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Reviewed Article:

How to Make a Medieval Town Come Alive – the Use of Volunteers in Living History

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Author(s): Pia Bach [1] ✉, Thit Birk Petersen [1]

[1] Middelaldercentret, ved Hamborgskoven 2-4, 4800 Nykøbing F., Denmark.

For over 25 years The Medieval Centre / Middelaldercentret in Nykøbing F. Denmark has used volunteers to inhabit the reconstructed medieval town of Sundkøbing. To combine the use of volunteers and living history is not easy or something that happens spontaneously. It is hard work and requires patience, strength and firmness, but also empathy, people skills, and leadership. Many museums have asked us how we successfully employ the use of volunteers without the volunteers taking over, or huge conflicts emerging. Therefore, in this article we

will present our method, which has worked very well for us for many years. A note must first be made, that while this method is a success at our institution, it does not mean that it can be implimented / transferred directly to another museum. The model must be adapted to fit the museum and its volunteers. However, the basics of the model are easily used and should be applied in all museums that have volunteers as part of their staff.

The article is written very much as a manual with a step by step method approach that takes the reader through the many details of working with volunteers. It is therefore not written in a very academic manner, but more in a DIY way. We hope it proves useful.

> “ The first weekend is very important as this can be a surprise to some. Many have a very romanticised idea about what it would be like to live in the Middle Ages – maybe they have visited us in July in sunshine, but not all days are like this – we are based in Denmark, and it rains. So, it can be a wakeup call for some

About The Medieval Centre

The Medieval Centre began as a ‘good idea’, as many things do. The town of Nykøbing celebrated its 700th years anniversary in 1989 and the local museum suggested that a replica of a medieval trebuchet should be built to celebrate the anniversary. The project was a huge success. In 1989, over a period of 3 weeks, more than 15,000 people visited Nykøbing, and it was decided to create some themed workshops the following year. After a few years a big donation from a fund in Denmark was awarded to the centre, and it was possible to build an entrance hall, toilets and start building what became known as Sundkøbing (See Figure 1).

Volunteers have been a part of the centre from day one. They make the town come alive and participate in the daily program. It is always the employees who make sure the basis of interpretation is perfect, and they give the guided tours. They also take care of the school program and the daily program tasks that require education. The base are the employees and the sugar on top are the volunteers.

In the beginning of the history of The Medieval Centre, the volunteers worked rather autonomously and there wasn’t a lot of control from the centre. No one knew how many would turn up in the morning or when they would leave. The volunteers had fun, enjoyed themselves with small sketches and interventions but from a professional point of view it was a disaster. It was clear that some sort of structure was needed.

By trial and error, the framework of our current model developed, and it worked really well. Through the years it has been adjusted and evaluated but in basic terms it is the same model.

It did scare off some volunteers when we first introduced this model, but it did also attract new volunteers who wanted to put in time and effort in a well organised manner. There are 7 full time employees at the centre and 7 seasonal interpreters. Beside this we have around 170 volunteers who come during the season to help inhabit the town of Sundkøbing.

The four pillars

The model basically has four pillars from which we work: requirements, expectation, education and respect. What stands above the pillars is the strategy of The Medieval Centre. Our mission is to teach our paying guests what it was like to live in the Middle Ages, effectively offering a form of time travel, 610 years back in time. This needs to be obvious in everything we do, and the volunteers are familiar with the strategy.

We set the frames, make the rules and expect the volunteers to act within these templates. The frames are used as guidelines for the volunteers, who know what to do, who is in charge, and that the final responsibility of the centre comes down to the paid staff. In return, volunteers can expect us to provide them with solid education, not just that they know our expectations from voluntary staff, but that they offer accurate representation of the past. We also listen to their needs and make sure that they are both physically and mentally ready to be part of the living history that we do.

The host – us, has to show leadership, show the way, give the volunteers tools and space, listen and make sure that the dialogue is positive. We must state, that the volunteers are NOT seen as cheap labour, and they do not take work from paid staff! They are very much seen as a co-worker and partner and they are doing a very important job – which we always make sure to let them know and thank them for the many hours of work they choose to put into our institution. This is the stable ground for a strong and loyal group of volunteers.

Pillar 1: requirements

Above all requirements lies our desire to produce an authentic experience for the visitor. Our aim is to show a picture of a medieval market town. Our employees and volunteers portray inhabitants in a town in Denmark in the year 1408 and know nothing of the modern world. There are no modern objects, no make-up, no glasses, tattoos or piercings in the medieval part of the centre. Authenticity is key. If a volunteer wants to bring their own clothing, we have to approve it (See Figure 2).

Another requirement is that our volunteers can take part in the first person live interpretation and that they can “act” accordingly and interact with our tourists. The volunteers get food, a place to sleep (in the medieval houses) and our support and education.

One of the worries that is often put forward from other institutions is the fear of setting up requirements for their volunteers and the reaction from the volunteers if they do so. Many fear that all volunteers will leave and never come back, leaving the institution in a situation they cannot afford to be in.

Our advice is to just go for it, make the change that is needed for the institution. Some may leave, but new volunteers will come and most will stay. If you have a well-established group of volunteers, of course a change will scare them, new sets of rules might put some off, and that must be simply accepted. Changes require sacrifices, and if an institution needs more professional groups of volunteers, then requirements and frameworks are necessary.

Involve the volunteers in the changes that involve them. Listen to them and what they might want and especially what ideas they may have. This makes them a part of the change rather than setting them apart from it. They like to be included and often they have very good insight in the business. We do not expect our volunteers to give more than they can, but we do expect commitments to be kept once made. We give them room for development and freedom with responsibility.

We never pay volunteers! That would change the balance of power, and it is crucial that we are in charge at all times. In some cases, we do refund travel costs if we have asked a specific volunteer to participate in a specific event because we need his or her skills. We also have some re-enactment groups coming from all over Europe and some of them are regular visitors that we are co-operating with because they have skills that are very useful to us and in such circumstances we can refund travel costs too.

There is a distinction between volunteers (groups or individuals) and people who do this work for a living (group or individual).

Pilar two & three: Expectations and education

Education: theory

The process of becoming a volunteer at The Medieval Centre is long. This is not to scare off some people but merely to make sure that both parties are aware of what is being agreed to (See Figure 3).

The first step is to get in touch with our volunteer manager Pia Bach. She will then have a personal interview with the person and after this, send them an application form together with a lot of information that they need to read. The application form asks questions about why they want to become a volunteer, if they have any experience with living history (not obligatory but it is always nice for us to know) and also other questions that can only be answered if they have read the information material. The form is sent back and they can now sign up for the first part of our two-part introduction course.

The introduction course is held in the spring from Saturday to Sunday. These two days are filled with a lot of theory such as a brief history of the Middle Ages in Northern Europe, daily life in the Middle Ages, religion, the living standards, the practice of living history at The Medieval Centre and how to be a volunteer, alongside more basic information. It is a lot to take in, a lot of new information and very theoretical. This is a surprise to some but it is very important for us to ensure that volunteers have basic knowledge of medieval history, as well as understanding our vision, and that the duties of being a volunteer at The Medieval Centre are clear.

Two years ago we changed the course, as many volunteers felt it was too theoretically heavy and academic and they lost interest in coming back. Most of our volunteers are not academics, they are laypersons who love history but they might not be the strongest in theory and many have not been in school for years.

Therefore we decided to change it a bit – there is still a lot of theory as it is simply necessary, but we changed some of the classes to be more practically oriented. For instance, before they sat in the classroom and our teachers talked about medieval fashion and food, now we dress them in medieval clothes and take them down to our merchant's house where they will spend the afternoon learning how to make fire, how to make a broom, how to make a medieval bed etc.

Therefore, they learn a lot about medieval fashion from the start, often resulting in some surprises, such as how wool can itch, and how dresses can be irritating if not wearing a long skirt underneath. The hose can also be quite strange for modern men to wear for the first time – a lot of humorous moments are often had during the initial fittings!! While this process is both fun and important for team bonding, the new volunteers also experience the feeling of linen and wool clothes against their body, and of wearing medieval shoes and headwear before they are set out in the town.

During the day, some of our experienced volunteers have been preparing a medieval feast for the new intake, and this food is enjoyed in the merchants house, in candle light, from authentic plates. This is usually a very lovely evening where the volunteers get the proper medieval experience; the magic of The Medieval Centre (See Figure 4).

During this evening event they also meet some of the experienced volunteers and can talk to them about the volunteer experience. It has paid off to change the last part of day to a more practical part – this is what they signed up for. Sunday is spent in the classroom, with theory and a lot of practical information – learning about day programs, what does a morning meeting look like and how do they book a house.

Education: practical

In the beginning of the season two weekends are selected to be the new volunteers' weekends. They sign up for one of the weekends and this is where they will first encounter tourists, experience a real morning meeting, sleep in the houses etc. It is often connected with a bit of nerves from their side. They are unsure that they will understand or know what to do when talking to a tourist. During the weekend they are together with other new volunteers, although there are one or two employees with them all the time and a few of the 'old hands'. The first day is spent in the merchant's house preparing lunch and doing other small tasks. Someone who knows the place and how it is experienced by the public is present all the time.

On the Sunday they can take part in the program, help at the trebuchet, the tournament, the archery etc.
Of course they will never be set on a task without having someone with them that can teach them how to do it. We make sure to follow through and ensure that they feel secure and safe.

The first weekend is very important as this can be a surprise to some. Many have a very romanticised idea about what it would be like to live in the Middle Ages – maybe they have visited us in July in sunshine, but not all days are like this – we are based in Denmark, and it rains. So, it can be a wakeup call for some that it is cold to sleep in the medieval houses, it can be rather wet, the houses are small and you are all very close together, there are always people around you. For some it is also a surprise that the tourists are there, and that the tourists are everywhere, looking, asking and photographing. It can be a challenge answering questions while mending the fire or just to be in the spotlight all the time. However, most of the new volunteers love it and they love the friendships they develop with other volunteers.

Pillar 4: respect; keeping the volunteers happy

When we began working with volunteers it was very quickly clear that some sort of head organisation for the volunteers was needed. An organ which the centre could communicate with and who had the daily contact with the members.

So the Guldborgsund Gilde was formed with a board and a chairman. All are elected by the other volunteers and the centre has one representative in the guild. They are very important in our work with the volunteers as they play a big part in providing further education, workshops, lectures and social gatherings like parties and trips. A small magazine is published 4 times a year. In this the volunteers can write articles about their experiences at the centre, exhibitions they have seen and we can write information about events, the season etc (See Figure 5).

Some volunteers have organised themselves in groups within the guild. There is a group who take care of the market place, a painter's guild, an archery guild and a textile guild for

example. It is a requirement from our side that all volunteers are members of the guild. There is an annual fee to be paid.

The volunteers can apply for money for projects that are relevant to the centre. So if a volunteer wants to go to a museum to research an object they want to reconstruct for use at the centre, some money can be applied towards that. If one of the groups want to buy some objects or tools to make their interpretation even better, then the centre can also apply for money for projects at the centre – new roof, musicians or sails for the ships.

The co-operation between the centre and the guild is very good and based on respect, loyalty and trust. The guild offers the volunteers a platform where they can meet and also security for them as volunteers and they know that they will be updated with the latest news.

Our volunteers come from many corners of the world. Of course the largest part is form Denmark, but we also have volunteers from The Netherlands, Germany and all across Europe. Many return year after year and children have grown up and spent their summers in the Middle Ages.

Changes – adapt the model once in a while

A new group of volunteers have started to visit us – the re-enactors. This is a new type of volunteer and a group that brings its own set of issues and challenges. We are very happy that so many groups want to join us and we appreciate them all! However, it also requires us to take a new look at our organisation of volunteers and come up with new ways to coordinate them. These groups are usually highly specialised and knowledgeable. At the same time their aim to visit is usually self-serving rather than vocational, and we have a huge task making sure that they understand that the paying guests are first priority and their roleplay comes second – or after closing hours!

Usually they understand and try to interact, but for many it is also a new way to meet guests. So this is the challenge for the future - incorporating re-enactors at The Medieval Centre (See Figure 6).

Working with volunteers is working with a living organism and the model needs to be flexible, moulded and adapted to new scenarios once in a while. Nothing is static.
While the volunteers love the medieval town of Sundkøbing they also need some modern facilities. We have a back stage area where there is a huge common area with kitchen, tables and room for good Danish hygge in the evening. This is where they cook dinner and breakfast, have a beer or two at night, play games, talk, listen to music and all the other things you do with good friends. This is also where, every morning, there is the daily meeting at 9.30. This is where all the tasks of the daily program are divided between staff and volunteers, so

we can make sure the program will run smoothly, for any information that needs to be told and where we all meet to say good morning to each other.

Everyone needs to participate in the daily programme and sometimes it can be a challenge to get people to sign up. We therefore came up with a scheme for a week at a time where they could sign up for the different tasks during the week. This way they could plan their week and take a day or two to do other things around the medieval town – cook, learn a craft etc. Doing this also made it easier for both us and them to see who actually signed up for what, and who did not. This allowed us to be able to say to various volunteers "today you will do this particular task, because X has been doing this task all week, and they need a day off". It makes the tasks easier to share as everyone is doing their bit and they know they won't end up with it every day.

Challenges – keep it simple

Our volunteer group works very well, we have found a model that works and fit our institution but we still encounter problems and challenges. There are basically two types of conflicts and challenges: 1. Between the volunteers, 2. Between us and a volunteer.

1. Between the volunteers	2. Between us and a volunteer
When many people of different age, social group, interests, perspective and insight are gathered and forced to live close together under rather primitive means it naturally can cause some issues. Not everyone likes everyone. Some thinks that the children make too much noise, some would like the kitchen to look neater that others, and some would like to sit up till late in the night singing and laughing. We therefore have set up some rules to make it easier for them to interact with each other. Some social guidelines for The White House (the common room – it has nothing to do with the presidential house in Washington, the house is just painted white). We try to manoeuvre volunteers who are in conflict, to avoid any confrontations as best we can. We try to make room for dialogue between them, listen to them etc. We try to make them resolve their own problems – they are grown up people and we do not want to decide when the kitchen is cleaned up. But we are always ready if a conflict gets out of hand!	This is mostly if we have not succeeded in making ourselves and the rules clear in the first place. Some hope to have a nice relaxed holiday in the idyllic Middle Ages where they can do as they see fit. If this is the case, then we have failed to communicate that they were going to spend their holiday in a working museum and that it requires some effort and involvement from them as well. This is usually easily solved with a talk about expectations from both sides. Then there are the volunteers who come with a different background. Maybe they have done volunteer work in another living history museum or they have done re-enactment somewhere. They need to be re-booted so to speak. We need to make clear that our rules might be different or we do things differently. The other volunteers are also very helpful and take very good care of new volunteers. Some volunteers are archaeologists or highly skilled craftsmen and some just think that they know more than we do about something. It might be the case. We do not know everything and we are very happy to hear from others about

There is a strict rule about alcohol. During opening hours it is strictly forbidden – also non-alcoholic beer!
After closing hours, alcohol that contains more than 15% alcohol is forbidden – beer, wine etc. are fine, but no spirits. This rule had to be implemented a few years back when a group got out of control and drank all night every night, and remained drunk in the morning. This was necessary because:

1. You can't do a good job if you have a hangover or are still drunk.
2. Tourists will notice.
3. A lot of the stuff we do requires that you are awake and fully aware of what you are doing in order to avoid accidents. It is basic health and safety – you do not go into a sword fight or a tournament if you are still drunk or hung-over!

improvements or new research, but it will always be us who decides if we will change something. Working with volunteers requires a good amount of people skills, knowledge of how group structures work, and pedagogy. We always aim for dialogue before setting in with rules and regulations.

Volunteers are a gift!

We appreciate our volunteers very much and we make sure to tell them (See Figure 7). They are important to us – we couldn't do what we do without them. Our conclusions or final remarks for working with volunteers are these:

- It takes time to work with volunteers – make sure you have a designated person in your staff whose job it is to take care of the volunteers and communicate with them. They need to know that there is one specific designated person they can come to. It is a financial investment but it pays off in the end.
- Always be clear what the expectations and requirements are – from the beginning. This is a way to meet many conflicts before they arise.
- Be very clear about who has final responsibility for the centre (always you – not the volunteer)
- Be kind and show understanding – they are here to help us and they do it in their spare time!
- Be helpful – if they have a problem or a question – we share our knowledge with them and they can use it as they see fit.
- Expect conflicts – a large group of people without a clear leader (the chairperson of the guild is not always present), will always cause problems. People like to be aware of a

problem solving hierarchy

- Be ready to negotiate and instigate dialogue
- Be grateful, say thank you and give something back
- Show respect – they are delivering a tangible piece of work
- Do not be afraid to lose volunteers – if they leave and cannot live with your new guidelines, then it would be unnecessary conflict and not good for either party. If some do leave, they will either come back, or new volunteers will come. Many want to put in some work in an organisation that is well driven and runs smoothly.
- If they feel appreciated they will give you tenfold back!

Remember that volunteers do this work of their own free will in their spare time – what do you do in your spare time and how would you like to be treated?

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Corresponding Author

Pia Bach
Middelaldercentret
ved Hamborgskoven 2-4
4800 Nykøbing F.
Denmark
E-mail Contact

Gallery Image

FIG 1. MORE THAN 15.000 VISITED THE CENTRE IN 1989, WHEN THE SMALL TREBUCHET WAS BUILT. COPYRIGHTS: MIDDELALDERCENTRET

FIG 2. AUTHENTICITY IS KEY. WE AIM TO SHOW THEM AS ACCURATE A PICTURE OF A SMALL MERCHANT TOWN IN DENMARK AROUND THE YEAR 1400 AS POSSIBLE. COPYRIGHTS: MIDDELALDERCENTRET

FIG 3. EDUCATION IS IMPORTANT. WE EDUCATE OUR VOLUNTEERS SO THEY CAN PERFORM AND ACT LIKE INHABITANTS IN SUNDKØBING. COPYRIGHTS: MIDDELALDERCENTRET

FIG 4. THE PROPER MEDIEVAL FEEL THAT OUR VOLUNTEERS SEEK. THIS IS AN IMPORTANT PART OF THE COURSES NOW. COPYRIGHTS: MIDDELALDERCENTRET

FIG 5. IN THE MAGAZINE THEY CAN WRITE STUFF ABOUT EXPERIENCES AND THERE ARE ALWAYS A FUN COVER PHOTO. COPYRIGHTS: MIDDELALDERCENTRET

FIG 6. THE NEW GROUP OF VOLUNTEERS – THE RE-ENACTORS. THEY ARE DIFFERENT FROM OUR USUAL VOLUNTEERS BUT JUST AS WELCOME. COPYRIGHTS: MIDDELALDERCENTRET

FIG 7. FROM A MORNING MEETING IN THE AUTUMN HOLIDAY. IT IS FULLY PACKED, A LOT OF PEOPLE AND NOT MUCH SPACE. COPYRIGHTS: MIDDELALDERCENTRET