When the Young Ones Blossom

– the welfare society of the future must rely more on volunteers, and young people can benefit from being trained for it from the age of 12

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On Friday morning, 16-year-old Sofie sat on the sofa of GO' morgen Danmark, TV 2's morning show. She is a "spire" – a young sprout – at a care centre for people with dementia in Viborg, where she draws, paints nails and cuts out Christmas hearts with the residents. "They have given their whole lives, and now we can give something back," she said. Powerful.

I sat there smiling. Because that is exactly what 32 perfectly ordinary young people in the village of Sengeløse did ten years ago – and exactly what I argued for in January 2020, when I was invited to write an opinion piece in the Danish municipal trade paper NB-Kommune about a new welfare model based on volunteers.

My point is simple: The welfare model of the future must rely far more on volunteers. And we must train young people for it much earlier – around the age of 12, before they become teenagers and their interests perhaps turn in a completely different direction.

This article follows up on Future Leadership Preparedness. It is about what the spirer and the young people from Sengeløse show us – and why it is also relevant for business leaders.

The spirer are already here

Spirer – literally "sprouts" – are young people aged 13 to 17 with a part-time job in elderly care or in day-care institutions. They play cards, go for walks, chat and are simply present. The scheme really took off in 2021, and according to Local Government Denmark (KL), the number of 14–17-year-olds in spire jobs doubled in two years – from 981 in August 2024 to 1,936 in August 2026.

Sofie has been a spire at her care centre for two years and works there twice a week. When Viborg Municipality first advertised the positions, it received around 200 applications. Young people want to help. And the elderly receive something no budget line can buy: Joy of life, laughter and a young hand to hold.

The idea was tested in Sengeløse in 2015–17 and described in NB-Kommune in January 2020 – the year before the spire scheme really took off. It is hard not to see the similarities, and I believe the experience from back then helped pave the way.

Care home managers point to the same thing. The spirer bring quality of life and joy, and they meet the residents in a special way. A care home manager in Aarhus put it very simply:

> *They see the person before they see the illness or the limitations.*

Why 12 – before teenage life takes over

As early as the project's launch in 2015, I told the local paper Lokalavisen Taastrup that we should start before young people reach the final years of compulsory school. Around the age of 12 they are curious, quick to learn and still within reach – before unruly teenage life, when friends, screens and completely different interests take over.

The whole vision of the project was to sow the seeds young people need to develop their self-care capability, join committed communities and dare to take up the leadership baton. And we deliberately chose perfectly ordinary young people – those right in the middle, who for that very reason far too rarely get anything extraordinary at all.

It works because we start much earlier than the many quick-fix programmes for teenagers that cost a fortune and rarely have any noticeable effect when you read the evaluations. The parents said the same: More than nine out of ten thought the programme was exceptionally good – partly because it stepped in far earlier than expensive, remedial teenage projects.

The same idea – volunteering as the entry ticket

My opinion piece in NB-Kommune on 6 January 2020 began like this: "Whatever the colour of the political agenda, the current economic model for welfare will not work in the future. The solution is to teach very young people to contribute to their local community."

It was not a political piece, but a concrete proposal based on practical experience. In the project "Future Leadership Preparedness" in 2015–17, it was a non-negotiable requirement that each young person – before admission – had to find, complete and document at least 20 hours of voluntary charitable work in the local community.

The young people helped out in the nursery and kindergarten, both indoors and outdoors. They built relationships with the elderly at the care centre. They tidied up the village. And they helped the single neighbour with a disability who could no longer look after his own garden. They did it – and many carried on after the project. More welfare for zero kroner.

The vision – fewer resources, higher expectations

The vision behind the project was to show what villages are capable of when we join forces and everyone pitches in. To nurture the surplus mentality needed for us to go on living in a welfare society with a built-in paradox: Fewer resources and higher expectations of quality.

The project was about building academic, social and personal competences all at once. We called it "future leadership preparedness": Being the leader of, and taking responsibility for, one's own life – even as a teenager. The focus was on three things: Developing self-care capability, collaboration and team leadership.

The aim was to prepare young people to absorb learning, communicate better and find the motivation for education and, later, work and self-sufficiency. But at the same time, they had to learn to give something back. That is why the entry ticket was 20 hours of voluntary, unpaid work – before the first module.

Emil – a shining example

It all started with Emil. I met him at martial arts in the village, and at 11 his energy was going in every direction. Together we came up with a simple set-up: An hour and a half a week of Danish and maths at his parents' home – and conversations about life's big questions, including those I had no answers to myself. Emil said it himself in a short film from 2013: Without it, he would probably just have carried on fooling around. Now he looked forward to going to school, being himself and learning something.

Even then, he began to give back. He helped paint fences, wash cars and tend gardens, earning pocket money for his electric guitar. His band played at the senior citizens' Olympics we helped sponsor in Sengeløse across five care centres. At 13 he gave a talk to a leadership team about his own development journey: About the inner dialogue, about setting ambitious goals and keeping binding agreements with himself.

When the project was launched, Emil, now 14, told the parents at Sengeløse School about his own experiences – and all 12 places were taken before the meeting was even over. In fact, we had to expand to 16 participants. Later he became an assistant instructor for the younger ones, and today he is training to become a special needs educator. Emil is the best proof that it can be done.

Why it works – for both generations

For the elderly, the benefit is obvious. For the young, it is at least as great. They learn to take responsibility for others than themselves. Responsibility is about being able to respond: Proactively meeting a challenge – even when it is not your own. They learn to communicate with people who are completely different from themselves, and they feel what it means to make a difference.

That is surplus mentality in practice: Doing something good for others that you do not really have to do – and discovering that you get at least as much back. Sofie says it herself: She always looks forward to going to work. In the project we called it giving before you can enjoy.

There is also a more down-to-earth benefit. The welfare sector is short of hands, and in several places spirer have begun to find their way into social and healthcare training. Others, like Sofie, dream of becoming early-years educators. Either way, they have learned something about care, presence and responsibility that they will take with them into working life.

From receiver to giver – the positive spirals

The voluntary work did not stop at the entry ticket. There was a clear expectation that, in 9th grade, the young people would step up themselves and take the pressure off the hectic homework cafés – especially for the youngest in grades 1–3. Those who had received help were to pass it on.

That is precisely where a welfare model based on volunteers gets its strength. Early intervention mobilises the young person's potential and at the same time yields benefits for society on several fronts – and it leaves its mark on the next wave of young people. Good, positive spirals in the local community.

From part-time job to welfare model

Being a spire is a paid part-time job, and that is fine. But a genuine welfare model based on volunteers can reach even further. In Sengeløse, the voluntary effort was the entry ticket to a programme of weekly homework training and five character-building outdoor modules, in which the young people trained self-care capability, collaboration and leadership under pressure.

The pilot project had a total value of up to DKK 1 million excluding VAT, as I and several instructors chose to donate all or a large part of our work. It all rested on a partnership between the school, the parents, volunteer instructors and homework trainers, local businesses, the municipality and a number of sponsors. I myself donated around DKK 300,000, mainly for the first group, and a total of about 1,600 unpaid project management hours to show that it could be done. Mayor Michael Ziegler donated DKK 25,000 on behalf of the municipality to the 2015–16 group, and the municipality's § 17(4) committee (UTA) supported the 2016–17 group with DKK 127,500. The parents paid a modest contribution of between DKK 5,000 and 8,000.

In addition, a long list of local volunteers and smaller sponsors contributed support and help – including on all the OLTC training expeditions in Denmark and abroad. Sengeløse Minibusser drove for free, the Danish Emergency Management Agency in Hedehusene provided a free training day, and we borrowed the school gym on Anholt for overnight stays free of charge. Volunteer homework trainers stepped up, the instructors in Denmark and abroad – including a Danish special forces soldier – worked at a heavily reduced rate, and food and drink were donated.

The arithmetic is simple. If just 10,000 young people each contributed 20 hours, that would add 200,000 hours of extra presence in care centres, day-care institutions and with the neighbours. And at the same time the young people would learn more about themselves and about what it means to take responsibility – before they become teenagers, with everything that entails.

Three questions from elderly care

On 3 March 2020 – shortly after the opinion piece – I was visited by two people from the Service Centre for Vitality in the Elderly and Disability Administration. They wanted to discuss three central questions based on the project:

What are well-being and quality of life? My answer was that quality of life is very much about belonging and being able to contribute – whether you are 12 or 82. When the generations meet, both get something neither could get alone.

How do you get different actors to work together? With a clear shared mission, and by everyone giving something: The school, the parents, the volunteers, local businesses, the municipality and, not least, the young people themselves. And someone has to lead the way and show that it can be done.

How should welfare develop in the future? With fewer resources and higher expectations, we cannot simply pay our way out of it. We must mobilise far more volunteers – and train young people to contribute long before they become teenagers.

The method – training, not a café

We called it homework training, because it is about practising, keeping your nose to the grindstone and learning to concentrate – no different from going to badminton, where there is also a coach. It is not that the parents cannot help, but that another adult, who does not have their genes at stake, can see things differently.

Young people learn in different ways. Some did sums with almonds and raisins, which doubled as a healthy reward when the lesson was over. Others got maths through everyday life: The price per kilo of minced meat in the chiller cabinet, or what percentage a quarter litre of school milk is of a whole litre.

On the outdoor modules we used nature as a classroom, following my 3H method – something for the head, the hands and the heart. In other words, the reflective, the will-strengthening and the emotional fields of learning, combined so that the learning sticks. It was not a beach holiday or a scout camp, but hard training. The character-building element also came from overcoming adversity and learning to fight to become a really good version of oneself. In Austria I watched 16 young people deliver high performance in fierce headwinds and cold, uphill, hungry, bruised, with snot and tears – and still find the surplus to triumph over themselves, help each other and take turns leading in practice – what consultants love to call High Performance.

We defined leadership preparedness as the competences, attitude and courage that are the cornerstones of self-care capability – leading oneself – and thus the prerequisite for leading effective teams that solve complex problems. In short: Going the distance in a headwind, making a decision and executing a good solution. Not unlike what many companies and organisations like to call strategy execution.

What does this mean for businesses?

The spirer and the young people from Sengeløse are the employees and leaders of the future. They have learned something many companies spend large sums teaching their people later: To lead themselves, to work across generations and to contribute to something bigger than themselves.

Companies would do well to look for this kind of experience when they recruit – and also in their graduate programmes. They can also become part of the partnership themselves: As sponsors, with employees as volunteer instructors and homework trainers, or by opening their doors to young people. I have written more about this in Partnership in Practice.

And there is a point for leaders themselves: What works for young people also works for adults. Leadership does not start with a title, but with the ability to lead yourself and the will to contribute to the community. First with yourself, and then with those right around you. Mobilising drive comes from a shared mission that is bigger than the sum of the participants' egos.

And just as in the project, nothing needs to be perfect from the start. It is precisely imperfection that makes room for the emergent and for what unlocks potential. That applies to teenagers, and it applies to leaders: Set yourself some clear goals, make a concrete action plan – and then train every day. Get up and fight on when you stumble. Be your own light in the dark as you venture, fumbling but brave, into unknown terrain.

Building blocks of a welfare model based on volunteers

Five building blocks:

- **Start early:** Around the age of 12, before young people become teenagers – prevention rather than repair.
- **Make contribution a prerequisite:** Voluntary work as the entry ticket creates ownership and pride.
- **Build partnerships:** School, parents, volunteers, businesses and municipality lift together.
- **Combine with training:** Homework training and character-building activities give direction and self-confidence.
- **Let the generations meet:** Both young and old grow from it.

Three questions for you as a leader

Ask yourself:

- How can our company help more young people learn to take responsibility for others?
- Do we look for volunteering and part-time jobs when we recruit young employees and graduates?
- Do we train our own leaders to lead themselves and contribute to the community – before we ask them to lead others?

Conclusion – welfare grows from the ground up

The welfare model of the future must rely far more on volunteers – and we must train young people for it much earlier, around the age of 12. Emil and the 32 young people in Sengeløse showed more than ten years ago that it can be done. The spirer show today that young people want to – and that both they and the elderly get great joy from it.

The next step is to make it a genuine welfare model: One where voluntary contribution, training and partnerships go hand in hand, and where young people learn to lead themselves before they have to lead others. That is the welfare of the future – and future leadership preparedness.

The article builds on, among others, my opinion piece "Fremtidens lederberedskab – en ny velfærdsmodel baseret på frivillige" (Future Leadership Preparedness – a New Welfare Model Based on Volunteers) in NB-Kommune (6 January 2020), my LinkedIn article "Ny velfærdsmodel baseret på frivillige" (2021), the project website fremtidenslederberedskab.dk (in Danish), Lokalavisen Taastrup (2 June 2015 and 28 March 2017), the feature "Uddannelse til mig" on P1 Morgen, DR (1 April 2016), YouTube films about Emil (2013–14), the feature "Fritidsjob får livsglæden til at spire" on GO' morgen Danmark, TV 2 (20 November 2026), as well as TV MIDTVEST (18 November 2026), Fagbladet FOA (2024) and KL's figures for spire jobs.

Do you want to develop the leaders of the future – in your company and in your community?

Cronquist Consult ApS helps companies with leadership and team development, graduate programmes and partnerships that build self-care capability, surplus mentality and leadership. Read more here:
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