

Resources Dialogue Group

Petronella Panérus, CEO Åkestam Holst

To be alive is to be a stranger, when you share a planet with 7.4 billion others. The journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski explains that an “encounter with the Other, with other people, has always been a universal and fundamental experience for our species.” The question he asks is: do those encounters lead to violence or to cooperation, to bridge building or to the building of walls?

Society today is faced with a number of challenges. According to UNHCR, the U.N. Refugee Agency, there are more than 65 million people forcibly displaced in the world - an unprecedented number. In the light of this fact, how do we dare find the courage to opt for an open world where compassion and trust are the guiding principles, rather than letting fear of the unknown or difference lead us towards becoming more distant and isolated?

When change is happening fast and when old structures begin to crumble and give way to new ones, we experience a gap of uncertainty. People feel insecure and directionless. During these times, authoritative leaders sometimes come forward, seemingly presenting a direction, or way to go, when in fact their ideas and solutions are based on fear rather than love or the will to create something better together.

If we as humans want to understand each other, we have to allow ourselves to be influenced and inspired by each other. We have to allow ourselves to be mutually dependent on each other, rather than exist in silos.

Companies can be seen as microcosms of society. In these microcosms, we as leaders can play an important role in encouraging a culture in which we view each other as resources rather than a burden, and where we allow truly different perspectives to co-exist as ways to learn from each other. If we strive to build more inclusive and heterogeneous company cultures, perhaps we can help contribute towards a more inclusive society on the whole.

Remaining strangers is our common loss. In a study from the University of Chicago, Nick Epley conducted a series of experiments where people connected with strangers. He found that connecting with others increases happiness, although strangers in close proximity routinely ignore each other.

So what is it that keeps us from opening up towards strangers? Is it insecurities, fear of the unknown, or both? If we want to understand others better, is it more helpful to focus on similarities or differences?

These are questions with no single true answer. But they are questions that need to be asked again and again, in order to create a world where people are united by their common humanity, instead of divided by their superficial differences, and nobody is truly a stranger.