

The Paramount Importance of “Bildning”

Sofia Ulver-Sneistrup: The Business Community is in Dire Need of More *Bildning*



I read on Twitter that a French bank director said that “at the office here in Paris we have to ‘force’ people to go for business meetings with Swedes” to his Swedish lunch date. The reason, according to the bank director, is that ‘Swedish business people don’t have anything to talk about except money, profit and golf. They don’t know anything about history, culture, politics or philosophy. They don’t even have a religion.”

This hugely unflattering quote is taken from a recent article in Dagens Industri (Sweden’s biggest daily business newspaper), published under the heading, “Philosophy can be good for business.” The point that journalist Jan Gradvall wants to make is that business people—and Swedish business people in particular (God bless us ... oh, that’s right we don’t believe in God)—are lacking what we in Sweden call *bildning*.

There is no perfect translation for *bildning* but it should at least not be translated as education - which would rather be translated to *utbildning* in Swedish. *Bildning*, as I will keep on calling it despite its mistakenly snobby connotations, is more of a culturally and philosophically informed understanding of the world and doesn’t necessarily have to be obtained through formal school education—although that is, of course, no disadvantage.

The point? *Bildning* is becoming an endangered species in the world of business. Today’s business apprentices are increasingly encouraged to go directly to practically oriented schools where profit is taught to be the only religion instead of starting their higher education with two years of liberal arts. Indeed, in the British “Oxbridge” tradition, philosophy, sociology, history of culture and history of ideas are studied before business is. This is still the model, perhaps unfortunately giving *bildning* an elitist connotation.

Why is bildning good for business? The answer is simple. *Bildning* is good—even necessary—not only for understanding the world in which we live, but also the people who live in this world and who use products and services. And it’s more important than ever in a world that’s increasing in complexity through globalization, extreme urbanization, flashmobs, acute climate change, polarization and fragmentation of ideological values, global terrorism, increased female power, capitalism meltdown, Arab Springs, Occupy-everything groups and democracy-craving social media revolutions.

No wonder businesses are confused, and in compulsory manners preach “business as usual.” But consumers are not “usual” anymore. Consumer society is going through one of its strongest paradigm shifts during the last 100 years, turning politically oriented on a massive, yet fragmented scale.

As an academic consumer-trend researcher and speaker, I come across a lot of various businesses and industries that lack focused analysis of the world. The more masculine and engineered the culture, usually (but not always), the larger the lack. It is not that most of these executives refuse or detest this knowledge, but they never needed it in the past. It is not until now that they have 10 warning signals from front offices that consumers actions are haphazard and unexpected, and it is beginning to show in their financial reports. What is happening?

What is happening, of course, is that consumer culture is today immersed, even impregnated, by paradox. Consumers have news and information streaming from all directions and have created new expert systems to feel safe. Therefore, solving paradox is today’s consumer’s “business as usual.” It requires taking into consideration contradicting ideals: authenticity vs. futuristic technology; ethical consumption vs. commercialism; life-lengthening vs. aging; climate care vs. greenwash; informed choice vs. leisure—just to mention a few. These are contradictions that ultimately form today’s anxious but yet exciting consumer culture, and to understand how consumers will act on these paradoxes, the business community needs a more culturally, philosophically and historically informed understanding of the world.

We simply need some good old *bildning*. Otherwise no one will want to play golf with us.

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