

# *Milk the Tiger*

**Northern European organisations seeking to establish themselves in Asia will have major advantages in relation to local players if they introduce an organisational culture and leadership style characterised by mature empathy.**

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The tiger is both a carnivore and a mammal. It has sharp teeth, but also mammary glands. Which of these attributes you focus on will determine the nature of your interaction with the animal. Cringing in fear of a tiger's big teeth requires no special talent. It is more challenging to establish a mutually beneficial relationship – and it is possible.

Many people talk about the competition between Asia and the Western world alone on the basis of costs. We can never win on this parameter! It would be better to focus on where we actually can win. We can win on Asia's home turf if we shift our attention to an area where we have a major head start. Put briefly, if we view our competitiveness in Asia from the perspective of attachment and development psychology we will be able to identify major advantages for Northern European organisations.

The quality of attachment has far-reaching consequences for a child's personality development, including their empathy skills as an adult. The relational leadership qualities of all leaders are impacted by the empathy they experienced themselves as children.

I deal with basic human attachment and development psychology in my daily work. This can be in a clinical context, with clients suffering from anxiety, depression or relationship problems. But also when I work with leaders and employees who want to develop their empathy skills so they can create stronger personal bonds with other key people in their professional network.

From an attachment and development psychology perspective, Northern Europe appears to have a major head start over countries such as China. If you look at studies investigating the degree of 'secure attachment' (Ainsworth et al. 1978), the number of children in this category is 50 per cent in countries like China (Van Ijzendoorn & Kroonenberg, 1988). In Sweden the figure is 74 per cent, in England 75 per cent, and in Holland it is 67 per cent (ibid.). Secure attachment is, among other things, a measure of how much empathy a child experienced during the first years of its life, and is therefore capable of showing towards others as an adult. Including in professional relationships. Northern Europe appears to

have a significant advantage in this area. We should consider putting this advantage to work.

Northern European organisations can use their greater empathy skills to competitive advantage in countries such as China. Studies have shown that the relative advantages of mature empathy in an organisation in Asia can be significantly greater than in Scandinavia. This suggests that the general psychological working environment Northern Europeans are able to create in Asia might be more comfortable to work in, for Asians as well. The most talented professionals are already in high demand in Asia. Competition for their loyalty is only going to increase in the years ahead. In other words, we can beat the competition on their home ground if we give some thought to how we establish and run subsidiaries in Asia.

Many people are aware today that leaders and employees who are better at building empathic relationships to other people make a company more profitable. Higher levels of empathy in an organisation correlate with lower staff turnover and sick leave rates, fewer personal conflicts, and greater adaptability, innovation and productivity. In a nutshell, better relationships lead to better results. And China and its organisations appear to be suffering from a relational tension which it would benefit everyone to loosen up.

There are big differences in how people from various cultures expect to be led. Yet obviously people prefer to be treated respectfully and not abusively, whether the leadership style is strongly authoritarian or encourages a high degree of autonomy.

In the competitive context, mature empathy can serve as a Trojan horse on the Asian home markets.

The primary sectors in Asia currently focus on manual production, but the standard of living and level of education will have risen significantly in a few years. And competition for the most capable and best-educated employees will have intensified. If Scandinavian organisations start today to integrate a more relational image as friendlier workplaces into their strategy, they will reap the benefits in a few years when they are trying to attract the cream of the labour market.

Asians have the same attachment needs as everyone else. They are likely to gravitate towards places where the most secure and healthiest attachment to other people is possible. People are the same on this point – we are attracted most strongly to the people and groups which treat us the best. We are generally not attracted to people and organisations which subject us to unpleasant experiences.

My own experience confirms the findings of van Ijzendoorn & Kroonenberg (1988). The leaders I have assisted describe Asian organisation cultures as characterised by rigid authoritarian hierarchies and power and subservience relationships. Where subordinate employees, partners and suppliers are often threatened, verbally abused and humiliated as a 'motivation tactic'. Approaches which I see as an expression of less appropriate ways of relating to other people, from an empathy perspective, and which create insecure attachment. Northern European organisations seeking to establish themselves in Asia will have major advantages in relation to local players if they introduce an organisation culture and leadership style characterised by mature empathy. This will make it possible to attract the best local employees at the same wages, while gaining the higher productivity which flows from empathic leadership. The same is true of relationships to local partners and suppliers – competitively stronger relational bonds can be built with a higher level of empathy.

Although empathy is not always highly emphasised in Scandinavian organisations, we may have a head start in relation to mature empathy which flows out of our common culture, expressed in terms of an amicable tone and respect for general human rights. We can translate this head start into bottom-line results if we recognise the value of the relational culture that the majority of us are capable of exhibiting. Scandinavia can capitalise on its culture if we are just aware of the value of the relational values we have, and how these influence ourselves and others in close relationships. Better relationships create better results.

What I am suggesting is that if we are able to bridle our fear of the Asian tiger economies and dare to approach them in humble friendship, we will give the tiger the opportunity to get to know us as a better alternative to what it already knows. With this approach it will be possible to milk it, if we recognize our own strengths and refuse to be paralysed by fear when we see its teeth.

We can capitalise on the threat from Asia if we dare to get close to it, and remain humble and friendly.