

# SISU-Resilience the Finnish Way

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# Defining SISU

- SISU: having guts, being stoic, showing resiliency, stubborn determination with a hint of madness
- Positive and Negative
  - + long term persistence and resilience
  - may lead to burn out
- Core concept in Finnish society, culture & history
- Core trait when describing “Finnish personality”

# Defining SISU

- “The word derives from *sisus*, which means something inner or interior.
- However *sisu* is defined by a long-term element in it; it is not momentary courage, but the ability to sustain an action against the odds.
- Deciding on a course of action and then sticking to that decision against repeated failures is *sisu*. It is similar to equanimity, except the forbearance of *sisu* has a grimmer quality of stress management than the latter. The noun *sisu* is related to the adjective *sisukas*, one having the quality of *sisu*.”

From Wikipedia

# SISU as patriotism during war

The Finns have something they call *sisu*.

“It is a compound of bravado and bravery, of ferocity and tenacity, of the ability to keep fighting after most people would have quit, and to fight with the will to win.

The Finns translate *sisu* as “the Finnish spirit,” but it is a much more gutful word than that. Last week the Finns gave the world a good example of *sisu* by carrying the war into Russian territory on one front while on another they withstood merciless attacks by a reinforced Russian Army. In the wilderness that forms most of the Russo-Finnish frontier between Lake Laatokka and the Arctic Ocean, the Finns definitely gained the upper hand.”

*Time Magazine*, January 8, 1940

# Climate & Culture & SISU

- Extreme long and cold winters
- Polar night or “Kaamos” during winter in Lapland in the north
  - About six hours of daylight in Helsinki in December
- White nights in summer
  - Dusk between 11:30pm-2am in HKI
  - Sun does not set in Lapland between mid May-July



# SISU in Business

In 2004, Jorma Ollila, CEO of Nokia, described his company's "guts" by using the word *sisu*:

In times like these, the executives who run Nokia talk up a uniquely Finnish quality called *sisu*. "The translation would be 'guts,' " says Jorma Ollila, CEO of Nokia, the world's most prolific cell phone maker, in an interview at company headquarters here.

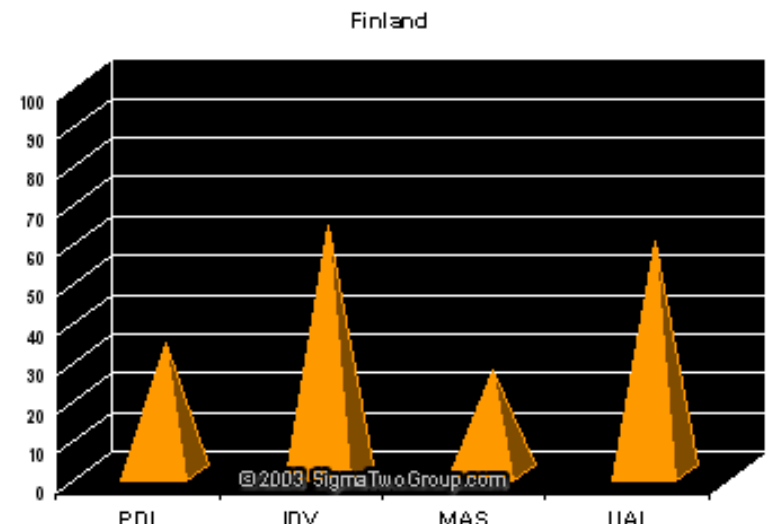
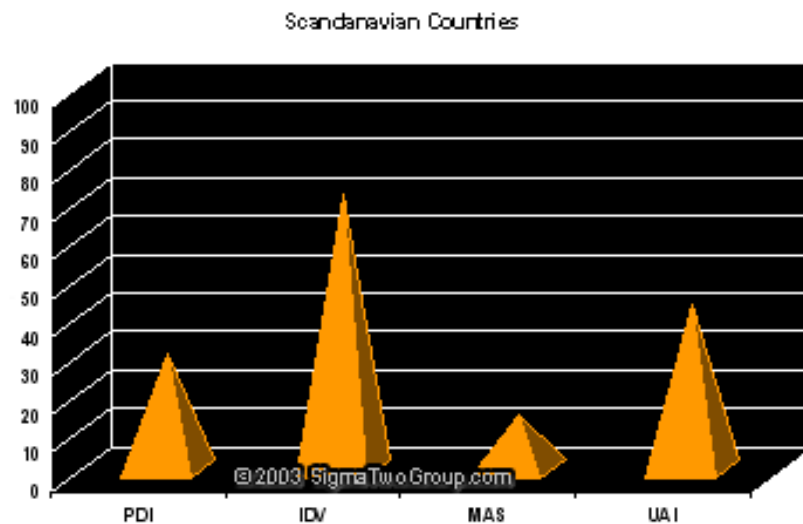
"But it's also endurance. There is a long-term element to it. You overcome all obstacles. You need quite a lot of *sisu* to survive in this climate."

The climate he's referring to is the bleak and bitter Nordic winters, but he might as well be talking about the competitive, erratic wireless-phone market and Nokia's travails. This *sisu* trait—anathema to Wall Street's short-term outlook—says a lot about Nokia's response to its recent turmoil.

Kevin Maney, USA TODAY

# FINLAND: WEST meets EAST

- *Horizontal Individualism*
- Strong sense of equality of opportunity
- Do it on your own, but strong sense of community (SISU)
- Avoid uncertainty, prefer structure, masculinity
- Strong & independent women



# WEST meets EAST

- Reserved but direct communication styles
- Respect (face) but honesty
- From High to Low Context (The silent Finn?)

**Values:** Democracy, self-determinism, equality for women, work ethic, human rights, ecology

**Communication style:** Introvert, modest, quiet, thinks in silence, doesn't interrupt, distrusts big talkers, uses silence, truth before diplomacy, little body language

<http://www.helsinki.fi/~tella/nishimuranevgitella299.pdf>



# Kalevala - the National Epic

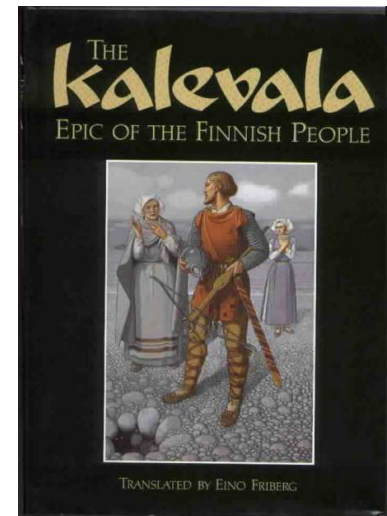
- Inspiration behind Tolkien's Trilogy

*... Finnish... set the rocket off in story. I was immensely attracted by something in the air of the Kalevala.... the beginning of the legendarium, of which the Trilogy is a part..., was in an attempt to reorganize some of the Kalevala... into a form of my own.*

- A rather grim collection of folk poems that were sung about the creation of the world, love, hate, greed & survival. SISU

- Important for the Finnish cultural identity and language

- First collected and published in 1835



# SISU & Finnish-Americans

“I like to think of my grandmother as having Sisu. She was left in the late 1800s after the death of her husband with seven small children and 360 acres. She worked, handled working men, handled finances, was successful when all believed she'd fail. Never spoke the English language, used her children as interpreters. That strikes me as having Sisu.”

*A retired nurse in her seventies, 2nd generation*

“When my (two) children were born, I had no medications or sedatives. Natural childbirth suggests having an object to look at as a focal point during labor. My husband made me a sign that said Sisu.”

*A teacher, wife, mother in her forties, 3rd generation*

Is Sisu Alive and Well Among Finnish Americans? William R. Aho, Ph.D

# SISU & Finnish-Americans

Study of Finnish Women's group in DC:

“one commonality that brings the entire Kipinä Kerho group together is a sense of pride in being Finnish and having *sisu*. No matter what status each person may have as a Finnish speaker or what country they belong to as citizens, they all share *sisu* and they claim universally, “We are very proud to be Finns.”

- Emily Channel, American University, 2008.

# Immigrant Child *By Aili Jarvenpa*

I reach back  
to my bilingual roots  
and catalogue them  
into fragmented images  
of my being,  
part captive of a land  
I'd never seen,  
but drained  
by the agonies  
of its famines, wars  
and tyrannies heaped upon  
my not too ample back.

In my dream  
I struggle to merge  
into my melting pot  
as my ancestors chant  
Sisu ! Sisu! Sisu!  
And I protest:  
I'm not brave!  
I'm not brave!  
Try to remove  
their sign of sisu  
from my psyche,  
Try, but fail again  
to prove  
that my life is mine  
and their lives were theirs.

# SISU Explained

- **SISU is a result of the unique geographical & cultural location of Finland**
  - Historically an isolated area
  - Inhabitants lived in small rural isolated communities
  - Long, cold & dark winters
  - Historically occupied by external powers
  - Survival depended on the individual having guts and determination while facing severe obstacles.
  - Small group populations combined their SISU to survive

# SISU in Finland Today

- In corporate names
- Candy



- Sports, especially Hockey
- Used as coaching technique
- In business culture
- In literature, arts, society

# SISU-redefined by Expat Finns

- SISU traditionally has a somewhat negative connotation.
  - A SISU that burns you out, that requires suppression of your feelings to do your duty & endure
- SISU among expatriate Finns has changed from “guts with a hint of madness” to pride.
- A positive force that:
  - brings people together
  - enforces your identity as an expat Finn
  - gives you a sense of strength, competency and community

# A Positive SISU Redefined

## **S = Sauna**

Importance of caring for your mental, spiritual and physical health

## **I = Introspection**

Importance of first knowing yourself and then taking on challenges

## **S = Share**

Importance of sharing thoughts and feelings with others to  
connect & create community

## **U = Understand**

Seek to understand yourself and others before you act / judge



# Resources

## **The Sword & The Sea Tales of Scandinavia and the Baltic**

<http://swordandsea.blogspot.com/2010/05/what-is-sisu.html>

## **Communication Style and Cultural Features in High/Low Context Communication Cultures: A Case Study of Finland, Japan and India**

Shoji Nishimura, Anne Nevgi and Seppo Tella

<http://www.helsinki.fi/~tella/nishimuranevgitella299.pdf>

## ***Sauna, Sisu ja Suomi*: Representations of Finland Among Finnish-American Women in Washington, D.C. by Emily Channell American University**

<http://finnspark.homestead.com/files/EmilyChannell.pdf>

## **Is Sisu Alive and Well Among Finnish Americans?**

William R. Aho, Ph.D. <http://home.comcast.net/~ahobill/sisu.pdf>

**Kalevala:** <http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/kalevala.htm>