

## THE MIXING OF CULTURES DRIVES INNOVATION

What do goat milk, spiders, and fishing lines have in common? Sea urchins and lollipops? Music records and airlines? Shakira and Shrek? Most of us would assume nothing. But out of each of these seemingly random combinations have come radical innovations that have created whole new fields and in ways large or small, changed the world. I talk about such fascinating combinations in my recent book *The Medici Effect* and it is striking how powerful this "effect" is for people that are working or living in cultures other than "their own." People like that have an incredible advantage in coming up with groundbreaking ideas - and in making those ideas happen. This definitely holds true for Swedes in the US.

As Swedes in America we have a tremendous advantage in generating new ideas - at least compared to your average Swede in Sweden or your average American in the US. The reason is this: groundbreaking ideas are created when we combine very different concepts with each other. The more unlikely the combination of concepts appear, the more likely that the idea actually will change the world in significant ways. People that are working in different cultures have a far greater chance of finding these unusual combinations and of becoming leaders.

Take, for instance, Marcus Samuelsson who became one of the world's most innovate chefs at an age most of us were still working in our first job out of college. What's his secret? He took something Swedish combined it with something entirely different. As he says in *The Medici Effect*: "Up to this point I thought good food was "owned" by Europe and France. But during my travels I understood that good food exists everywhere. That was when I realized that if I combine my knowledge from Europe with the tastes that exist in Thai food or Japanese or Latin American food or whatever, then I will have something exciting."

We, as Swedes in New York and the US, can all use the same principles by looking for ideas in fields and cultures beyond our own. In fact, this is one big reason that the US has been able to remain competitive for so long. Foreigners arrive, integrate reasonably well, and proceed to find amazing ways to combine ideas and concepts from different cultures and fields into new products and services, art-works and businesses. How, then, do you maximize your chances of creating the Medici Effect? Some critical steps include:

1. Break down the barriers between cultures and keep an

open mind while looking for concepts and ideas in unusual places.

2. Combine different concepts to come up with new, groundbreaking ideas.

3. Prepare to experiment with the idea, your first try will most likely not work.

4. If you feel a little fear in doing all of this - that's OK. It is proof that you are pushing the boundaries.

5. Do all of the above often - the scientifically strongest correlation to innovative success is to try many times.

All right, these are some of the ways to generate ideas here in the US. But what is happening at home - what is happening in Sweden? During my speaking engagements with Swedish companies I have realized something intriguing, something of a paradox: Sweden is one of the countries in Europe that has been most open to foreigners and to immigration, yet the Medici Effect is lacking. There are people from all kinds of cultural and professional backgrounds that could bring new, amazing combinations of ideas to Sweden and boost innovation to ever new heights, just like Swedes are currently doing in the US and around the world. But such innovation is not happening.

We, in other words, take advantage of the Medici Effect abroad and forget about it at home. Indeed, Swedes in the US are changing the concept of Sweden by furiously combining design-approaches, ideas and products with each other. But the concept of Sweden is changing in Sweden as well - we just have to be open to let others do it. At least if we hope to remain competitive.

Or, to put it in the words of our favorite chef, Marcus Samuelsson: "Most people confuse the notion of 'Swedish.' Sweden today is international and mixed. Sweden today means sushi, rolled by a black guy, served to a Korean couple." Why not? ■

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