Interview with Sami Erviö 7.2.2025 - 15:15

Interview questions:

Leadership & Management Styles

1. How would you describe your leadership style, and how has it evolved over time?
2. Do you see yourself more as a leader or a manager, and why?
3. How do you adapt your leadership style when managing different personalities and work styles?
4. What do you believe differentiates a great leader from an average one?

Motivation & Team Management

1. How do you keep your employees engaged and motivated, especially during challenging times?
2. What strategies do you use to encourage innovation and creativity in your team?
3. How do you balance short-term performance goals with long-term organisational growth?
4. Can you share an example of a time you had to make a difficult decision and how you handled it?

Conflict & Challenges

1. How do you handle conflict between team members and ensure it is resolved effectively?
2. What has been the biggest challenge in your role, and how did you overcome it?
3. How do you manage stress and pressure, both for yourself and for your team?

Performance & Success Measurement

1. How do you measure the success of your team and individual employees?
2. What key performance indicators (KPIs) do you focus on to track progress and efficiency?

Advice & Professional Growth

1. What advice would you give to someone aspiring to be in a leadership position?
2. Looking back at your career, what mistakes would you avoid if you had to start over?

The interview was held by phone call and recorded. The recording was transcribed by Descript using AI and checked and if needed corrected by Iris Erviö.

Interview Transcript:

Iris

So the first question is, how would you describe your leadership style and how has it evolved over time?

Sami

 I believe in a strategy in leadership, meaning, you need to know, what do you want to do? What needs to be done? And then every other decision you make, you kind of compare to that, meaning if I'm doing now this or that, will it lead towards the strategy or not? Whether it's a business decision, a management decision, or a decision regarding people.

 I think that's the style. And then I guess that the next one is that you need to have people accountable on what they're doing. They need to have a freedom and then they need to be accountable on their performances. And that has evolved. When I was younger, I tolerated much more and much too long, uh, people not doing the right things.

 And then, then, uh, whenever you grow older and you, you kind of get more experience, you start to, when you have the gut feeling that, um, this is not going to work you learn to trust your gut feeling that, hey, this is not going to work, you don’t wait anymore. You learn to trust your gutfeeling that hey what we're doing here, whatever, whatever it's a business in this market. We have been now trying to get into it for three years and it doesn't work. Then move and not kind of keep on trying and waiting. Nothing, no thing goes better by waiting in management.

Iris

Okay, next question, do you see yourself more as a leader or a manager and why?

Sami

Leader, definitely. To me, management is, is kind of, um, well, if you have something you need to, uh, you need to achieve something, whatever it's grow market share or, you know, win the market or bring a new product to the business or conquer, you know, some services space or what have you. And you determined that that's what needs to be done. And that's what you want to do. Then I think that that's the kind of the leadership piece and that involves people for you to um, get the people to want to do it. Leadership is to get other people to do what you want.

If you want to conquer America, you need to get the people underneath you to want to do that as well, so that they don't want to conquer Russia.

And, uh, and that's the kind of the leadership part, the management part is, is there that, how do we do it? Well, we need to establish a subsidiary. We need to hire five salespeople and salespeople need to have a sales processes and, and we need to, uh, have a, you know, uh, CRM to see what they are doing. And we need to set up goals and so and so on.

Iris

Good. Thank you. How do you adapt your leadership style when managing different personalities and work styles?

Sami

Well, this is a classic four field, will and skill. So, uh, whenever people that you're managing or leading, when they have the necessary skills and their will to do it, then it's very easy, then you delegate.

It's a delegation quarter. The best one you can get. You have competent people and the competent people want to, want to win and want to do. Then you delegate. You just let them run. When you have people who don't have the, uh, skills, but they have will. But they're trying hard and they want to get there, but they just cannot.

Then you teach.

Uh, when you have a person that has the skill, And he could do it, but well, you know, he doesn't really get there, and he doesn't really want to do it and get it done. Then you motivate.

And then when you have those noodle heads that have neither skill or will, then you command and control. You tell that now you do this, and then tomorrow you will come to me and show what you have done.

And then you do this. So you tell them what to do, and you check them that they have done it. And then obviously if you have a run a good business or good organization, you have As much as possible, the first ones that you can delegate and as little as possible, those that you need to come on, sounds very simple when you put, it's very simple.

It's very difficult. It's very simple to say and very, very difficult to do in real life.

Iris

Okay. What do you believe differentiates a great leader from an average one?

Sami

Well, I guess that the great leader, um. It's paranoid in, in, in a sense that, that, uh, they don't believe in luck or they don't believe in that things will improve themselves or that if we just keep on doing the same mediocre thing over and over again, some miracle will happen and we will get out of this, you know, hole.

And that's, that's the first one. So they have to be in a kind of belief that they, that if things look bad, they are bad. And I think a lot of, a lot of especially young leaders have this because, because they want to often impress other people or they want to make them feel good and then, then they are not doing the difficult situations.

Leadership is about making difficult decisions because the non difficult decisions, the easy and good ones will be already made by other people. Has to make the difficult decisions, only difficult decisions, and they are more often not. So that's one. And the other one is that they keep the strategy in mind.

That if there is a, whatever, there is a factory in Lapland like we used to have. And even if it's very difficult to close it down because You know, 25 percent of their people in that little village are working in our factory and the whole village is going to go down the drain if we close it and it's very bad.

But it doesn't fit our strategy, we just have to do it. So I think the idea is to keep an eye on the strategy, do only those things that enhances, makes you go towards where you want to go. And every decision, whatever is difficult or nice, you will do based on your strategy.

And then when made one, I just, but when being a headhunter, I, I kind of made one matrix of a really good leader or a bad leader, and the matrix is that when you wake up in the morning and you know what I should do, I should close that factory. Start clock running and then see how long does it take that you really do that difficult situation.

And that's the measurement of a good leader. Good leader goes and does it immediately, bad leader waits for a year and another year and a third year and so on.

Iris

So, question number five. How do you keep your employees engaged and motivated, especially during challenging times?

Sami

Very easy. You cannot motivate anyone. People has to be motivated by themselves. However, you can create environment that people are motivated. And it's a different thing. You can create an environment that still some people will not be motivated or you can have a people who would be motivated but there are issues around that kind of prevents them too.

Most people want to do good jobs. Most people want to succeed. Very few people want to kind of do bad things. I think that most people want to want to succeed and be do good things. And they are naturally motivated. But the feature that this is again, sounds very simple in paper, very difficult to do in real life.

One, you need to make sure that you have it. Uh, the clear and, uh, universally accepted goal. That's the strategy. What do we want to do and why? Some people wrote these mission statements or vision statements and blah, blah, no matter how you do it. But it's absolutely crucial that everybody on board will understand what you are trying to, trying to do and why.

You say that we want to conquer American business. It's, uh, then you need to explain why, why, why America, why not Russia or France? They has to understand it and they have to accept it. And as long as it's not understood or accepted, what are we here to do? Do, uh, what are here for? What are we doing? No matter.

Nothing else helps. It has to be understood and it has to be accepted. And if somebody doesn't accept it, they need to go somewhere else to work. But when that's there Then the next thing is that what is my responsibility in that? If I'm a CFO of a company, let's say, or a sales manager. What am I contributing for us to reach that goal?

It has to be very clear. Your role here, we're going to America's, we're going to run it. You need to go to East Lapland, South Lapland, five subsidiaries as a CFO and set up the taxes and what have you, insurances. You are a sales manager. You need to hire five sales guys that can actually go there and sell to these customers and have the competencies.

So your role. in contributing on that goal is absolutely crucial. If you have not steps number one and two, you are almost there already. Then step number three, what is it in for me? People are all, uh, self centered. They want to have good for them and their families. So you need to, uh, the next step is that, hey, if you do conquer America, you get promoted, you will be running the whole America, you will get options, you will get money, you will get prestige, you will learn, whatever it is.

You have experiences, you know, very few people who have this, uh, opportunity to go somewhere, build something new, blah, blah, whatever it is. But you have to have that on a, what is it in for you? And it's most often something else than money. It's opportunities to learn, it's opportunities of being in charge, it's opportunities to kind of, uh, see if you're, you know, if you can fly, can your wings hold you, uh, kind of fulfilling yourself.

Money is an important and a part of it, but it's mostly something else than money. It might be something to do with, uh, with your, your vision. And while we are here to save the world, we are here to, you know, stop climate change, or we are here to what have you. It can be whatever, but it has to be something that the person who's working for you is, uh, feeling that this is some benefit for me.

Otherwise, often, you get people that they just come to work and they go home and nothing really, what you would call motivational, will happen. And the fourth, the last one, is the social connection. Most people, as there was a, uh, a lot of study about, uh, people in World War I, you know, a lot of people died.

And the biggest reason why they were there, why they kept on fighting, was not for their country, was not to stop Germans or conquer France. It was because of the team around me. I would fight for these other guys that I'm here. So it's a social connection. Most people need it. Most people think that, um, that they are actually working for, for the, for the guys around them.

Whether it's the fellow sales people or it's, it's for the, you know, sales secretary working for the sales guy who's been there. They are helping each other out. So you need to make sure that your team has that positive social connection. They want to work together. They respect each other. They help each other out, etc.

Four steps. And if you get this done, you don't have to motivate anybody. You just make an organization and make sure that everybody's there and they will be motivated.

Iris

 Thank you. Next question is, what strategies do you use to encourage innovation and creativity in your team?

Oh, well, uh, you will have to have a culture that, uh, accepts failures.

Uh, most innovations that are successful will have proceeded about five or 10 other ones that have been.

And the innovation can only, only live in the, in the environment where people are free, they have freedom and they are not, they are not afraid that, that if I try something new and it fails, I will be fired. So they have to have some freedom. They have to have some leeway. They will have to have some extra time.

to do some experiences and thinking. So if you're running a kind of managing a company too tight, so that resources so that everybody is up to the heads of kind of running the mill, there will be no, no innovation whatsoever. So people have to be empowered so that they see that if I'm working here and I see this thing is not working here, what if we will do it like this?

And that way they will have to have the, And they would have to have the belief that if I take it to my boss, he will not say shut up. It's not your business. Go back to, it has to be, it has to be freedom. There has to have been a responsibility. If somebody sees whoever it is, the first line worker or a manager, that this is what we can do better.

They have, we'll have to have to take the responsibility and they will have to have the courage to do that. I think that the courage and the. And the kind of, uh, belief that, that you can do these things without being punished or you don't have to be afraid of stepping outside of the box, it's the most important thing in, uh, fostering innovation.

Iris

Next one, how do you balance short term performance goals with long term organizational growth?

Sami

Well, it obviously depends on your situation.

In a perfect world, you will set up your long term goals, your strategies, as I said earlier. And then you start to do your quarterly or annually, uh, your issues going forward and you will have enough, you know, capacity, enough money, enough, uh, profit to be able to do that so that that you are able to balance them so that you only do those things that will take you towards your your long term goals but they are same time helping you in your in your short term issues however sometimes it's not the case sometimes it's so that you have a ship it's in the it has a hole in the middle it's bleeding it's it's sinking soon engines is not working, then it doesn't matter which way you're, you're heading.

If you're sinking, then you need to just fix the short term issues. You need to fix the holes and you need to fix the things and get to get your nose above the water before you can start to think about the strategy. And that's why that's why leaders, when you have leaders, you have a kind of a leaders who are thinking of the long term kind of visionary leaders.

And you have the go and get and fix it. Leaders, they have different times when they are effective in different organizations. Sometimes you just need to fix it and not worry about what happens in two years. You just have to. Otherwise, we have bankrupt or we lost. And sometimes you have to leave way that I will work towards the future and I have the I can I can live with it that I'm not performing that well this quarter or this year.

But typically it's a balance and very seldom you have the leeway. Very few organizations have, maybe Google has it or Apple has it so that they can really think about what to do. But most organizations you have to balance doing the short term fixes and doing keeping your eye on the ball. But that's why it's so important that, that you, you prioritize those short term issues that will take you to the future as well.

Often When I want to fix something, you have several options. I can do this, this or that. You should select always that fix that takes you towards the long term goal, but you shouldn't let the fix done too much in, in many, many situations.

Iris

Okay. Thank you. Now, can you share an example of a time you had to make a difficult decision and how you handled it?

Sami

Well, you make, you make difficult decisions all the time. I'm just thinking of which examples can I give. Well, I guess that the most difficult decisions are always coming into, uh, it's not difficult to start new businesses, invest money, get growth, kind of invest in growth because that's what everybody likes to do.

I think that the most difficult decisions in my career and I think most leaders career is that when you need to shut something off. Something that you believed in, um, something that, that other people's believe in, something that people have been putting a lot of time and effort. Typically, let's say that we have a new business project. People working on developing the product for five years, a lot of problems coming on, it doesn't get kind of performance is not there. It doesn't work. And then the decision that enough is enough. I just shot it off now. Yeah, they are the most difficult decisions because you have first the emotional yourself.

They're bought into it. You have to accept that you are failing yourself. You have to let all the people down. You have been maybe hiring other people somewhere else, kind of speaking them nicely how great it is, kind of lure them into your company to do these things, and then you have to let them everybody down and just, you know, quit it.

And these are the most difficult ones I have had.

Iris

Okay. Um, next category is conflict and challenges. And the first question for it is, how do you handle conflict between team members and ensure it is resolved effectively?

Sami

Well, I think it's like handling any other conflict. First you, you listen to each, each one of what their points of view are.

Uh, then you try to mediate them to see. each other's points and come to an agreement or conclusion on that. Hey, this guy looks at it like this. He looks at it like that. What do you think? Figure it out. And if they cannot do it themselves, conflict continues, then you just have to decide like a judge. Now we do this.

We put this off. This is how it is. I understand you have problems with it. I understand you have a other point of view, but now we are going to do this and you have to just live with it. You can't let them live for long.

Iris

Okay. Then the next question is, What has been the biggest challenge in your role, and how did you overcome it?

Sami

Yeah, maybe I didn't.

Well, I think the big challenges are, are, uh, Often, you get into big challenges when you do acquisitions. So you go and you buy a company, spend a lot of money, And, uh, which have, which have, uh, obviously ramifications in your, in your profit and loss and your, your balance sheet. And then when it It turns out not to be what you thought, uh, it's often very difficult to turn it around because there's so much kind of invested in it and, uh, and, uh, maybe you learn something more during it and then you just.

It's very difficult to turn this around if you kind of went into the wrong place, did the wrong thing. And because often these are so big for the company that they can't kind of afford to just say, Hey, we make a mistake, let's move forward, or it will be very difficult.

Iris

Okay. How do you manage stress and pressure both for yourself and for your team?

Sami

People, uh, the leaders, they have to have some safety valves, some things that they can do themselves in order to relieve the stress. And, um, and people are very different in, in, in that respect. Some people typically the introvert types. They need time, you know, sitting somewhere ice fishing themselves, kind of, uh, relieve the stress.

And the other ones, the extrovert types, they need some, you know, fun things around them and something they want to do, go to play. You know, play something with their friends and family and so on, but, but relieving stress is very much of an individual issue and it, same things do not work for, for other people.

It's very personal how people, but I think that as a boss, if you see that your team or your team members are stressed. You just need to get them out of the office, force them if they don't do it otherwise. And obviously stress can lead to burnouts, which is not good for anybody. It's not good for the employer, it's not good for the people, if it gets too bad.

Little stress or some medium stress in times of stressful situation, and times when you need to perform, it's all good. But it can't continue week after week, month after month, year after year. There has to be ups and downs, and there has to be, you know, stressful times, or times that you really achieve, and then there has to be times that you can take it a little bit easier.

In old times, when I started, companies used to have kind of positions, Where people could go, let's say, analysis positions or business development positions where you could just, you know, you can run a division for three years and then you are fed up with it and then you will have another something, do something kind of thinking wise or just get rid of running thousands of people.

But nowadays. Whenever all the organizations are so lean, they are very little of these and they're very good stress levers. You kind of put people for six months or something to do something kind of thinking work, thinking of some new business development or what have you and then kind of loading their batteries.

But I don't think many companies have that luxury anymore nowadays.

Iris

Okay, now, yes, um, Next question is, how do you measure the success of your team and individual employees?

Sami

It's very, very simple in a way that you have your, you have your big strategy But you want to do the big goal, the big mission, vision, then you just put it in pieces. I used as a managing director, I used to have myself, uh, every, every year I had three or four or five things that, uh, needs to be better. So I was loose and when I was speaking with my board, uh, I had like annual targets that this now we are in this situation in a year.

We should be moving whatever it is, whether we are having a better quality or whether we have a larger market share or whether we have bigger revenue. So, so I had kind of annual targets as a medicine director level. And then I was just splitting it for the guys. Hey. I need you to get your American business grown by 15 percent or I need you to get two more sales guys open up two more territories.

I need to launch five more products, what have you. So it's a kind of a three. It starts on the top and then you just divide the targets for everybody until it goes all the way down to the individuals. And then you measure it or check it quarterly. Half yearly, at least, where you are, have you, have this been done, have this not been done, why it's not been done, and then you give feedback for the, for the person that, hey, this is not done, you should have done better, let them know.

Iris

The next question is kind of a similar area. It's what key performance indicators Do you focus on to track progress and efficiency?

Sami

Oh, it depends very, very much on the situation. If you are a sales guy or you're a CFO, you have completely different. But I think that I'm, I was always, um, I was adamant about, or I preferred to have the overall company goals to most of the people, at least a part.

So that, uh, so that the keep the everybody had a, that you couldn't like, well, there was a big Finnish company, but there still is big company, but they were bigger in the past. Uh, they had a famous, uh, rating of individual performances, one to five, five million excellence, one being changed required. They lost about a billion a quarter in one, in, in one year.

1. 2 percent of the people get rating one and it's absolutely disgrace. So, uh, you, and they were, they were paying multiple millions in bonuses for people that the company was losing a billion. So it cannot be so that the KPIs are such that, well, I did good work. Well, I did presentation and I did this or that.

It always has to be tied up to something tangible that contributes to the company's success. Otherwise completely meaningless.

Iris

Could you give an example of one? What it could be tied to?

Sami

Well, for example, well, um, Uh, You could, for example, say that, Uh, that, Let's say, because sales is always the easiest, So, R& D is most difficult, Because it's a long time, But let's say that, okay, we need to open up to America for business. And then you make, make a goal saying that, okay, we have, uh, at the end of the day, we have made our, uh, uh, started our American business. I wouldn't say that I would have set up a KPI so that you need to hire five guys and you need to open three offices. And then you've made your KPS because anybody can do it.

You can always hire any noodle head and I have a, bring a buddy in and I can open a, rent an office. I would say that you will need to have your first client. Or you need to have, uh, your first, if it's a business that you have long cycles, it will say that you would have to have five, uh, proposals made to your clients.

Which you can do without the client. I mean, you just can't send them in these pieces. You have to see discusses it. So I would make something tangible that is, is kind of, uh, things that they need to do it. It's not something that they can just sit there in the office and do. They have to go out. They have to prove that they have been doing something at theirs.

They've been discussing with clients. They have been discussing with, uh, uh, for, uh, for an R and D, I would say that a long project that in, uh, you need to have a. Two patent applications or, or you need to have a proof of concept that is tested somewhere. Something that is tangible and, and that it's not just work you do.

A lot of KPIs are work for a lot of people in the organization, which I think is wrong. It always has to be attached to some kind of achievement, not what you have done, but what you have achieved.

Iris

Um, last category, last two questions, uh, are about advice and professional growth. Um, what advice would you give to someone aspiring to be in a leadership position?

Sami

Take responsibility, carry it. Uh, if I'm a managing director, I have 10 people working for me. I have a CFO, I have three, four divisional managers. I might have some regional managers. I have always two, three, four of those that are not performing as well. That's what I wanted. You just make sure that you are running a piece that is not a problem for your boss.

Whether, uh, if you are a, if you are a first line sales guy, there's, you have seven colleagues, you have one sales manager, sales manager spends half of, uh, maybe 70 percent of his time trying to figure out the two, three, four worst ones. So when you're working somewhere, you take responsibility and you deliver so that you are always the one that is making solutions for the boss, not the problems.

Once you do that, then he's, uh, the boss is working like, like any other human being. He said, okay, now this guy, he's been managing his, uh, region very well. Maybe I give these three other regions for him so that I can concentrate on the others because there's not going to be a problem. Make problems go away.

That's how you do it. And then you take responsibility, uh, whatever they throw at you. And it's, it's the same in any, I mean, whatever your highest managing director of a biggest company, it's the same. You just deliver, and you do what you are needed, and then good things follow. Simple, again, to say.  But difficult to do.

Iris

Okay, and the last question that I have for you is looking back at your career, what mistakes would you avoid if you had to start over?

Sami

I wouldn't buy one company in Norway.

Iris

Is that the only one that you have?

Sami

Then they are a lot smaller mistakes, but, uh, I, I think that, that, uh, as I said when you, when you, uh, kind of have your strategy and then you work step by step, then they obviously did a lot of mistakes in the, in the, in the past, but often they are so small that you can just kind of fix them. But then when you do big ones, uh, then you are not necessarily able to fix them.

Iris

Okay. That's about it.

Sami

All right. Thank you very much. Good luck with your project.

Iris

Thank you. Thank you.