

A Hard Day's Work

Samhall is finding meaningful work and careers for people with disabilities across Sweden as the company undergoes a personal transformation of its own.

Images by Johan Jeppsson

More than 23,000 people in around 200 localities throughout Sweden are employed by Samhall. Of that number, 22,000 possess some form of disability. This inspiring state-owned company is dedicated to finding meaningful work that furthers the personal development of people with disabilities.

Monica Lingegård, CEO of Samhall, spoke to *The CEO Magazine* about how the organisation has systemically and strategically shifted its culture, values, and behaviours over the past three years.

The CEO Magazine: How did your career lead you to your current position?

Monica: I did a masters degree in business administration and then I entered the IT and management consulting business. That's where I started off with Capgemini. From there I moved into the internet industry when it was extremely hot in 1995 and stayed there as a consultant until 2001, when everything crashed.

I then moved into a CEO position with a company called Prenax, which is an international subscription agency. It's a business that nobody's heard of and it has four or five

players around the world but it was an interesting journey. It was a turnaround transformation. They took on a lot of money during the internet boom era and they were bleeding in 2002 when I joined.

In 2005, I moved onto G4S Secure Solutions as the CEO of their Swedish operations, which was also a turnaround story. This is also when I entered the more staff-intensive business. From 2011, I've been the CEO of Samhall.

Since coming into the business, you've been responsible for changing the leadership and culture of Samhall. How did you implement those changes and what has been the reaction from staff?

Our company has a cultural challenge and we need to move into a more customer-oriented, positive, solution-driven environment where people are looked upon as a true resource adding value to both themselves and our customers—a culture and a company to be proud of. Working with our company culture and our leadership styles is one of the most challenging things you can do. Structure is important but culture overrides structure. If you do not have a culture that forms behaviours taking you to your long-term goals there are no

processes, tools, or products that can compensate for that.

When you work with culture and leadership you have to work with many different activities in parallel. It's not just one thing; it's a lot of different things. You have to start from the top and change the leadership style and culture from there. It starts with me showing what kind of leadership and culture I want and demonstrating that through how I manage the people around me.

We've done everything from establishing a very clear set of values to training, leadership development programs, writing books, making movies, and performing workshops. In the workshops we discuss values and behaviours. We discuss which behaviours we want and which we do not want to see. There are all kinds of things that I've done and obviously my managers and I are an important part of this change program. I spend more than 50 per cent of my time out there talking to people and giving engaging speeches where we talk about culture, behaviour, and what strategy we need in order to be more successful.

I think a lot of people appreciate the change and appreciate the programs that we run to create a >

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successful culture. One important part of the culture is to be more customer- and sales-orientated and more business-driven, and there are also employees who don't recognise themselves anymore.

We have people in our business that do not feel comfortable with the change and don't think that they have the right competencies or skills in order to meet these new standards. I would assume that they don't appreciate this change in the same way as the people who think of themselves as strong leaders who like doing business and look positively at working in a company in strong progress.

What values have you set for Samhall and how do you align your staff with these values?

When you set values you have to roll it out in a way so that everybody can understand the rationale behind the values and how these values can help us create a more successful company. Implementing value-based leadership and creating a culture where you live your values is complex while in transition. Launching new values is difficult because it means nothing unless you clearly show what kind of behaviour stands behind those values. If we tell people to be engaged, reliable and attentive, what does it mean to be engaged? You have to make people understand what it means in their daily lives and accept that those values will act as strong guidelines or even be looked upon as our own company law.

Setting the values is a challenge. We engaged customers, employees, suppliers, and our owners before we came forward with a set of values—words that we felt we could agree upon and feel comfortable with. There is no use trying to implement values that are so far apart from who you are that nobody will believe in them. You have to build on your own strengths and uniqueness. Once we decided on that, we carried out many different things in order to communicate the values effectively.

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We showed movies to our staff, we wrote books, we held workshops, and I delivered a number of speeches. We have a huge leadership-development program where we have a thousand managers entering the program over a two-year period. It's a massive program to run in a company like ours. Working with culture and behaviours and values is time-consuming because in a big company like ours it takes years for it to be part of regular behaviour. We have to be consistent and sustainable to see a true change.

How have you influenced your company's approach and attitude towards sustainability?

What's interesting is that our whole reason for being is around sustainability. We work for a Sweden where everybody is looked upon as a true resource in the labour market—where our employees are seen as true value for Swedish companies and the public sector. Most of my employees have some kind of disability and our job is to make sure that they get a real job, a job that somebody is prepared to pay for on the customer side.

Social sustainability or social responsibility is why we exist in the first place. Obviously, we have to be sustainable in all kinds of capacities, from socially to

environmentally and financially. In order to have long-term sustainability, we have to make sure that we're making money, we have profitable contracts, and we acquire healthy businesses and customers. By doing this, we can make sure we achieve our core goal, which is to develop people through work.

What does the future look like for Samhall?

We are basically in two different industries. One is the labour market industry where we need to make sure that everybody who wants to work can work. Sweden is not unique. There is a growing need across Europe to manage the youth unemployment rate. The demand and need for companies like Samhall, which actually has a special assignment to make sure that we take unemployed, disabled people on board and develop them through work, is increasing.

From that perspective, I think we'll see Samhall grow and reach 30,000 employees in the future. I think the Samhall idea and system should be rolled out across Europe because it's a brilliant idea and we're facing huge difficulties with the unemployment rate in Europe. The need for Samhall and its expertise will grow even more in the coming five to 10 years. ●