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# Leadership Principles of the Vikings

Jan Kallberg

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What you need to  
explore, conquer, and  
succeed as a leader in the  
dark ages.

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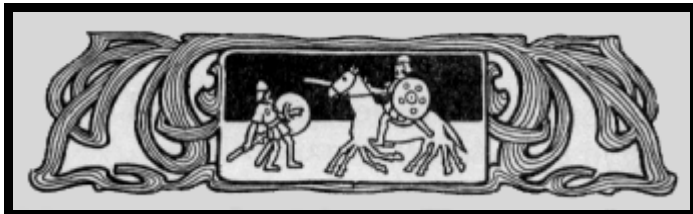
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## Jan Kallberg

The distinct characteristics of Viking leadership drew the interest of Jan Kallberg at an early age. The author is a former light infantry company commander of the Royal Swedish Army and an Arctic ranger. He holds a law degree and an LL.M. from Juridicum Law School of Stockholm University. He continued with graduate studies at the University of Texas. His major field of is decision-making and public management with the focus of his dissertation on “decision making under great uncertainty.” He was born in one of the tribal lands of the Viking heritage, Westmanland, the land of the men from the west where the vast forests meet the rivers and the land breaks up into valleys and then is dispersed into villages. As a younger man in his early 20s, he traveled extensively. Jan Kallberg resides in Texas and has published seven books in Sweden.



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## Introduction

The Vikings were formidable adopters to the Dark Ages and were able to reach their strategic goals – land and wealth – and without losing their freedom or individualism they were able to build effective collective action to acquire what they wanted.

The Dark Ages was a trouble some era in world history but it also resembles the changes we are facing in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century with turbulence in the economy and the social order, and with questions about our belief system. Things are no longer the way they used to be and the way we assumed things to be for the past century. Globalization is more than a buzzword today; it is a reality when our companies no longer can compete and there is a cloud of uncertainty about the future. It leads to a changing environment in business and trade.



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Fundamental parts of our culture such as religion and the way we portrayed it, are being challenged. There are clashes among different forms of civilization claiming leadership and political territory. What was a solid investment fifty years ago, might be gone in a few years and there are tremendous shifts of wealth and equity. This sounds to be as it was today, but it would also be an accurate description of the world in 800 A.D. World history tends to repeat itself in some form and we can see linkages and similarities between these two transitional periods in history.

The Roman Empire had collapsed four hundred years earlier and from the fragments of the Romans, the Byzantine Empire in the east and the Holy Roman Empire in the west were created. Both were under pressure from aggressive neighbors and competing empires as the Arab expansion and barbaric tribes that had unified and formed countries in the border regions. Neighbors that were easily conquered by the superior Romans have now learned how to fight, to trade; and the advantages that the Byzantine and Holy Roman Empires had inherited from the Romans were no longer giving them the edge over their opponents.

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The barbarians had gradually become trained opponents, disciplined, and driven by defined strategies that were contrary to the older power's interest. New trade routes were established that took away the revenues from the old ports. What had been a long stable tradition of trade and interaction during the Greek and the following Roman empires, was totally shook up – a millennium of certainty had turned to total uncertainty of how events would turn out and what was coming in the future.

The Moslem faith had been one of the major challenges and their holy war against their Christian neighbors had pushed the borders and soon Egypt, North Africa, Spain, and a major part of the Byzantine Empire had become under Arab and Moslem rule. Step by step, the Byzantine Empire, which had possessions all the way to today's Iran and the whole Middle East, lost its territory and withdrew toward Constantinople and Greece. The old empires were as tired as our old industrialist companies when they faced the initial waves of globalization in the 1970s and 1980s – they relied on old and reliable revenue streams they assumed would last forever. They were not adaptive, and it never really crossed their minds that the business landscape would change. The

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change has not stopped and with the Internet, its speed is increasing.

This turmoil created the disruption of old trade routes and the establishment of new ones as the Arab expansion and the wars between the Byzantine and the Arabs continued. The way business had been conducted the last thousand or even two-thousand years was suddenly turned upside down as trade from Northern Africa was no longer smooth with funneling through Rome or Athens. Trading suddenly took new paths through the Caucasus and over Spain. The former fairly safe voyage over the Mediterranean was now haunted by Arab and barbaric pirates, and there was no longer any monopoly; but, there was also no longer any order.

New traders cut the middlemen and went directly to the source. They would seek their ways through the uncertainty by sharing knowledge, bargaining with pirates, and being movers and shakers. It was a fast moving economy compared to how it had been before, but there was a much higher risk for loss of property and even life. This created opportunities as well as trade. Profits easily soared as trading was disturbed and new goods suddenly became available through a change of

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trading patterns. This was an opportunity for the optimist and a sure death for the pessimist.

The longer we look at the dramatic changes that took place since a thousand years ago, the more we see similarities with the societal turbulence we experience today with the Internet, globalization, terrorism, uncertainty, new technology, and a fast changing society. Drastic change in trade or society is nothing new to this planet but when it happens we have trouble seeing through the fog of war. The information might even contradict itself. The sources are limited to be able to acquire correct information. New unforeseen events can turn development in a direction for which we are unprepared; and this increases the risks for us.

Risks are hard to measure and understand but going from one era in civilization to another even increases the probability to make the wrong decision. The beauty of a stalemate or a status quo, or a society frozen in time with no changes or challenges is that risk and the understanding of risk is significantly easier because we know many of the factors that would have an impact on the risk and the opportunity. Stable societies and trade patterns benefit in that they are established and can create large and tailored organizations to cater to these

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needs. Drastic change would create the opportunity from which the entrepreneur can benefit and increased lack of information, fog of war, and uncertainty gives the advantage to those who take initiative but do it in a calculated manner.

If we can predict the future, we can structure ourselves in advance to face it well. The industrial era from the 1880s to the early 2000s was expansionist in nature. Every company tried to expand to the limits of the market; it was influenced by scientific management that saw everyone as dispensable. Everyone could be swiftly changed for another employee. That worked well in a society that had little change except for a predictable progress of market growth. These giant corporations now face a severe challenge when what was a profitable large organization suddenly has become a huge overhead that can not adapt or run fast enough while the business changes and globalization becomes more apparent.

We no longer are able to predict the future using our traditional leadership and management styles. Even tools for management and proper allocations, to steer the business, become obsolete when the underlying concepts and fixed assumed relations captured within these tools, are

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transformed. Once outdated they lead to disaster and failure instead of success. To avoid failing we need to find new ways or rediscover secrets for successful leadership under great uncertainty. There have always been uncertainties to be acknowledged but still companies could make up sales projections for five – ten years and they were right. They sold what they projected. Today many companies are unsure if they will be around five – ten years from now.

Traditional leadership models from the industrial era have several input channels like projections built on cyclic behavior. If the amount of uncertainty increases, these tools will start making spurious inferences leading to the wrong decisions and eventually, losses.

The Vikings' approach to deal with uncertainty and turn it around so the risk becomes an opportunity has a relevant message in the today's economy and in the events of the future. Instead of seeking answers in the past to tell us about the future we turn around and actually look toward the future with an open mind and maximize the flow of relevant information that we can absorb and process. This can be accomplished by extensive sharing and adding of ideas based on genuine

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interest to reach the mutually accepted goal. A forward-looking adaptive fast moving organization will be on top of the events as the new society and the future unfold.



# Vikings

The Vikings were highly successful in the chaotic business environment of 800 A.D. The question is – how did the Vikings cope with change and what made them successful?

What made the Vikings different and how did they exploit the opportunity instead of falling prey to the change? Those they preyed upon were huge masses of soldering enemies with no real motivation to put up a real fight. This enemy did as little as possible just to get their wages and move on. They unfortified cities taking peace for granted. They attacked monasteries and noblemen collecting their fortunes on islands and remote seashores based on the fact that their old enemies were unable to conduct a swift amphibious assault. They all shared a common characteristic – they resembled our mature mega-corporations' attitudes and approaches to the challenges of our time.



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The similarities make the Vikings relevant to study. The Vikings share their characteristics with the fast-paced entrepreneurs of our time and age. They faced challenges, confronted the unknown, used their limited resources, and created a social environment that was focused on success. They saw an opportunity and seized it. What were the barriers of the sea, became a highway to conquest.

The question why suddenly Iron Age farmers entered a voyage to the end of the world and beyond can be answered in several ways – but the key components are trust, equality, honesty, decisiveness, accountability, and open-mindedness. They were pursuing opportunities that they saw and they tailored tactics and strategies to be able to achieve success. After a Viking understood the opportunity, he “sold” it to his fellow Vikings and they made a mutually accepted decision to *go for it* and if successful share the spoils. The Viking missions are true collective actions because everyone agrees to the goal and puts his efforts in to accomplishing the mission. They have a well-defined stake in the final outcome, if successful. No one is forced by being a royal subject or subordinated by being given a decision in which they have not participated.

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In 800 A.D., traditional leadership was based on fear and threats of violence instead of motivation and sharing. Peasants were rallied to fight against the Vikings by local kings only by threats of punishment. The Vikings, by being more aggressive and deadly than any penal system, scared the local defenders off. The peasants had limited opportunities for a successful defense as the Vikings would go after the gold and trophies of the rich noblemen and merchants instead of trying to figure out if there was anything to steal in the simple shacks of the peasants.

There was no real incentive in place for the masses to fight against the Vikings. It would benefit them more just to stay away when the Vikings created havoc. The masses hoped the Vikings would focus their energy on raiding the merchants and noblemen to whom the regular workers either owed money or taxes. The noblemen and merchants had lost – like the “fat cat corporation.” They have consciously, or unconsciously, ensured that those who filled their ranks and were the foundation of their organization did not really care if the organization survived or not.

Today’s workers, if not motivated, might go the extra mile anyway but then for a completely

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different reason than the survival of the company. Perhaps they like the town and do not want to move. They want to pay their mortgages and keep their houses. Or they want to keep up the car payments and maintain good credit. The reasoning comes from a strict selfish perspective. It might gain the corporation for the short run but in the end another opportunity will occur and their artificial loyalty to the company will be gone.

Vikings were motivated by their own opportunities and goals, many of their opponents were motivated by fear and by fulfilling the goals of a noble or king with whom they had no association. Vikings' ships were loaded with entrepreneurs ready to start their enterprises. And if already successful, they were ready to continue their path to wealth and to reaching their strategic goals. They knew what they wanted; they acknowledged that they needed to cooperate to reach it. And they were committed to the mutual mission to reach their own strategic goal that was aligned with the common action taken by them as a group. Their drivers were completely opposite of the subordinated, fear-driven, and penniless opponent that was rallied to fight them.

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The corporate world is filled with companies that are fear driven and not motivated from within. To succeed the fear-driven company has a huge disadvantage. Their members will not look for the best of the organization as a whole because the organization will not award them. Any tool like information, novel ideas, or accurate observations on what is happening, is felt by their workers as “doing anything beyond the paid job is to stick out your neck if you are wrong.”



*The Vikings always trained in their basic skills like archery, fighting with swords, throwing spears, and hand-fighting. For them it was not a matter of being violent or not. In the Dark Ages, disaster came suddenly and an armed response had to be swift, decisive, and accurate. In business terms, we can never relax, even if our company is doing well. And even the best salesperson needs to be continually trained to be able to take on an aggressive competitor. Vikings understood that there were no “quiet periods.”*

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If a worker sees the time spent in an organization as transitional and he does not invest any interest in that organization, and if this is aggregated by many others with the same opinions who form the organization, it is likely that the organization will fail. The corporate world believes fear of getting fired is incentive enough and that is no different from the peasants who were slaughtered in 800 A.D. Leadership for success is different from leadership for submission and control. When a functional, success-seeking company should need less control, more freedom and control is maintained by the code of conduct, the moral within the organization and the social web between the different individuals who form the organization. Once the trust, confidence, and internal accountability is established, the group gains leverage; they use their combined strengths to reach and achieve success.

Vikings were not driven by fear but instead they were driven by opportunity and the fair sharing of wealth gained by trade or acquired by raiding. These were decisions by free men deciding to take action and seize an opportunity in a "business" environment that was uncertain, risky, and where the final proceeds from their expedition were not clearly measurable or visible.

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The Vikings represented an adaptive approach to leadership that was realistic and goal oriented without being wasted by prestige or derailed by internal politics. The Viking leadership principles have a message to tell us today because we are experiencing globalization and increased technological advances and have entered uncharted territory in which nothing survives failure. We have entered the corporate “Dark Ages” and to survive we need to be able to change as the environment around us changes. The key words are *adaptive* and *proactive*.

Answer.com has in one of their explanations for Dark Ages: “An era of ignorance, superstition, or social chaos or repression.” I would say that that description carries weight today even if the wording is not perfect. Today’s world, especially the corporate world, is filled with ignorance and lack of true knowledge. People are driven by vanity, prestige, internal politics, and by trying to mislead and abuse others’ trust to reach what they want. We have created an environment where white lies are almost recognized as a part of our professional life, where we try to get what we want without considering the strategic fallout.

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Superstition is to act on feelings and emotions. Many major decisions today are made by how we feel or by our mutual group thinking instead of by realistic facts. "This is a great product," says Bob and Tom. Therefore, it is a great product that will sell – not because we know so but because Bob and Tom say so and we accept it as truth because it is a part of our role in the corporation. We are expected to accept everything that comes from within, as truth. The problem is that the buyer does not work here. That is superstition in a modern context and it is as superstitious as Iron Age priests looking into the stomach of a fish to determine the weather. It is based on what we think and believe should happen, mixed with what we want to happen and what a person in our role in an organization is assumed to have as an opinion to share in that matter.

Seen with Viking lenses, that is a recipe for disaster. Many companies today face severe challenges. It can be technology like that of Polaroid that did not see the boom of digital cameras coming. Or it can be socially driven like McDonalds that had to face a swing in people's interest from traditional fast food to a low-fat diet. Major manufacturing companies could never believe that



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