

Nordic Insights Podcast September 2020

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Satu: [00:00:00] Welcome back to Nordic Insights. I am super excited to have a conversation with Hans-Peter Siefen and he is the co-founder and chairman of the Nordic Business Forum, the most successful and sought after business event series in the Nordic countries over the past 11 years. These events in Helsinki, Oslo and Stockholm have hosted an amazing number of world leading speakers. These include Barack Obama, Al Gore, Simon Sinek, Sir Alex Ferguson, Seth Godin, Steve Wosniak, Gary Vaynerchuk, Randi Zuckerberg, Sir Richard Branson and even the late Jack Welsh, just to name a few. The audience in these events has grown annually from a few hundred participants to over 7000 CEOs, business executives and entrepreneurs. Nordic Business Forum online events have reached over 20000 participants. I am very curious to know how Hans-Peter and his colleagues have achieved this success, starting from a little town called Jyvaskyla in Finland and what their journey has been like. Let's find out.

Satu: [00:01:19] First of all, thanks very much for coming on board. It's great to have you here this morning and I been doing some research about you. And something that really resonated with me was your mission to talk about when you talk about which is building good leaders to change the world. And it's not about entrepreneurs, but you also talk about intrapreneurship. And so can you elaborate what it means to you?

Hans-Peter: [00:01:49] Yeah. So as you said, building leaders who change the world is our mission statement then and indeed our mission. And it was actually one cup of tea with Jim Collins back in 2014 when he came to speak at our event in Finland. And we were discussing or he started to discuss with me about what it is that we actually do at Nordic Business Forum. And he said that what how he would say what we do is that we build leaders. We are building leaders, not Nordic Business Forum. And he said that that's the single most meaningful and valuable thing that you can do for a society that you build good leaders. And our mission statement was framed in a different manner before that. But then it became building leaders who changed the world. And we do of course, we do it through different means that we practice on. We we strongly believe that it's a very meaningful mission.

Satu: [00:03:00] And also, you talk about the entrepreneurial spirit, which is not just within business entrepreneurs, but also anyone who can have that, you know, intrapreneurship. So can you elaborate what it means to you?

Hans-Peter: [00:03:17] Yes, sure. That that used to be a part of our mission statement as well in the beginning. And it still is. And it basically is still the same, even if even if the actual wording has changed, has changed a bit, thanks to Jim Collins. But, yeah, I believe that entrepreneurs, basically, they they they keep the society up and running, although all the welfare societies, et cetera, hold all the money to keep up libraries and schools and public health and everything comes from companies in the in the end, from private businesses founded by entrepreneurs. And and then on the other hand, it's the intrapreneurs, it's the intrapreneurial minded people within each company that keep those companies up and running and succeeding. So I think Intrapreneurship is is a really important thing. And encouraging it and making people intrapreneurs within their organizations is is the most valuable thing.

Satu: [00:04:29] And what are those characteristics when somebody is entrepreneurial? What does it mean?

Hans-Peter: [00:04:35] A simple way to phrase it, from my point of view, is that you don't just do what is needed for you or not to get fired or not to lose your job. You do you do much more than that. You do what's requested, but you do even more than that. You do you give all of your creativity in your proactiveness, your proactiveness in and really give your efforts for the customer and your your company like you would be an entrepreneur. And I believe that these entrepreneurs are the ones who also are the ones to get promoted first. They are the ones who proceed with their careers and take on more responsible roles and responsibilities, say a very close synonym kind of to entrepreneurship. I think taking responsibility that that's what it means from my point of view.

Satu: [00:05:32] Now, when it comes to your own character, you obviously a very big risk taker and a big dreamer. And one of the things that you have said in the TED talk that I was watching 2013, you said that you have to make those calls you are afraid to make. And obviously it's about being not afraid to fail and putting your fear aside. And

one of the stories I heard you talk about when you are young man, that you were so poor that you didn't have money to pay the TV licence and you make that big call. So can you tell us about that incident? And is that Finnish SISU that made to you to do it?

Hans-Peter: [00:06:14] Yeah, I actually have forgotten that. But now that you mentioned, if I remember, I don't even remember that they would have told that there's a story anywhere, but you have been digging deep.

Hans-Peter: [00:06:26] But yes, indeed, must be like 15 years ago. Yeah. Anyway, there was an incident in which at the same time I ran out of money and I, I had broken up with my girlfriend or a spouse. And I don't remember what I got from the inspector at the TV licenses inspector.

Hans-Peter: [00:06:49] But I guess it was a penalty or or something.

Hans-Peter: [00:06:53] And I just called them and told that, hey, it's a very bad moment for me and my girlfriend left me and I don't have the money to pay for it. So so they they basically forgave me. Yeah, that's true now.

Satu: [00:07:08] So since then, you have made a lot of very big calls that I'm sure have been very scary. But in 2011, you made a call to Al Gore. Tell us about that or.

Hans-Peter: [00:07:20] No, it was it it was actually in 2010, I think quite early, early on in 2010, like I guess it was in January 2010 or or something. But yes. So we started off with Nordic Business Forum just a bit earlier than that, basically in in late 2009. And we were going to organize our first first annual conference in late 2010.

Hans-Peter: [00:07:52] And in late 2009, we started to sell it and the sales took off quite OK, basically done just by myself and my business partner during then. And while we were building up the 2010 conference in terms of sales and all the practical arrangements, we also started planning what we will do in 2011. And then we also had the idea that a good theme that we would really like to go for and promote as the theme of Nordic Business Forum 2011 could be responsibility. The phrase became strength from responsible choices. How responsibility can be be really a part of good business sense as well. And while doing good, you you actually can do the best business out

there and create a cycle of recommendations on customers who who feel feel good about you have a responsibility and so many other things as well. But but strength from responsibility, a strength from responsible choices became the theme.

Hans-Peter: [00:08:59] And we were thinking, who could be the main speaker? The star headline in 2010, we just had local Finnish speakers, but for 2011 we thought that we want to aim for some international names.

[00:09:14] And so we did. Then it was one winter evening when I, I got the idea of, hey, how about trying to bring Al Gore may have had been some time earlier when I had watched The Inconvenient Truth documentary by him and I called Jyri my business partner and told that I know why I got this idea that we should we should try to bring Al Gore to you Jyvaskyla where our event was still held, a rather small city in the middle of Finland.

[00:09:44] And, yeah, you're upset that that's that's a great idea. Very fitting for the theme and everything. But Al Gore doesn't go to Jyvaskyla. Well, anyway, I said, look, let's let's try at least on the next day at the office, we started Googling a phone number to Al Gore's office on or some some kind of a contact information. And we found one to Al Gore's office. And that was pretty much my first business call in English. So I guess. But but I made the call.

Hans-Peter: [00:10:13] And after some six months of of exchange with their office and his agent, we were we were introduced to we managed to get a positive response. Al Gore responded on tenth of July in 2010 that he would actually arrive to Jyvaskyla to give a speech at our event in May 2011. So that was a big day for us.

Satu: [00:10:38] I bet that must have felt amazing that something like that you made it happen.

Satu: [00:10:43] So that's fantastic. Now, all these things of dreaming big and taking risk. So what are some of the Finnish or Nordic trades that you can identify within yourself that made you successful?

Hans-Peter: [00:10:55] Well, I'm not sure if I'm I'm the right person to evaluate myself on the trades , but if I should try to at least something that the Nordic people are associated with quite often is honesty. And and when something is promised, it's actually delivered, and in Finland a verbal contract is actually A binding contract legally as well. As I , understood, correctly, or that's at least, how everyone, treats it.

Hans-Peter: [00:11:24] And I guess something that has helped me is that I've been somehow able to build trust in between myself and our company on our customers and I guess within our company, within within the employees as well. Later on, when we had had some employees at some point and I'm still, of course, but but earlier, in the very early stages, it was just me and my business partner. But somehow I've been able to build trust and keep my promises. And that has helped us along the way. And of course, there has been a lot of luck on our side as well, which has helped us.

Satu: [00:12:03] I read somewhere that someone said that they don't believe in luck, that you actually create your luck, that you make this, you act towards the things will come to you. And I'm sure in your case, you have made a lot of a lot of hard work to get yourself where you are right now. If we talk about Nordic business culture, in your opinion, are there common things that the way Nordics do business and what would you say the characteristics of that would be? Or is there a big difference how Finns do business or Swedes or Norwegians? Or are they are they very different ways of doing it? Or do you think that there's actually some things that are really similar to all the this?

Hans-Peter: [00:12:47] Well, what they just mentioned about when you agree on something you actually deliver, I think expands to all of Nordic really well. And there are some differences, I think, based on my personal experience. Norway and Finland, Finland are most similar to each other. Sweden slightly different in in culture. How basically? Well, this might be a bit stereotypic as well. But how how things are on average may be discussed further before actions are taken in Sweden than in Finland.

[00:13:25] But on the other hand, when they are then discussed through all thoroughly, then then taking actions is more straightforward and so forth. So but I guess that's that's a slight difference in between, for example, Finland and Sweden. I don't have that much experience in Denmark, but anyway. Or Iceland either. Of course, only some. But anyway, I think the Nordic area in general, of course, has a great reputation

internationally. The products are high quality, the design is appreciated. And also the fact that you can really trust on the Nordic people in the business, I think is widely widely recognized around the world. So we have a good reputation, I guess, and we should keep that.

Hans-Peter: [00:14:17] Of course, we should really work hard on it to keep it down and make it even more known around the world. So we build, we build, build on it.

Satu: [00:14:29] Now, the secret of success, I hear you sometimes say that you exceed expectations both with your customers and audience and also you're your guest speakers. So can you give us some examples of those things that you have been doing where you obviously exceed expectations?

Hans-Peter: [00:14:48] Yeah, yeah, indeed. I believe so. That, first of all, a very simple a very simple formula for growth is that you work hard on sales and marketing, very diligently on sales and marketing, and of course, to be innovative with it as well. But you need to work hard on it to acquire new customers. But at the same time, you know, you not only meet, but you exceed your customers expectations so that you make sure that you keep almost all of them, at least a very large part of them, year over year. And if you keep your old customers and you acquire new ones with hard work in sales and marketing, then you grow. That's a very simple formula for growth. And both of these are, of course, difficult sales and marketing is difficult and requires a lot and then surprising your customers in a positive way. Exceeding their expectations is also extremely difficult. But you need to have a big heart for your service and for your product and well in the end of your customer. So if you are really passionate about the product, the industry you are in and the value you deliver, you deliver to your customer, you are basically thinking of it almost night and day. You are learning about it. You are reading about it. You are coming up with new solutions and better ways to deliver the value to your customer. You are innovating and you are listening to feedback. You are trying to understand what's beyond what's maybe not said or worded in the correct way, but what's the root reason for the feedback? And you fix those things and you innovate solutions and you try to think what could be beyond what the customer expects, that that has, of course, the value creation side of it.

Hans-Peter: [00:16:54] In our in our case, for example, the value in networking, I thought events on a value in in learning from the content and the speakers, etc. But then there is a big factor on customer experience as well, how you make the customer feel when when the customers are interacting with you. And in our case, especially, of course, during those event days, how you may be surprised to surprise the customer positively when he or she arrives at the event venue and of course, even even earlier in the process.

Hans-Peter: [00:17:35] But let's speak about the arrival. How how you surprised the customer when when the program begins or at at some maybe unexpected moment during the program, how you could surprise the customer in the catering or how you could surprise the customer in the end of the day or when they are leaving? We really tried to make the customer smile and surprised them from the customer experience side as well. We have some really talented people within our organization working with the with a big heart on it. So those are the things we we try to work on. And for the first time, I guess it's easier than for the ones who already attend for the fifth or seventh time. But luckily for us, very few are really focusing on organizing and developing a business seminar full time year round. Most organizations do it as a side project while they are their main product is something else. And that that shows if your conference runs really by the minute, that's already a surprise for the customer. The first time or in many cases, that's that's at least a surprise for the speakers usually as well. Also, our comparison group is on average, not that hard to beat, honestly.

Satu: [00:19:08] Ok, and can you tell us maybe a one example of those things that you surprised a customer, something concrete, so how do you surprise the customer that they told you they like them?

Hans-Peter: [00:19:19] Yeah, well, one one thing that has happened all over again year after year is that at the cloakroom, the cloakroom is run by our own staff and the students that that participate at the event as a part of their studies in different customer service roles. And and. At the cloakroom, we actively seek for jackets where something is broken and we fix it during the day, when the customer comes back and sees that the check it this fixed.

[00:19:57] The button button is in place or whatever it could be. That's that's a sort of a positive surprise, which which usually the customer doesn't expect because that's not the product of a an average cloakrooms services service. The.

Satu: [00:20:31] Let's talk about these amazing speakers, these were leading speakers that come to your event year after year. How have you created trust and credibility of your organization that you get these people actually to do coming?

Hans-Peter: [00:20:47] Well, we at least have not had any sort of got me on my business partner were really young boys from from the small city in Finland, so we didn't have any connections to Al Gore or anyone notable. So we we just worked hard on it as well. We were active in making connections and contacting people on and in many cases, we also need to work on the speakers for many years before they actually are convinced to come or or we find find a suitable time for them to travel in and so forth. So it's not not an easy job and we have not had any existing networks for it. Of course, now our reputation is much more well known within the speaker on speaker agencies and many, many part of this. But and that helps us. But there has not been a shortcuts to it. So while working diligently on building a reputation with showing what we what we do year over year has has then done the trick. And it's still not easy with many speakers, we need to really give our best effort to get them, get them to commit, but it's easier than it used to be.

Satu: [00:22:13] And so what's your lead time you're getting? These speakers must must be quite a few years because they must be very booked in advance.

Hans-Peter: [00:22:21] Well, sometimes it's it's many years, but in most cases also the speaker doesn't want to commit to something that is more than 12 months ahead or more than one and a half years ahead. So you kind of start the negotiation maybe earlier or you start it for, let's say, twenty, twelve, and then you actually succeed in 2016. That that might be the case, but usually you don't confirm a visit for 2016 in 2012. So so so you may be confirming 13, 12, 11 months prior or like we like the case was with Barack Obama. We confirmed it only three months prior or.

Hans-Peter: [00:23:13] Yeah, about three months prior. So we were working on it for a long time. But and took a risk as well because it could have been a no in the end. But we confirmed him just after his presidency, three months before our conference.

Hans-Peter: [00:23:31] In your opinion, what are the main things like, if you can mention a few things that you think that make these business leaders exceptional and why are they what makes them successful?

Satu: [00:23:43] And, you know, I heard you said in one of your interviews that folks in the Jack Wells, one of your favorite people that you have met. And so what makes him special?

[00:23:56] Well, I guess in Jack's case, so many things make him so special. Jack passed away on 1st of March this year, he was at a conference in 2013 in in your Jyvaskyla in this small city where our event was organized for the first four years and when our our headquarters still is, I sent him an email, I think it was in November last year. And he still he still responded quite promptly. One once went away. I don't remember which year it was. It was probably two thousand seventeen when we sold out our event. I guess in April for the fall, the event was probably in late September or early October and we sold it out in in April, I if I remember correctly, I was just being in Montreal, C2 Montreal, bench-marking what they are doing and learning from from their content. And I shared the information on Twitter that we sold out and Jack Welch responded on Twitter, congratulations, etc., and he's just he has surprised me so many times. And when also when he was visiting, first of all. He's still one of the highest rated speakers that we have ever had. I think he's the third highest rated speaker speaker by our customers. He he he's so clever. And even if he was old, already been quite old, he he was so insightful. And what really impressed me on top of that, very warm hearted, very interested in in everyone, he I'm not sure everyone but everyone I saw him met and what in us as well, what we were doing and gave advice on. And yeah, some some people seem to be able to stay humble and interested even if they are immensely successful. And I guess most people only become successful because they they are able to stay that way.

Hans-Peter: [00:26:21] Most people we have worked with, most of our speakers are well. I think all of them are super nice or have been always super nice, and I my feeling

is that it's a bit different than, for example, in music, etc. The writers are not too long with these speakers. Usually that is not the writer at all. So that's how they speak.

[00:26:52] So they many of them don't have big egos. They've been more humble.

[00:26:56] Well, that's my experience. Of course, I've not worked in the music industry too much. We we we don't usually have a few artists each year as well.

Satu: [00:27:07] But yeah, now these these events are pretty amazing what you organized. So your team must be really crucial to make something something happen like like those events. And but if you think about your team, what are the main features that you look into when you choose a team member? The

Hans-Peter: [00:27:32] We first of all, we look for passion for for our mission and our product passion for what we do. That's the first thing we look at. I don't believe that. For example, in sales, anyone can sell a product to successfully, which they don't believe in themselves, which they wouldn't use themselves, etc., and that goes for goes for any role in an organization, although, of course, you need the critics.

Hans-Peter: [00:28:05] You need the people who challenged your offering and the way in which you create value for your customers.

Hans-Peter: [00:28:13] But. We have still we have ourselves first looked at passion for what we do, especially when I, I still run around recruiting. That was that was the first thing I was looking at. Everything else is secondary, basically. But of course, I better think smarter as well.

Hans-Peter: [00:28:37] Ok, so you have had experience being inspired by the best business leaders in the world, so how do you inspire your team?

Hans-Peter: [00:28:46] Well, of course, we have a privilege of being surrounded with all of this world class teaching and content by our speakers and content producers, et cetera.

Hans-Peter: [00:29:03] Like for for instance. Again, this is about shows also the character of Jack Welch again. But one one time, I guess it was in two thousand and sixteen or seventeen and we had our pre Christmas party in your Jyvaskyla and we wanted to have a a content to it as well. And one of the crucial topics to discuss at that point for us was culture. And I just the email check whether he he could do a session for us remotely on culture. And I asked how much it would be cetera as well. But he he he responded immediately and wanted to do it free of charge. So he was visiting at our pre Christmas party remotely, remotely and teach us about culture for an hour or so. So we have we have a privilege of of having having great people around us and and really inspiring people to learn from, which helps a lot in the industry. Such an otherwise we we we, of course, try to pay attention to it. We we try to we try to communicate the why behind the what as often as possible, communicate the why behind the what more and more often. So that's at least one key ingredient of it as well, I believe.

Hans-Peter: [00:30:40] And you have had Simon Sinek also speaking in you events a few years back.

Hans-Peter: [00:30:46] Yeah, we have had him three different events so far, actually.

Satu: [00:30:51] Now, I'm sure that you have had many highlights during these years, is there one that you think tops it all?

Hans-Peter: [00:30:59] Well, the most important event we have had has definitely been the 2010 event, the first big event we have ever had.

Hans-Peter: [00:31:09] I mean, if that if that would not have taken place and also if that would have failed miserably, that could have been the end of the story. And anyway, everything starts from somewhere and. The starting point, this, at least I still feel in our in our story is the most important moment, the most important part of it. And it was a good event, nothing compared to the ones we run out nowadays. But the 2010 event was a good one, as I recall it. It really exceeded the customer expectations as well. So that that was the most important moment so far.

Satu: [00:31:58] I feel just loving that you have had a pretty amazing journey past 10, 11 years, and you also now have decided to give back to your community. So you give seminars to students in schools in Finland and Estonia.

Hans-Peter: [00:32:15] Yeah, actually, we did so very actively in between 2012 or late 2011 and 2017. But it's it's now on pause. So we haven't been extremely actively going to schools at the moment. But but indeed we did that extremely actively during those years and probably will continue. We visited some two hundred and fifty schools all together, if I remember correctly, during those years.

Satu: [00:32:46] That's pretty amazing. Are you giving seeds to many of these students that you wanted to get into business and have this intrapreneur spirit?

Hans-Peter: [00:32:56] Yes, that's what we were trying to convey. The the entrepreneurial spirit was was our main message basically to the students.

Satu: [00:33:07] So when we talk about challenges, I'm sure you have had many, many, many during these years, so has covid been your greatest challenge so far or has there been something else and how you been handling it?

Hans-Peter: [00:33:22] Well, I think our or my greatest challenge has been has been leadership. Acting as a good supervisor and being worthy of our people has been the greatest challenge for us and myself, at least. Of course, covid-19 is a is an enormous challenge for anyone in our industry. But it's an opportunity as well, sort of an opportunity to innovate. And we are trying to utilize it as well as possible. A lot of things we have been doing earlier would have probably the development for the digital side of our products that we have done so far this year since the beginning of the covid-19 pandemic has equaled what we would have otherwise done probably in in four or five years or so. On the other hand, it's a disaster, but on the other hand, it's a great opportunity or the fact that it forced us to innovate could be a great opportunity for us in the future. We'll see what we make of it.

Satu: [00:34:30] So how does the future look for you and Nordic business for what do you see in the future?

Hans-Peter: [00:34:36] To put it simply, we we try to create value to our customers in the best possible ways and we try to innovate on what those ways are. Of course, now, during the covid-19 pandemic, when physical events of this scale basically cannot run the international travel, this is not possible. Speakers are not able to arrive to events internationally, etc. But anyway, in the future, we continue to to strive to create value to our customers and do it in a better and a surprising way each year. And thanks to all due to the covid-19 pandemic, the digital offering from us will be much more significant in the upcoming years. And that's at least something, something different. We also plan to expand internationally and many of those discussions were quite, quite far already before before the end of February.

Hans-Peter: [00:35:41] But there have been on hold for now. But we plan to continue to international to open up our operations on new markets as well.

Satu: [00:35:50] So the actual main event has been postponed to 2021. But you are having a online event even in September, don't you?

Hans-Peter: [00:36:00] Yeah. On September twenty fourth, we have an online event called The New Normal. And on in early early November, we have a virtual masterclass on on business models with a three day master class with Alex Osterwalder, naturally, remotely and many of similar kinds coming up. Twenty twenty one then as well.

Satu: [00:36:25] It's really exciting to hear. And 2021, one of your key speakers will be you will know Yuval Harari and Ryan Hannigan from HubSpot.

Satu: [00:36:37] So you really have big names coming up again. What would you say to your younger self? That was it, 19 year old young man who attended the first leadership event in 2003.

Hans-Peter: [00:36:49] It would be probably better for me to just stay silent.

Hans-Peter: [00:36:55] I mean, things have gone well, so I wouldn't I wouldn't like to mess it up. So let the young man do what the young man is going to do.

Satu: [00:37:09] Can you give some few tips to our listeners, those who have big dreams and and, you know, see you as a as a great visionary and business leader, how to start or grow their business or their career?

Hans-Peter: [00:37:23] I would give at least one with which has been very useful for myself. I don't remember where I learned it from. Yeah. It was actually a Finnish coach, I believe, called Jari Sarasvuo. The basic idea I believe in is that you need to and you should you should train be in long term, but you should set realistic goals for yourself in the in the short term and with long term. I mean, like 10 years and with short term, I mean like a year or two years on short term, you should really believe in what you go for and you should be able to build up a spiral of of accomplishment so that each time that you said something as a goal for you, you don't always fall short on it.

Hans-Peter: [00:38:15] You should kind of try to make sure that more of the times you succeed than fail for yourself as well as for your team. If you are leading an organization, that's the only way to build confidence, or I believe that's maybe the only way to build confidence and a positive spirit and a feeling of accomplishment. But that will bring you far. I mean, people people overestimate what they can do in a year, but they usually underestimate quite severely what can be done in 10 years and in long in long term. You should you don't of course, it's not the mask, but but if you feel like it, I, I encourage you to dream big, if you have a vision of what you want to become or what you want to accomplish or where you want to be in in 10 years or whatever at the time frame, a long, long time frame, anyway, it will help you to spot lessons and spot ideas and spot tools and mentors and whatever that can help you to go to the right direction. It will also help you not to not to go after opportunities which are not in line with your longer term vision or passion. So you kind of have your centers up and running for the right pieces of wisdom to bring you to the right direction.

Satu: [00:39:42] Well, that's a great ending and great advice. Thank you so much. It's been absolutely fantastic to have you here as my guest and also and I wish you all the best of success for your future and can't wait to follow your career and also to be part of the Nordic Business Forum. So thank you very much.

Hans-Peter: [00:40:02] Thank you Satu

Satu: [00:40:04] If you are interested in taking part Nordic Business Forum events, go to NBForum dot com. Next event is the New Normal on 24th of September, featuring world leading business speakers, including Carla Harris of Morgan Stanley and Brian Halligan of HubSpot, as well as virtual networking and masterclasses. You can also follow them on LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram, and the links will be in my show notes. Don't miss this opportunity.