



LEADERS IN FOCUS

WITH PER-ARNE HJELMBORN

Ambassador of Sweden to Spain



Foto: Stina Gullander/Regeringskansliet

As Sweden's Ambassador to Spain, Per-Arne Hjelm born plays a key role in strengthening economic and political ties between Sweden and Spain, with a particular focus on trade, investment, and long-term economic cooperation.

Per-Arne Hjelm born brings extensive international experience from a diplomatic career that has taken him across Europe, Latin America, and Asia. His work has covered areas such as trade policy, investment promotion, and EU internal market affairs, with postings in Chile, Spain, and China. He has also served as Ambassador to both Brazil and Malaysia.

Before taking up his current position, he served as Director General for Trade for Foreign Trade Affairs at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in Stockholm, working closely with both government and industry to advance Sweden's global economic relations.

Outside of his professional responsibilities, he has a strong interest in sports and culture, often using these shared interests to build relationships and connections across borders.

In three words, how would you describe your leadership style?

Calm, inclusive and aiming to work in a strategic way.

What advice would you give to someone leading across cultures for the first time?

Stay curious, listen deeply, and do not assume you have all the answers. I still remember how fascinated I was when I first learned about Hofstede's cross-cultural management theories during my studies at the Stockholm School of Economics in the early 90s. It was my first real insight into how cultural differences shape expectations, communication, and decision-making. All these years later, I am genuinely grateful that I get to work with these dynamics every single day. If you approach cross-cultural leadership with humility and a genuine desire to understand others, you will build trust—and trust, which is still one of the greatest assets of the Swedish society, is also what makes international cooperation actually work.



I have always admired Dag Hammarskjöld. His mix of moral clarity, quiet strength, and deep sense of service feels just as relevant today as it did during his time.



Choose a fictional character or historical figure you admire as a leader, and explain why.

I have always admired Dag Hammarskjöld. His mix of moral clarity, quiet strength, and deep sense of service feels just as relevant today as it did during his time. When I was back in Stockholm during my last posting at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, my office in “Arvfurstens Palats” happened to be right next to the Dag Hammarskjöld Room. Outside it hung a beautiful portrait of him, and I would pass it every single day on my way in and out. It became a daily reminder of the kind of leadership I aspire to.

Swedish fika or Spanish picoteo?

I honestly appreciate both. Living in Spain has taught me that picoteo is almost a diplomatic tool in itself—relaxed and perfect for open conversations. That said, a Swedish fika still has its own charm. It is wonderfully unpretentious and offers a moment where everyone steps away from their desks and meets as people rather than by job title. It is one of the best ways I know to socialize across teams and connect outside the usual work structures. In that sense, both are great traditions, just in different ways.

What role does economic and commercial diplomacy play in strengthening Swedish-Spanish relations today?

A very central one. Our two countries are deeply engaged in areas like the green transition, defence, digital innovation and the whole competitiveness agenda which is key to European prosperity and security. Economic diplomacy helps connect our governments, companies, and research communities, and it creates real opportunities for shared growth. In a fast-changing world marked by geopolitical tension, those partnerships matter more than ever.



Foto: Statens fastighetsverk

How do you protect your energy and focus as a leader?

Quality time with my wife and family, reading, and regular exercise help keep me grounded. Whenever possible, I also try to carve out small pockets of stillness during the day—just a few minutes to reset and regain perspective. Maintaining a reasonable work-life balance makes me a better leader.

Where do you see the greatest opportunities for deeper cooperation between Sweden and Spain?

There is huge potential in areas like green technologies, digital transformation, defence collaboration, and health innovation. We share similar ambitions, whether it is sustainability, security, or competitiveness in Europe. And our strengths complement each other remarkably well. That gives us a strong foundation for even deeper cooperation. And importantly, the successful Swedish companies delivering cutting-edge products and services and our close cooperation with Team Sweden, including the Swedish–Spanish Chamber of Commerce, are a real asset for us in Spain. They help turn political ambitions into practical partnerships and concrete results.

Leadership in diplomacy often goes beyond formal authority. How do you define leadership in a diplomatic context?

For me, diplomatic leadership is less about hierarchy and more about influence—about inspiring and guiding others through credibility, empathy, and example. It is the ability to bring people together, build consensus, and stay calm when things get complicated. Ultimately, it is about earning trust, not demanding it.

Looking back, what advice would you give your younger self?

Be patient. Every posting, not least the most challenging ones, teaches you something important. And do not underestimate empathy and kindness—they open doors and build relationships that last far longer than any single assignment.

Looking ahead, what is next for you personally, professionally, or for the sector you represent?

Professionally, I look forward to continuing to strengthen Swedish–Spanish relations, especially in the areas where our interests are expanding fastest. Personally, I hope to make even more room for mentorship. After three decades in diplomacy, helping the next generation grow feels like both a privilege and a natural next step.