Gunnar (USA) shows that he experienced that Swedes are assured that their career will progress by itself, and that promotion to leader will mainly be about gaining responsibility not salary, just as Alfred (Germany) agree on. Alfred's (Germany) story shows that he has the impression that the Swedish leadership is very unglamorous. According to him, very few want to be leaders and that there is no prestige in leadership, which he describes as the opposite to Germany. He points to the fact that the difference in salary in Sweden is very low considering the difference in responsibility, while in Germany it's a lot bigger. Charles (China) describes the Swedish leader as someone who reluctantly agrees to be leader for the sake of the group. Both Charles (China) and Tommy (China) report that Chinese people are more careful to belonging to something than Swedes are. Tommy (China) explains that when writing a Chinese address, it is country, province, street, house and name. He says that in Sweden it is the other way around, "I" comes first, the country last. Both Tommy's (China) and Charles' (China) stories also report that the company is a way of belonging to something. For example, Tommy (China) was invited to weddings as the leader of the company that provided for the employees livelihood. Tommy (China) and Charles (China) are the only ones that report of any lingering contact with their employees and coworkers from their time as leaders abroad. Hedvig (India) reported something similar in her story, that she perceived Indians as grounded in other values, such as family and tradition, and that she was surprised by how much they invited her into their lives.

*["What I think differs is that how you embrace this team spirit and how you are used to share with others, -they are surprisingly personal, a lot more. I think that there is different view of how things are done there. I am incredibly fascinated by how they invite, to weddings and such." ]-Hedvig, India*

## **To be a part of a group**

“To be a part of a group” was interpreted as the third central theme. This is due to the reappearing tales in the stories that concern the leader's effort and struggle that was tangible in the subthemes “to build up the team”, “to gain membership” of the new cultural group and “to have be on the inside” or outside of the culture, according to the relations that the leader has with the employees.

The aim to feel like part of the group or to centralize the team is mentioned in all of the six leadership tales. Gunnar (USA) explains it as the joy of being a part of a team from the beginning, the feeling of entrepreneurship and a sense of “all for one”.

*["We created and put a lot of time into what values we would have. The company spirit and the culture, how we should evolve it so that everyone should be part of the very progress there, very exciting" ]-Gunnar, USA*

Charles (China) mentions the stress of not being able to understand the language and hence not understanding how the employees feel or to enrich the relationships on a more personal level. Raket's (Denmark) and Hedvig's (India) stories show how they have experienced that a team not only work better together but are more of a togetherness if all of the members can find a way to connect to each other. They both also report “being a team” as an important part of being a successful global one, since the members have to be more flexible than in a uni-cultural team.

The leaders all speculate about the fact that it is important to be a group, and how that is harder where the rules how to get to be a part of the team differs depending on culture. Hedvig's (India) story proves that she found it a bit hard to relate to the Indians being so personal, since she experiences Swedes to have more integrity. She says that it is not only about being in the same room, but being on the same spot mentally, which is hard sometimes. This is by far most prominent in her story compared to the others’.

*["In Sweden we are polite, but that is it. Indians have another way of fitting in, to be a part of the group. They open up quickly."]-Hedvig, India*

Alfred's (Germany) story shows that the language helped him gain a place among the Germans. He described an American leader, who had to use translators wherever he went, which made it hard to be a part of a company where speaking German was essential. Rakel (Denmark) had a different angle of how she approached team building and relations. She reports that she experienced that what goes on in the private life is not of a Danish company's concern, so the employee get very few excuses not to do a good job, even when having kids. As previously stated in the results, she sat down to talk to her employees that had become parents, and discussed how they together could solve it in the best way, to prevent fallout from her team. She explained that in Denmark, hiring a nanny for helping out with the family duties and kids is not unusual, neither despised and that she recommended this to her employees.

*["When at work, you really are. It is not a lot of coffee breaks." ]-Rakel, Denmark*

On the contrary, Alfred (Germany), Hedvig (India), Tommy (China) and Charles (China) all report that coffee breaks or other social activity fill the purpose of socializing with the group in Sweden. As they point out, Swedes often talk of work when at work, but it creates a better social climate even so. In China and Germany on the other hand, Tommy (China) and Alfred (Germany) explain that the conversations are more private and not work-related. Tommy (China) and Hedvig (India) also point out that there is a clear line between work-colleagues and friends in Sweden, whereas in China and India those are the same. Tommy's (China) and Charles (China) stories show that they both experienced relations to be a crucial part of leadership. They announce that without being part of the group, the leader misses out on valuable information and a way of communicating follow-ups to the employees.

*["You don't become a part of the group. I don't have the experience that you do. You get accepted, but you don't become part of the gang." ]-Charles, China*

*["There is no division between friends and colleagues, you sort of belong to the group, very strongly. It becomes like a second family." ]-Tommy, China*

When asked about private relations to the employees, the two stories about being a leader in China are dramatically different. Charles (China) claim that there is no such thing as being a leader and expect to be part of the group, due to the fact that relationships are based on a common language. The Chinese friendship that formed with one of his coworkers partly built on the fact

that she spoke such good English. He noticed that by socializing with her, she could gain information from other employees and by that he could enhance the relationship with them. Tommy (China) on the other hand, claims that to be a part of the group, the outsider needs to like being part of social culture and adapt their behavior to fit. In his story he describes that he personally is engaged in the work at the company to employ leaders that are aware of the different culture as well as appreciate it. Also Hedvig (India) is part of a program at the company that emphasizes the importance of work with soft values and relations, not only goals and profits.

*["You do business, but really you nurture the relationship. If you do something good for him, you know that you get something good in return, because you both already invested in the relationship. This also works between leader and employee." ]-Tommy, China*

In the story that Tommy (China) tells, he describes that the line of leader successors at his company is consciously managed, not to harm the relationship that the previous leader has built. He continues by saying that there is a profound loyalty to the person hiring the employee and as a sort of payback the employees try to do a good job for the one who hired him. The loyalty is so strong that sometimes, if the leader quit, so does the employees that he hired. -Either to move with him to the next job or because they don't trust the replacement. There were examples where employees had only stayed, in spite of the fact that their personal career was on hold, and quit once when the leader did. Tommy explains it as putting money into an account, the more the leader invests in the person, in the relationship, the better work will be done. He also explained that the loyalty to the leader extends to private life, and describes a situation where he and his employees were out having dinner

*["There is quite a drinking culture, but the employee that the leader has the most faith in can toast on behalf of the leader. So when I didn't want to drink, my employees drank on my behalf" ]-Tommy, China*

According to Tommy's (China) and Charles' (China) stories, it is also important to ensure that one does not risk losing face. Charles (China) describes that if the leader has built a good relationship there is also a better chance that the employees actually comes to him and asks for help, which he experienced as extremely rare otherwise.

Neither Charles' (China), Hedvig's (India) or Tommy's (China) stories show any signs of the leaders being asked home by any of their associates or employees, but they have all been presented with pictures of family, which they see as an indicator or invitation to further deepen

contact. Charles (China) even mentioned that a home-visit would have been impossible since he believed that the Chinese were too embarrassed about poor home standard to show a Westerner. He was the only one who decided to show pictures of his family and ask about the employees' home-situation. Tommy (China) and Hedvig (India) do not mention who started exchanging personal facts but only commented on the fact that the employees did show pictures.

## **The need to communicate**

The last and final theme is “The need to communicate”, with its subthemes “to have one-way communication”, “to need opinions as leader” and “to communicate with the leader as employee”. I interpreted that there are times when the leader felt a greater need for communication, and other times when the employee felt the need for different reasons. Those are interpreted in the stories through the unwanted one-way communication that some leaders experience and in the absence of opinions they experience among the employees. The leaders experience that the need for employees to communicate with the leaders mainly revolves around their own career. The leaders considered this stressful since the Swedish leadership style relies upon consensus and that the leader gets feedback on projects and decisions from the employees.

*["They do not question decisions, but when it comes to their own career they come knocking at the door."]-Rakel, Denmark*

Gunnar's (USA) and Hedvig's (India) story mentioned consensus as something they tried to introduce in the culture, but only the US leader succeeded to some extent. He managed to convince the employees of the value of airing opinions by showing the benefits for their career. The Indian leader found that a consensus was better reached through making sure they were on the same page, to ask specifically if there were any questions and finally making a summary of the meeting to ensure they all agreed. She reported that it was very hard to make the Indians speak their mind, and did not mention any signs of career goals amongst her employees. Also Alfred (Germany) spoke of communication as a way to ensure that he and his coworkers were on the same page, but in terms of that he displayed trust by speaking his mind instead of the other way around.

*["I explained that I wanted to learn from their knowledge and experience in the company to be more effective in my leadership, and that made them more inclined to help."]-Alfred, Germany*

Alfred's (Germany) story shows that his coworkers regarded it as confusing if the leader discussed matters of the company with other employees or coworkers. He also reported that he experienced that coworkers assume that a person who asks questions is incompetent and that the coworkers suspect that the leader is not fitted for the task if he invites others to be a part of the decision. He did find it very useful to be able to know the language, which he was alone about mentioning.

What Gunnar's (USA), Raket's (Denmark), Tommy's (China) and Charles' (China) stories have in common is that they mention an experience of the employees having a strong and indisputable will to impact the own career in every way there is. Most common are mail to the leader, personal contact and a demand for clear goal setting for the following year. The lack of communication regarding the actual work that was being done was mostly prominent in Charles' (China) story. He described that communication that did not build on a relationship was very hard to make at all. The one-way communication that both he and Tommy (China) encountered was experienced as very hard to overcome.

*["It took a while before I understood to ask about how the work proceeded, I had t ask about the family and the kids first."]-Charles, China*

*[" 'When the emperor speaks you sit quiet', they used to say when I wondered why they didn't say anything" ]-Tommy, China*

This was causing trouble since Charles (China) found out that his Chinese employees responded with "yes, yes, yes" if he asked them something at a meeting. He soon learned that losing face is the reason why he was not questioned. He explained that his employees would never risk embarrassing him in front of others, as would happen if they asked any questions or spoke their mind about how the work was actually proceeding, since he was the one responsible for it. Both Charles (China) and Tommy (China) found that to attain their goal of communicating with the employees in a productive way, they needed to take the conversation elsewhere. They did not get the information they needed from the employees to be able to lead in the way they wanted in the meeting room, but instead they had to ask for opinions in a more private context where the employee did not risk embarrassing the leader by questioning his decisions.

## **Discussion**

### **Prominent parts in the stories**

The present results show that the cultural differences that were the most prominent in the leadership stories were those which regarded Claiming and gaining Trust, Offering and accepting Independence, Identification with the role as leader, Private and work-relations and The need to Communicate. These themes are found in the results in different ways, as the leaders described different situations when they experienced it. As an example, the importance of being part of the context or group in one way or another was evident in all the stories, but in India it was perceived as a struggle to connect the team, whereas in USA it was perceived as an enjoyable consequence of the entrepreneurial spirit in the group. The desire to belong was often compromised for some of them by the fact that foreign countries value a more assertive and omnipotent leadership, whereas these Swedish leaders prefer to lead in accordance with their employee's opinions and to give them space to take initiatives. This creates a gap in trust when the leader wants to show that he trust the employee by giving her freedom in her work, and the employee refuses to reciprocate this trust by not accepting the additional space. The leaders claimed that in Sweden, they would have been able to trust their employees with new assignments without specific directions, but they found it hard to transfer this way of leading to their new foreign contexts. The challenge to "take the best of two worlds" was approached differently by the leaders. The most successful attempts were in accordance with the cultural values, where both the leader and the employees made adjustments where needed.

The results point to the conclusion that the most challenging elements for all of the leaders can be seen in light of what Edström and Jönsson (1998) claim: that managers demonstrate their trust in their co-workers by leaving them enough space to figure things out by themselves. They continue by saying that Swedish leadership is imprecise and vague, but it is built upon a common understanding of the problem. This is seen as positive in Sweden since Swedes, according to Daun, (1998), are also a very consensus-concerned population and it is important that everyone agree.

Jepson (2009) found in her study of German and British leadership that German employees tend to appreciate a supportive and listening leadership on basis of a constitution of the right person in the right position. Germans are, according to Jepson, very clear that they value expertise and functional competence, and it is important that although employees might benefit from some space to perform, it should be the leader who makes the decisions. This fit with my results, where Alfred's (Germany) story states that he found it hard to ask for advice without his competence being questioned. Also his quote, which describe that he only took decisions for the very sake of it, match Jepson's findings.

### **Common and different cultural experiences**

My results show there were common and different experiences concerning culture. What all the leaders had in common was that they reported that it is important for them, as Swedish leaders, to have a relationship and connection with their employees. All of the leaders reported wanting to include their employees in decisions to create a better social and work climate, something that proved harder than expected in some countries. In the story that Alfred (Germany) tells, that the German coworkers considered him an unsuitable and maybe even incompetent leader when he asked for advice from his board-members. As soon as he explained that he wanted their opinions to do a better job, he got the advice he needed. This is in accordance with the GLOBE (House et al., 2004) results, since consensus and to demonstrate trust by giving space for own initiative, is namely quite the opposite to what employees outside of the Northern Countries are expecting from a leader. Also (Hofstede, 1982) argues that a feminine country such as Sweden is used to intuitive rather than decisive leadership, and to seek consensus.

Holmberg and Åkerblom (2001) argue that consensus leads to a problem when Swedish leaders work in a foreign team, namely that consensus in Sweden implies everyone is regarded as being just like “everyone else”. In a Swedish team, difference in status is undesired, but in other countries the leader is expected to take control, make a decision and be direct. House et al., (2004), argue that the group chooses the most representative in terms of attributes and behaviors, to be the leader. House et al. further state that if the leader does not match criteria that are attractive in terms of the Cultural endorsed Leadership Theory (CLT) used in GLOBE, for example to be direct or to make decisions without discussing it with others, the leader might have a harder time being accepted by the group than if he adapted to the common values of the society.



In this case, when Alfred (Germany) showed a side that in Sweden would have been considered attractive in a leader, he instead was seen as a weak leader in Germany, which made his board doubt him as suitable for the role.

The presented results show that the story that Charles (China) provides addresses the issue of relationships that is prominent in his experience of Chinese work environment. When he did not get straight answers from his employees during formal meetings, he realized that he needed to adapt culture and work harder to get a good relation to his employees so that they trusted him enough to speak to him in private instead. Otherwise, he did not gain access to the information he needed to be a good leader. He also had to be very clear in how his decisions would affect the employees in a short time perspective. Conte and Novello (2008) and Hofstede (2008) argue that high-ranking people in China expect to get confidential information to a larger extent than in other parts of the world. They suggest that when dealing with Chinese, the leader shall practice a great deal of cultural sensitivity to gain the most of the informal culture and to be as direct as possible in terms of how decisions affect the employee.

These results can also be connected to the GLOBE (House et al., 2004) results that state that while Sweden is ranked 48 on performance orientation, China is close behind the U.S. with a rank of 13, which is considerably higher. This means that Chinese employees are more focused on career and attaining goals than a Swedish leader might be used to. What is surprising is that when comparing Charles' (China) and Tommy's (China) stories with the GLOBE (House et al., 2004) results and Conte and Novello's (2008) results, the present data show signs of a short-term plan among the employees. Charles (China) describes the employees as restless to get ahead of the career and uninterested in long term plans. Instead his employees' want to know what they can do right now for their career even if that means quitting and starting over at another company.

Tommy (China) describes his employees as extremely loyal and would not leave the company, as that would be disloyal to the leader. However, none of them mention what Conte and Novello (2008) describe as a belief in luck and circumstance rather than personal achievements. This contradicts Charles (China) story completely, since he claims that his Chinese employees were very careful to take own responsibility for their own career. They did not wait for fait to step in but rather let Charles (China) know that they wanted new challenges. GLOBE (House et al., 2004) has found that China rank as 34 at future orientation, in other words in the

middle sector. This too contradicts Charles story to some extent. The results from the present study suggest that China would be among the short-term future orientation societies, since Charles (China) describes his Chinese employees as preferring to work with the present task rather than planning for future goals. On the other hand, the placing on long-term orientation might be due to the fact that China place high on performance orientation, which is connected to the hunger for a career.

### **When culture simplifies or complicates leadership**

As stated in the beginning, all of the leaders stress the need to be a team. The results interpreted as the theme “To be a part of a group” show that the two who talked the most about their relationships were Hedvig (India) and Tommy (China). While Tommy considered himself as a part of the group and the culture, and describe the culture at the company “as a family”, Hedvig mentions trouble with finding a balance between the need to be a team and the way Indians become one. The GLOBE-study (House et al, 2004) data show that Sweden is in the top of Social collectivism and hence want to belong to a group, whereas Indians are at a moderate ranking of 26. But on the In-group collectivism, Sweden is in the opposite, at bottom 60, and India is ranked a high 4 (House et al.). This is coherent with presented results and can explain why Hedvig (India) considered it a struggle to make the Indians form a team with her. They needed a stronger, more intimate bond with other team members to even want to be a part of the group at all. On the contrary, as many Swedes, Hedvig (India) wanted to belong to a secure and tight knit collective group without having to share too much of her private life which is a part of her in-group collectivism-life.

What is also noticeable in the results is the mentioning of coffee breaks and lunch as a social event. The leaders claim that Swedes talk about work even at recess, but the data shows that it is a valued part of the culture at the organizations that fill a function of strengthen the group. The present results show an example of how the high Social collectivism and low In-group collectivism take form in Sweden: it is important to be a part of the group at work, but integrity and a sharp line between work and social relations is regarded as appropriate and polite. Charles (China) appears to consider himself between Hedvig (India) and Tommy (China) in the aspect of wanting to be private. He found it odd to be as personal as desired with his employees

but put that aside and strived to be more personal for the sake of a better understanding of his employees.

Based on the results from the present study, it is evident that if there was a big discrepancy between Sweden and the foreign country in a specific GLOBE-dimension, it was likely to turn up in the leaders' stories as something that complicated their leadership. Many examples in the data show that the more discrepancy, the harder it was for the leader to feel at ease with the leadership, unless he or she did change. On the other hand, if the culture was similar, the leader reported that the culture did not affect the leadership. For example, my results show that Hedvig (India), Tommy (China) and Charles (China) reported an inviting spirit and a sense of pride among their employees towards their family-life. Hedvig (India) reported that she found it a bit hard to get used to. She explained that her opinion of Swedes is that they have more integrity and might be polite but rather not private in work situations. Hedvig further showed a major commitment to facilitate cultural disparities by meeting the needs among her employees for a more assertive leadership but still found it hard to practice a leadership in her Indian team that was coherent with her values. Even though she reported on being aware of the cultural differences and stating that it is important to acknowledge these, she did though not report on any specific actions towards meeting the desire for intimacy in her team that was shown by for example sharing private information.

In the GLOBE ranking, Sweden score 61 on In-group collectivism, while India is ranked as 4. My results show that Hedvig's story is coherent with what would be expected in regard to CLT's (House et al., 2004), in that the cultural endorsed leadership in India is that of an assertive leader that show care for her private relations and share this with her employees. This might have aggravated Hedvig's (India) leadership. India is also very low on Gender Equality (see Table 4) while Sweden is very high. This might also affect Hedvig's leadership, since Indians do not consider "soft" decisions such as reaching consensus or care for the team as important as Swedes do. The combination of CLT's, where Indians rather see men in strong positions and women as nurturers (House et al., 2004), combined with the fact that Hedvig did not feel comfortable in showing her nurturing side by sharing her private life, might have been a cultural clash itself, that aggravated her leadership. Tommy (China) considered the cultural sensitivity a positive thing, but he also reported that he took actions towards understanding and being a part of the culture, such as showing pictures of his family and engaging in the role not only as leader but as "father" of his

employees. He also stressed the fact that this is important and the present research show that this, together with his self-concept relational orientation, has impacted on his sensitivity towards the culture's members. His story is also consistent with CLT's since China as well as India has a high rank, a nine, on In-group collectivism.

### **Culture that changes or strengthens leadership**

My results show that Alfred (Germany) described a culture at the company that did not premier trust and generosity but rather a culture where the employees expected to be mistrusted and get a reprimand instead of feedback if they did not succeed. He also described the incident with the company-car and the focus on titles, which might devolve from the fact that cultures with low human orientation are motivated by material possessions and power (House et al., 2004). Germany has among the highest rankings (5) on uncertainty avoidance and on assertiveness, but the lowest on human orientation. Human orientation indicates to which degree the society encourages its member to be kind and rewarding to others and value relations. This is coherent with my results that show that the social climate in Germany is less trusting than in Sweden and rarely rewards relational efforts. There is also a major gap between Sweden and Germany on the rank of Gender egalitarianism, in fact there is a significant discrepancy between Sweden and all of the other countries, apart from Denmark. Alfred (Germany) is the only one who mention it, which could be both a combination of that gender egalitarianism and humane orientation, or the fact that he has a well-educated wife whom he described was seen by his colleagues as a sidekick to himself, which annoyed them both.

“Identification with the role as leader in a different culture” is in the present study interpreted as a conclusion of the sub themes “to change the leadership to fit the culture”, “to identify with the culture” and “to be the leader that the culture desired”. The results show that identity as a leader was either strengthened if a leader was operating in a country similar to Sweden, or changed to better suit the new context. According to Sveningsson and Larsson (2006) leadership emerges in the context is therefore partly coherent with the results, but down to the wire leadership has, as Hofstede, (1982) says, a nationality.

Rakel (Denmark) reported by far the least cultural clashes and had difficulties with pointing at specific behaviors or values. The GLOBE (House et al., 2004) results show that the

two dimensions where Denmark and Sweden differ the most are Humane Orientation and Performance orientation. This is in the present data shown by the only two stories that the leader could pinpoint when asked about specific cultural differences or surprises. She reported that she was surprised over the work-mentality at her company and the lack of coffee breaks, and the difference in childcare. She also mentioned that she took action towards helping her employees with the second problem. These were the only clear statements about culture that she made. I interpret this as practicing leadership in a culture very different from your own might not lead to the same endeavor to reflect over the own leadership identity since it is more consistent with the original Swedish one. GLOBE (House et al., 2004) states that Sweden is ranked 48 whereas Denmark is ranked 25 on the dimension performance orientation, and hence it could be assumed that there would be a more pronounced experience of this in the data. The Danish leader did although not report on any problems with the enhanced performance orientation, which might be due to the fact that she has been working at the same company and position for a very long time and report to not recall what it is like to be a leader in Sweden. This is, on the other hand, not as important since the question concerns her experience of being a leader in Denmark, not in Sweden.

Gunnar (USA) reports to identify strongly with the entrepreneurial spirit in his team and at the company. This might have helped to strengthen his role as leader in that particular context, since his idea of leadership that focused on degrees of freedom and goal-setting was consistent with the desired leadership at the medical science company. This can be connected to the theory that self-expression in the organization fill needs for personal and relational identification (Gonzalez & Chakraborty, 2013), and creates an identification with the collective. Since Gunnar (USA) did not need to change his values when practicing leadership as much as Hedvig (India), he did not experience the same struggle to cope with challenging leadership situations. As previously stated by Javidan & House (2001) and House et al. (2004), the US is in the highest sector on the dimension assertiveness and performance orientation. Those results are coherent with this since Gunnar (USA) emphasized performance and ambition as tangible among his employees. It also shows that he appreciated that and reported not having to change his leadership style or personality, or even believe that it was possible to do so. I propose an explanation of this by referring back to Thatcher and Cooper (2010). They argue, as previously stated, that the person identifies more if he sees attributes in the organization that are similar to

his own. Even though USA is rated 11 on assertiveness, whereas Sweden is at the very bottom with 61, Gunnar did not experience it as a problem, since he himself probably is more assertive than Swedes in general and hence fit the cultural values and practices well anyways.

Another leader whose leadership was strengthened due to the fit between culture and person is Tommy (China). He is the only leader that reported “relationships” as his principal strength. His story revolved around the relationships and how they affected his leadership in a positive way. Thatcher and Cooper (2010) explain the self-concept theory, where people that have a relationship self-concept orientation, identify with their relations and are more careful to maintain them. This is coherent with the present results where Tommy (China) found it enjoyable to lead in a country that values relations due to the fact that his own talents for relations are flourishing in the context. His leadership identity was hence strengthened by the culture that appreciated the relationship-focused leadership he practiced. Tommy reported that he suggested that the company should pay more attention to employ leaders that appreciate the relational culture to build on the previous leadership. Ritter and Lord, (2007) state that employees measure the new leader on basis of the previous one. This can be connected to the results, in that taking care of successors might be even more important in China where the relationships are more desired than elsewhere.

### **Methodological concerns**

As Braun and Clarke (2006) stress, it is important to recognize the potential bias in thematic analysis. I have followed the method in every aspect to avoid bias, but it is still my personal analysis of the data and I am aware of the fact that there might be other ways to interpret data and hence find different results. My method is adapted to the cultural perspective, and due to that, I have interpreted the data with a focus on identity and culture. Another result might have been more focused on for example specific leadership skills, but since the answers generated more personal experiences that descriptions of particular situations that described the leadership itself, I propose that my method was well suited to fulfill my purpose which was to investigate the personal experience, not to deduct specific leadership skills. There might be a possibility that a complimentary questionnaire regarding personal traits might have generated another dimension to the study that could have made the interpreted identity more solid. As for now, the identity and identification with leadership is based on personal tells and hence very subjective and also

interpreted, not measured by objective standards such as a test could have provided. The purpose of the present study was to study the personal experience of the leaders, not to measure their personality or their actual leadership skills in proportion to a set template.

The open questions of a semi-structured interview are a source of divergent data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and were during the analysis of the present data experienced as both negative and positive. Never the less, the research questions for the present study benefited from a data collection method which was as flexible as possible with follow-up questions in order to grasp the specific experiences, and hence a semi structured interview was best suited. The results from the present study show that the leaders themselves both chose to talk about personal experiences when encouraged, and also showed a coherent pattern in lingering on specific details in their stories that proved to be coherent with the different theories. The study is not generalizable, but only a study of how the interviewed Swedish leaders experienced what it is like to be a leader in a team from a different culture.

### **Theoretical concerns**

Theory and discussion of the present study is to a large extent grounded in the GLOBE research project, which in turn is partly built on Hofstede's dimensions (House et al., 2004). When I studied the area of global leadership and culture, it became obvious that these two theories have been so influential on later studies of culture and leadership that is hard to find research that contradicts it. Also Sveningsson and Alvesson (2012) are among the most influential in their area, where they research the concept of whether or not there even is something that can be called leadership or if it is rather a series of contextual factors. There are though some things in GLOBE, Hofstede's and Alvesson's and Sveningsson's theories that is worth noticing.

Blagoev and Minkov (2012) argue that there is an ongoing controversy about the GLOBE dimensions, but they can also validate some of the GLOBE dimensions empirically. As Jepson (2009) claims, the standardized questionnaires of GLOBE capture leadership in an objective way. Even though GLOBE also used media-analyses and interviews, this was applied only partly to the total sample for further research. Yeganeh (2013) argues that culture is a complex concept that cannot be fully understood by dimensions. Further, effectiveness of leadership may vary depending on cultural values of an individual (Spreitzer et. al. 2005), which point to that there is

a demand for studies that focus on personal values of culture that complement the quantitative research.

Ailon-Suoday and Kunda (2003) take a social constructionist stand and argues that it is important to consider the eventuality that societies hold on to their cultural values and practices simply because they like to see themselves that way, since differences create a sense of 'us and them'. I will not linger on the perspective of social constructs since it is not the chosen methodological perspective of the study, but it is worth to notice the two sided coin of being more aware of cultural differences, that the culture is fortified by how immigrated leaders react to what they assume is the culture. That might create an even more static cultural norm that excludes rather than includes. Ailon-Suoday and Kunda further propose a more fine-tuned approach to how identities are changed in the cultural context. I therefore have chosen to focus on the work of Svenningsson and Alvesson (2012) who have chosen a more qualitative and interpreting view when studying leadership. They propose a focus on the feeling of what is going on in leadership, and look for more appreciation of how leaders react in the social context.

It shall be noted that the analysis, although made from the methodological framework that is provided by Braun and Clarke (2012) about thematic analysis, is based on my own opinions and interpretations. I have chosen not to focus on things such as previous leadership experience, specific leadership styles, gender or age in the study. It is noted that such work might benefit the study if the data were to be re-analyzed from a broader perspective, but not the chosen research questions of the present study. Especially the case with Hedvig (India) and Charles (China) who only partly or not at all have been living in the countries where they operated could have been more thoroughly researched in terms of how they internalized the culture, something that is far easier when living in the country. Hedvig (India), Tommy (China) and Gunnar (USA) were all interviewed at their workplace, something that might have facilitated their ability to reflect around their leadership in a way that to a larger extent focused on the leadership in cultural context.

## ***Conclusion***

The present results show that the cultural differences that were the most prominent in the experiences of the interviewed leaders all revolved around five themes. The five themes found in the stories were Claiming and gaining Trust, Offering and accepting Independence, Identification



with the role as leader, Private and work-relations and The need to Communicate. The employees in the different countries all preferred an assertive leadership, whereas the Swedish leaders prefer to practice a leadership where the leader has an informal and coaching role that leaves space for own initiatives. Cultural issues arise mostly when the leader wants to show that he trust the employee by giving her freedom in her work, and the employee refuses to reciprocate this trust by not accepting the additional space, in ways that are represented in the themes. The challenge to “take the best of two worlds” was approached differently by the leaders. The most successful attempts were in accordance with the cultural values, where both the leader and the employees made adjustments where needed. In such cases, the Swedish leadership was appreciated. When the leaders identified strongly with the cultural values of leadership in the country, they reported to feel comfortable and enjoy their leadership in the foreign culture to a larger extent than in situations where they had to change their leadership to meet the cultural differences.

### **Suggested future research**

Considering the results of the present study, there should be more research concerning the underlying concept of trust and how it manifests in situations where Swedish leaders work with foreign teams, especially in societies where the cultural differences in the dimension Assertiveness, In-group collectivism and Social collectivism (House et al., 2004) are substantial. It is also suggested that more qualitative research should be done in the area of personal experience and case studies of specific leaders, since it might deepen the understanding of how cross cultural leadership affects how Swedish leaders think about their leadership identity.

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