What makes a good research leader? It seems the answer cannot be found in any specific type of personality. There are many recipes for the perfect apple pie. The same goes for successful leadership strategies. What effective leaders have in common though, is the ability to let creativity flow and to pass on responsibility at the right time.

BAGADILICO Vice Coordinator Johan Jakobsson possesses these characteristics. Or so says the Swedish Foundation for Strategic Research. They just presented Johan with a 10 million SEK grant within the ‘Future Research Leaders’ program.

- I’m still a very young research leader and I keep on learning from my mistakes. But I hope that they saw in me a determination to continue to develop as a leader. What I aim for is quite simply to engage my research group members. I try to create an open-minded environment where people are given freedom to air original ideas, where we can talk about everything and where students can take ownership of their projects, says Johan Jakobsson.

Aside from his qualities in spearheading a research group the grant validates the ongoing research in Johan’s lab. Two main research lines will be boosted by this cash injection. His groundbreaking research on non-coding RNAs has already received a lot of attention. Not least by winning him a top SRC grant last month. These RNAs are believed to regulate memory, learning and other higher functions in the brain. The other objective is to examine the role of endogenous retroviruses, parasitic viruses that have been part of the human genome for millions of years. The viruses are suspected to play an important role in various brain activities.

The recent influx of research funds buys Johan and his team time and peace of mind. The group can now take in more researchers and is allowed the space to perform truly experimental research, a hard-earned luxury in this business. With the pressure off to churn out papers in the short-term more creative ideas can be explored.

- In my opinion, research projects today take about five years to complete. So, if you get money for one or two years your efforts to perform original research will no doubt be stifled, concludes Johan Jakobsson.
The gate to Europe. A tagline today routinely associated with the Öresund bridge. The once hotly debated link between Sweden and Denmark has become an important symbol of regional identity, connecting two nationalities. This was the subject of BAGADILICO’s Markus Idvall’s dissertation in the year 2000.

Markus has since taken a sharp turn in his research focus. He’s now building a bridge of his own, linking two landmasses rarely connected by solid construction, the cultural and medical sciences. In tandem with Susanne Lundin he has researched the ethical aspects of the sometimes shady netherworld of organ transplants and the drummed up promises of xenotransplants once offered to patients.

With his recent SRC grant of 2,3 M SEK Markus is now shifting his attention to Parkinson's disease. In the project ‘The Two Horizons of Research’, kicking off in 2014, he will investigate the cultural and social negotiation that is taking place between researchers and patients when clinical trials are performed.
I want to try and understand how patients experience clinical trials. What kind of dialogue is in place with researchers? What is the context of informed consent in these clinical trials? How are the research results relayed to patients as the trials go on? And how do researchers see their role in communicating with patients? These are the type of questions that I will try to get answers to.

In his efforts to get a historical bird’s eye view on these matters Markus knows to appreciate having Lund as his key observational platform. Taking the renowned cell transplants from the 80’s as a starting point he will try to paint the bigger picture of researcher-patient relations over the past decades. He is looking to spot certain trends in how communication between the two has developed over the years. Current research is showing that patients are moving towards a more active role in setting the new conditions for clinical trials.

First off I will explore the methods involved when recruiting patients. How did the two parties communicate leading up to the actual trials? What kind of information is provided to patients beforehand and how was this followed up until the completion of the research project? I will try to find publications, research plans, informational brochures and other material that can help me map out the lines of communication established throughout the process.

The project will start by exploring Lund’s PD research environment but Markus Idvall aims to also interview researchers from the U.S. in order to broaden the perspective and give the study further scientific credibility.

The final part of the project will consist of extensive interviews with patients. Markus already has some experience in talking to PD patients being part of the ongoing TRANSEURO study. To date he has interviewed both patients and the public in different focus groups on the risks and opportunities involved in cell transplantation research. His contribution to the much-anticipated study was inspirational in his decision to launch the current project.

Besides from the scientific merits of his SRC application Markus believes that what gave him the grant is in no small part reliant on him belonging to the BAGADILICO environment.

- I think I absolutely benefited from being part of BAGADILICO. I think a lot of people are excited to see this partnership between medical and cultural researchers continue to develop. Another reason for getting the grant, I think, is because it’s a feasible, clearly defined project. It is not built on lofty theories but instead a rather robust step-by-step investigation.

When asked about the potentially normative underpinnings of the study, Markus Idvall hesitates for a moment. He then concedes that when dealing with cultural analysis of any kind you are bound to reach certain conclusions that may be interpreted as being of a normative nature. Such are the conditions when you investigate sensitive ethical dilemmas in society, he says.

- But the goal is not to only offer up one side of the story. It is true that in this case the patients could be considered the ‘weaker’ party but for the sake of scientific analysis it is equally important to understand the role of the researcher.

Markus Idvall will be working part-time on the three-year project ‘The two Horizons of Research’ starting in January 2014.