

Reflections on leadership in university museums and non-university museums

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Resumo

Durante 18 anos de trabalho em museus suecos tive a oportunidade de me cruzar com alguns bons directores e directoras de museu. Tinham em comum um espírito empreendedor e um entusiasmo em conhecer pessoas de todos os níveis da comunidade, bem como uma percepção profunda de como o estabelecimento de redes de contactos é importante para o desenvolvimento e sucesso do museu. Após dois anos e meio como directora do Museu da Universidade de Uppsala – o Museu Gustavianum – os directores de museus universitários que conheci são igualmente entusiásticos e diligentes, mas trabalham com base em permissas diferentes, nem sempre em benefício dos respectivos museus. Tendo como base entrevistas realizadas com cinco directores experientes – dois de museus universitários e três de museus não universitários – este artigo tem como objectivo lançar o debate sobre os aspectos essenciais da liderança nos museus.

Abstract

During my 18 years working in different museums in Sweden I had the opportunity to meet some enthusiastic and real good, networking museum leaders. They had all in common a desire to meet people from all levels of the community. They also had a profound insight in how important networking is for the success and development of the museum. After two-and-a-half years as Director of the University Museum in Uppsala – the Museum Gustavianum – I have met enthusiastic university museum leaders working hard, but with other premises, sometimes in benefit of the museum, sometimes not. Through interviews with five experienced museum leaders (two from university museums and three from non-university museums) looking upon 'advocacy and leadership' I hope to raise a fruitful discussion about how we shall develop the best sides of leadership.

Introduction

Three years ago, I became director of the University Museum at Uppsala University. The museum had been inaugurated in June 1997 and was situated in the seventeenth century university building called Gustavianum (Fig. 1), which also houses the famous Anatomical Theatre. This was a dream job for me, working in a museum that would be a window to the world for the activities of the university, both historical through its collections with roots in the Middle Ages, and current, through today's exhibitions. I knew that other museums were also involved (Museum of Evolution, Botanical Garden, University Library's Cultural Heritage Collection,

Museum of Medical History). However, at the moment of my appointment I did not know much about them.

Full of enthusiasm about this new challenge, I encountered a well-profiled and coordinated museum programme for the entire university, for the benefit of researchers, students, and the public alike. Before I assumed the position, I had prepared a proposal for a joint profiling and marketing of the museums. Since I saw myself as sitting on a huge treasure chest filled with knowledge, I felt an enormous optimism. As a researcher (historian of the Middle Ages) with a great interest in popular education and a great desire to relay knowledge, I thought to fit in perfectly. I had

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almost 20 years of experience of managing museums outside the university, of which three years were devoted to major cultural and historical projects such as Stockholm's year as Cultural Capital in 1998 and the City of Stockholm's Millennium Celebration. My museum years in the 1980s had been spent in the relatively small Swedish town of Motala, working at the Canal and Maritime Museum. In the 1990s I was head of the Art Museum in Uppsala and later section manager at the Museum of National Antiquities in Stockholm.

In this paper I will explore whether my experiences from non-university-museums concerning strategies on 'how to run' museums were useful in a university museum. I also want to look at the kind of support needed for leadership to develop, the best sides of leadership, and the importance of networking.

Meeting the university museum world

Fairly soon I discovered that the world of the university museum was different - for better or for worse - from my previous appointments. My first acquaintance with these differences had to do with the financial conditions. Here, there was stiff competition for funds. During my first meeting with the President of the University, he made it perfectly clear that the university did not have the resources to maintain museums: "We cannot afford museums. The mission of the University is research and education". The so-called Third Mission, to relate information to the public about what the University does, seemed to have very low priority.

As I left the meeting, I wondered how I could convince the university management of the strategic gains to be won in relation to the surrounding world if more money would be spend on museums. In my previous jobs there had been competition between the 'care' and the 'exhibit' section for funding, but in the end a good balance was usually found. Above all, the economic resources (even if they were meagre) were specially earmarked for museum activities. Funds came from the Ministry of Culture and the duties of the museum were outlined in cultural-political terms.

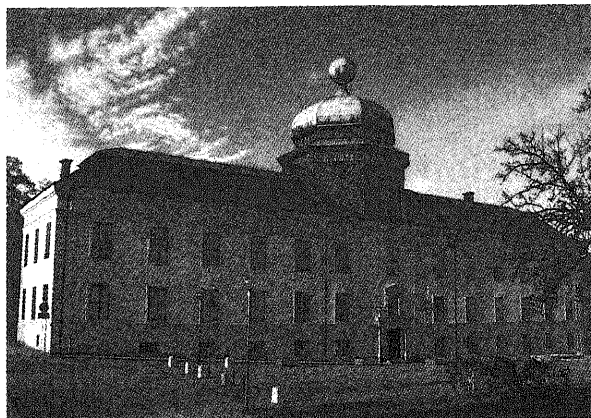


Fig. 1 – Gustavianum was built in the 1620s and is the oldest preserved building of Uppsala University. It opened as a museum in 1997 (Photo: Fabio Galli, courtesy Uppsala University).

Now I resorted under the Department of Education, which had no money for cultural heritage. I realized that I had to convince not only my public but also my superiors of the uniqueness of the 'treasures' owned and cared for by our university museums. I had never had to convince my own bosses before.

Strategies

Capture the public

One thing I learned while working on major cultural projects in Stockholm is that 'a good story well told' gets you an audience and pays well, but it has to be something that interests a large number of people. For the temporary exhibits programme, I decided to go to the present and look inwards, to the university's collections and contemporary research – the exhibit 'Cats, cats...' is an example of this. Every third household in Sweden has a cat and there are abundant cat societies and cat clubs that capture the interests of many people. In working with other groups, we gained access to broader public channels. In our collections there are mummy cats, cat fossils, cat skeletons that show evolutionary processes, cats in art, ongoing research about cat diseases, etc. Developing the educational programme around existing 'highlights' was another important strategy,

using for example the Augsburg Art Cabinet with its 1000 objects – the seventeenth century internet. The Cabinet was constructed in the city of Augsburg, Germany - a time-consuming task which continued from 1625 to 1631 and it was presented to the Swedish King Gustavus Adolphus in 1632. The Cabinet is an impressive piece of work designed and put together in order to represent the wonders of nature as well as the advances in art and technology (Fig. 2). It contains hundreds of compartments with nearly a thousand miscellaneous objects. Like today, when we are looking for knowledge on ‘the net’, the owner of the Cabinet could open it and demonstrate all kinds of marvels, ‘curiosa’ i.e. artefacts which aroused interest because they were exotic, expensive or rare, or simply because they were technically complicated. The marvels of art and technology, together with those of nature, were intended to captivate viewers gathered

around the Art Cabinet. Our pedagogical programmes (‘Looking for knowledge about the seventeenth century world’) are already very popular.

Another useful ‘highlight’ is the Anatomical Theatre, built on the roof of the existing university building (Gustavianum) in 1660-63 by the famous scientist Olof Rudbeck. The Theatre is one of the oldest and best preserved anatomical theatres in the world. The amphitheatre was constructed for 200 observers, with a dissection table in the centre. Professor Rudbeck’s aim was to raise the level of medical teaching at the University and dissections of executed criminals were carried out until 1766. In November 2001, it was used for its intended purpose – dissections – for the first time since the end of the eighteenth century. This time a 3D ‘Virtual Mummy’ was unwrapped and inspected on the table before a live audience, displaying the techniques used by the ancient Egyptians to preserve their dead. The dissections were a great success and continued to bring new audiences to the museum for five months.

Convince the management

Increase visibility

In order to get support from the university leadership for the museums, I realized that what needed to be done was to show economic gain and to make profit we would need to make the ‘splendour’ of the collections more visible. For this reason, I started a joint marketing plan for the museums and intensified the work of attracting the general public. Several cooperative projects to improve visibility were initiated: a new museum portal on the Net, a project called ‘Virtual visits to Treasures of Uppsala University’, together with Uppsala University Library, and particularly the ‘Experience Uppsala University’ project that, among other things, included training of students to become ‘certified university guides’. Another way to increase visibility was taking part in the project ‘Academic Heritage and Universities’ (*Universeum*), in which 12 of the oldest universities in Europe worked together for the mutual benefit of the common European cultural heritage.

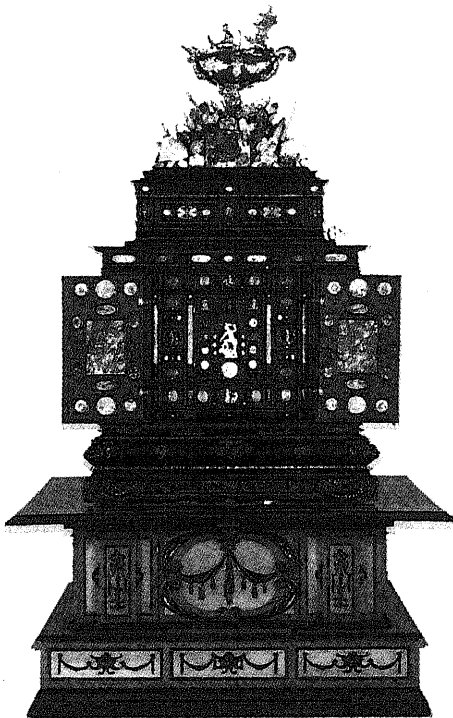


Fig. 2 – The Augsburg Art Cabinet was offered to King Gustavus Adolphus II in 1632 (Photo: Augusto Mendes, courtesy Uppsala University).

Increase external pressure

From my years in non-university museums I had learned that it is necessary to increase pressure from outside the museum to get support from one's 'bosses'. Our way of doing this was by building a network with the tourism agency and business representatives in Uppsala and by active participating in enhancing 'the Uppsala image'. Working with local business representatives, companies and hotels gave us many new visitors.

Another way was to build up active reference pools and linking them to the museum. One of these is the Teachers Pool, with teachers from all levels of primary and secondary schools. The teachers regularly meet with the museum-pedagogues, discussing new programmes and evaluating ongoing activities. Thereby, the teachers are our ambassadors. The Seniors Pool also proved to be an important resource - members helped us in dealing with the university leadership and acted as active ambassadors for the museum towards the general public. The pool consists of retired professors from all disciplines within the university, who are primarily working with Museum Gustavianum and work without payment, mostly as consultants for different exhibitions, but also as lecturers and guides.

Complete knowledge within reach

Just as I had hoped for, the almost immediate positive experience for me was the closeness to knowledge and research in vital social areas. Being able to 'download' the latest findings within various fields of research was incredibly satisfying. For example, in cooperation with the Rudbeck-laboratories, we made an exhibition on new landmarks in cancer and diabetes research. Just by crossing the street, I can meet the archaeologists and look at new findings. The pride I felt in being able to further develop the reputation and trademark of Uppsala University has also been important in my work.

The most conspicuous difference in my new position as compared with my previous work, has been the absence of clear-cut staff positions, both in lack of staff trained

for museum-tasks and the lack of clear job descriptions. As a consequence of these unclear positions, salaries are low. Librarians exist as a professional group in my university, but museum workers do not. Above all, we are lacking information and marketing-staff as well as staff in charge of exhibit activities. The public side, including the gift shop and guided tours, etc., is also weak in terms of professional training. Other museums (i.e. non-university museums) are rather better equipped in these areas.

How is it going?

Today we have a joint marketing and communications plan for all museums in Uppsala university and the public side of our activities is gradually being strengthened. For Museum Gustavianum a new organizational plan is beginning to function and revenues from the public are steadily increasing - in just two years, proceeds from the shop, guided tours, and entrance fees are up 25%. Last year 49,000 visitors found their way to Museum Gustavianum and including guests for the shop and conferences in our building we took care of 140,000 visitors. Together, our five university museums had 190,000 visitors. Are we convincing the university management? Not yet, but we are hopeful. The university needs time to incorporate these new public activities and to accept the Third Mission for the university, which continues to have low priority.

Keys of success – what are they?

My strategies on how to run Museum Gustavianum, based on my experiences in non-university-museums, seemed to work out fine, but I figured that it might be useful to compare my experience with that of colleagues in order to obtain some guidelines for the future. Which sides of my leadership should I develop more? Therefore, I conducted some interviews with three former and two of my present colleagues. After questions about age, education, title, extent of position, institutions, number of employees, etc, I asked for factors that have been keys to success (personal characteristics and/or external factors); where did they find support as directors, what did

they think about the importance of networking, and whether they had applied for or would have liked to be a director? (see Appendix).

Among my colleagues in the university there are some truly burning souls, including Professor John Peel (JP) and head curator Viveca Halldin Norberg (VH). John Peel came up with the idea of joining the three departments of palaeontology, zoology and botany into a Museum of Evolution. Without any formal decrease in his working hours as a professor, he has put his soul into the museum. Peel confirmed that our expanding collaboration, with regular contacts in the museum council and our new common marketing plan for the museums, means a lot to him. His great passion – ‘The Museum of Evolution: 5 Billion Years of Development’ – was first met with enthusiastic support from both leadership and personnel. As for himself, he says he enjoys the innovative aspect and challenge of the museum. However, budgetary constraints have forced down ambitions. Networks of colleagues and unions have been a great support, as well as contacts with the directors of university collections. John Peel is torn between his two worlds and realizes that in the long run he has to choose between being a researcher or a museum director.

Viveca Halldin Norberg burns fervently for her Cultural Heritage section of the University Library, but she cannot be sure that she can stay on since responsibility shifts from librarian to librarian. She calls herself both ‘cocky’ and ‘humble’ and finds her greatest support in women’s networks, like friends from her days as a student. She has a strong will to be a leader and comments on leadership at the university: “The department chair is often the person who does not have the energy to say no”. In other words, leadership is mostly not seen as important to one’s career. Working in non-profit organizations has given her extra strength and self-confidence. People are the most important factor for her.

During my years in Stockholm, I met some successful museum directors. One of them, Ulf Erik Hagberg (UEH), was my boss at the Museum of National

Antiquities. With brilliant social skills, deep knowledge, and an admirable supply of courage, he managed to bring about the construction of the so-called Gold Room (50 kg of prehistoric gold in an underground room), an investment of almost 40 million SEK. He emphasizes the importance of being something of a daredevil, testing boundaries and trying to reach a wide public with unconventional methods and ventures. Hagberg feels that popularization is important and has worked hard to get support from the business community and others.

Nanna Hermansson (NH) came to the City Museum of Stockholm at a time when funding was being cut back. Many staff members who had been at the museum ‘forever’ were made obsolete. Nevertheless, she managed to create a well-functioning museum under very tough circumstances. Hermansson is driven by a strong desire to ‘be beneficial’ and takes her civic mission seriously. For both Hagberg and Hermansson, a group of museum directors of the largest museums in Stockholm has been of great support. Now that she is retired, Hermansson says that “it would have been helpful if I had taken a course in leadership at an early point in my career”.

Desirée Edmar (DE) came to the museum world from the Department side, when she was asked and accepted to take on the enormous job of heading the National Museum of Natural History, which has considerable responsibility in terms of research, but is not a university-museum. Edmar is a symbol of the middle position between the two worlds of museums. Her leadership skills are characterized by her commitment and strong will to develop her co-workers’ skills. Like her colleagues mentioned above, she emphasizes the importance of leadership networks, especially those consisting of women, to help female directors.

Conclusion

The five colleagues interviewed were between 54 and 70 years old and had a long experience in leading positions in the museum world. All of them can be called ‘burning souls’ with considerable competence

in their specific fields. Their size of staff was from 10–200 employees, the leaders of university museums managed around 15 employees.

When it comes to the exercise of leadership and management in both museum 'worlds', the similarities are greater than the differences. The similarities are above all the desire and motivation to be a director as an opportunity for creativity. Especially the female directors pointed out the important role their co-workers play in the success of the museum's activities. The women directors agreed that leadership training would be useful.

Colleague networks seem to be available to everyone interviewed and all were aware of the importance of networking, although Stockholm's museum directors appear to have better connections with the surrounding community. Almost without exception, the interviewees received weak support from 'above'.

The differences manifest themselves mainly in terms of the scope of the different positions and in

terms of economic resources. There is very little time for the university to work actively with museums and the individual departments are seldom interested in working with the public. The competition for funds is also a prominent aspect of the university museum world.

Looking at my strategies for public success, I have found them useful in my new role as director of a university-museum and the interviews with colleagues convinced me that a good director in both museum 'worlds':

- a) has solid knowledge of the museum's fields of responsibility;
- b) has enthusiasm and a strong will to lead and mediate;
- c) dares to think differently (spectacularly) to attract the public;
- d) sees people/co-workers as the most important resource; and
- e) has the ability to network with the surrounding community.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to my former and present colleagues for their time and patience answering my questions.

Appendix

	Which factors have made your leadership successful?	Where have you found support for your directorship? a) your staff b) comparable institutions c) external networks	Have you had support from the ministerial level?	Which networks have been the most beneficial in your leadership? a) your own section b) other networks	Have you yourself applied/wanted to be a director?
JP	Energetic. Right person at the right time.	a) initially b) research institutions c) union networks	No, not really.	a) colleagues	Power is important. Thrill, creativity and teamwork.
VH	Enthusiastic, fearless.	a) female colleagues b) female research colleagues c) voluntary organisations	Some support from departmental level.	Combination of internal and external networks, mostly voluntary organisations.	Yes. Strong wish to lead and support my co-workers.
UEH	Enthusiasm, will to popularise, wish to test limits.	a) mostly strong support b) good among colleagues c) associations, economy, industry and sponsors	No apparent support from governmental level.	a) colleagues' networks important b) networks in industry, economy and society	Strong wish to reach out to the public audience.
NH	The will to lead, creativity, and meeting the audience.	a) not really b) fellow-directors c) nordic network	Mostly weak support.	a) colleagues	A wish to be useful and do good.
DE	Engagement, developing the co-workers potential.	a) yes b) fellow-directors c) female directors' group, international contacts	Some support.	a) colleagues' networks	Leading is exciting. The co-workers are the most important resource.

Table 1 – Summary of the answers provided by the five directors.