
Denmark



This month, our focus turns to Denmark, a small country with a population of just over 5 million inhabitants, which has achieved a notable degree of economic success over the last 50 years. Located between mainland Europe and the rest of Scandinavia, Denmark has preserved a distinct national identity, exemplified by the valued royal family and the reluctance to fully integrate with the EU. Danes enjoy a high standard of living and the Danish economy is characterised by extensive government welfare measures and an equitable distribution of income.

The Danish approach has many attributes which could be deemed Scandinavian such as a strong egalitarian streak, the need to seek consensus and the attribution of status according to competence rather than class or education.

Organisations are transparent. There is good sideways communication between different business units and a readiness to cut across the hierarchy if necessary. While accountability lies with individuals, they will rarely take decisions without consulting everyone affected. Meetings are frequent and have a stated purpose, an agenda and are timely. It is important that information is widely disseminated and that a 'need to know' culture of information sharing is avoided. In fact, cross-departmental information sharing tends to work much more effectively in Denmark than in most other countries.

Business structures tend to be very flat in Denmark, which fits in neatly to the Scandinavian desire for an egalitarian approach. A good manager is somebody who encourages and coaches; who delegates to competent colleagues and who communicates clearly and unambiguously. Anybody who tried to manage Danes with an autocratic style is likely to be seen as rude and arrogant and unlikely to be given the necessary levels of support and local assistance.

Erin Meyer, author of *The Culture Map* quotes Ulrich Jepson, a Danish executive working for Maesk, and his view of an ideal leader in Denmark. He says "I felt it was important to dress just as casually as every other member of my team, so they didn't feel I was arrogant or consider myself to be above them. Danes call everyone by their first name and I wouldn't feel comfortable being called anything but Ulrich. Managing Danes, I have learned that the best way... is to push power down in the organisation.... That really motivates people here".

The belief that individuals should be considered equally and that individual achievement should be downplayed has been part of Scandinavian society for centuries but it was codified in the so-called "Law of Jante" by Danish author Aksel Sandemose.

The classical Scandinavian characteristics of consensus, loyalty to the community and equality are well disposed to make Danes good team players. It is important that everyone feels of value and is included in the process. "Danes are uncomfortable talking about their accomplishments and ambitions and often downplay any success as pure luck. That is the Danish code for being professional," says Jeppe Trolle Linnet, a Danish anthropologist. "The highest honour that you can claim," he adds, "is that you are happy and that you are really content with the way you have lived."

Plain speaking is admired and being frank is viewed as a sign of respect to the person you are dealing with. This directness can sometimes be mistaken as rudeness. However, just because Danes are direct does not mean they enjoy confrontation as they will avoid any personal references or overtly difficult situations.

Finally, Danes use good humour to create *hygge* which is explained as "the absence of anything annoying or emotionally overwhelming; taking pleasure from the presence of gentle, soothing things".