



Use your power as a leader (UXLibsVI plenary)

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Let's start with two UX mindset example stories from Linköping University Library (LiU Library) and SLU University Library (SLU).

One day, Anneli's co-worker Eva told her that she'd been doing guerrilla interviews. She got some really useful feedback from 15 students, and it only took her about 20 minutes. Eva, who is the library's System Manager, briefly described the quick attitudinal research she had done because she and her team wanted to find out what motivates students to return books that are overdue.

The fact that she gave just a short summary, that she didn't ask for permission before doing the research, and not once during conversation referred to what she'd been doing as 'UX work' made Anneli very happy, because all those things proved that interacting with users is a well-integrated part of the workflow.

One of the things Anneli addressed in her UXLibs keynote in 2019 was the importance of creating a certain workplace culture where empowering staff is key. Related to that, it's also important for managers and leaders to never seek control. This story illustrates that UX is truly embedded – at least within some parts of LiU Library.

At SLU, one staff member, Malin, noticed that some users, when returning books in the machine, stopped just before the end of the returning process. Then they put the books on the 'returned' shelf without finalizing the process in the system.

Malin felt the urge to help the users by teaching them that they should just press a certain button to finish the process of checking the book in. But instead, she decided to ask one of them why they hesitated to finalize. By that simple question, she found out that the text on the finalizing button said, in Swedish, 'Avsluta' – which means 'to finish' – and so the user was unsure whether that could actually mean 'abort process'.

Malin fixed the issue by writing some alternative texts on the button which she tested on a few students. The text was changed, and the issue of people hesitating to finalize, as well as that of books being on the returned shelf that hadn't been checked in, disappeared.

These stories show how well established the UX mindset is within our organizations. But when it comes to embedding UX within the whole library, SLU has been more successful than LiU Library, perhaps because SLU has been striving for many years to build a culture of strong, facilitating leadership as well as 'employee-ship'.

Empowering people

Around ten years ago, SLU embarked on a journey around the concept of Employee-ship to strengthen the work culture of the library.

In Sweden, the term Employee-ship is used to describe an approach to develop a culture of ownership and responsibility throughout an organization, where both



staff and management own their working situation and it can be a powerful tool for empowerment of staff.

Initially a consultant was hired to kick off the work with all staff and through various initiatives. Since then, the work culture has developed continuously and is now characterized by a strong sense of responsibility, taking care of each other and the workplace, with a strong mandate in a majority of individuals, to independently develop the work continuously.

Work engagement and reflection upon what people value in life

Here we invite you to pause and reflect on this question: do you find that there is a difference in your performance at work based on your level of engagement?

Research shows that most people seem to believe they perform better while engaged. Therefore, increasing the level of engagement could be a good thing for a leader to do.

In order to increase the level of engagement, the SLU library dove into values.

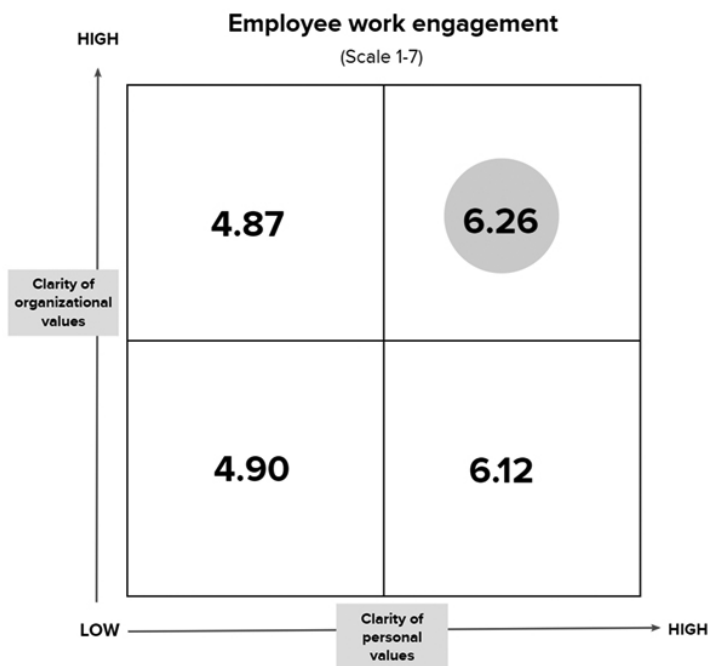


Figure 1 Employee work engagement.

Figure 1 shows clarity of personal values on the X axis, and clarity of organizational values on the Y axis. If a staff member's values are on a par with the values of the organization, and those values are clear and acted upon, that is the most ideal situation in terms of engagement, but the most important factor is individual reflection and clarity on one's own values. The theory behind this is that when people have reflected upon their own personal values, and hence 'know' what they value in work and life in general, their work engagement is higher (Posner and Schmidt, 1993: 344).

A global study from 2017 found that workplaces with a high level of engagement at work also have a 17% higher productivity and 21% higher profitability (Gallup, 2017: 38). The same study found that globally only 15% feel engaged with their work. So, there are plenty of reasons for trying to raise staff engagement with work in general, and not just with regard to UX work.

At SLU we approached this by actively reflecting on individual values and sharing them in small, safe groups. We also collectively chose values that we believed were descriptive for our organization at the time, and also the values we would like to be descriptive of the organization in the future. We found out that we wanted to value more things, such as courage, being experimental, clarity, long-term focus and competence to make decisions. To make sure that we had a common understanding of the meaning of those words, we discussed the definitions in various groups.

'Competence to make decisions' was one of the values that we particularly wanted to focus on, as a way to proceed faster with development. However, when the meaning of this phrase was discussed, we found that managers wanted work-teams and staff to become more competent in making decisions, but staff in general wanted the management team to make more decisions. This difference between the staff's perspective and that of senior management seems to be a common challenge in many organizations, as mentioned by Andy Priestner in his UX handbook (Priestner, 2021).

After some discussion, we agreed on this definition:

Competence to make decisions

Clear mandates, decision paths and frameworks enable us to reach decisions. We facilitate decision-making by not getting caught up in prestige and established patterns and work with anchoring rather than consensus.

Strategies and work with values are all good, but we wanted to find ways to keep this in focus in our daily work lives. A deck of cards with questions that help us

reflect on the values in our day-to-day lives was created. The cards are now used regularly, for example at check-ins or as ice breakers at various meetings.

Regardless of how you do it or what method you choose, working on your organizational culture is important, not only from a UX point of view, but to improve the work environment in general. We all know that this kind of work takes time, so it is important to be patient and lead by example, because culture is key.

Use of formal documentation

Even though it is a well-known fact that ‘culture eats strategy for breakfast,’ strategy can be an important element for embedding UX. If you have a culture that is prepared to put strategy into practice, then that’s even better.

If you are a library director and you have the means and power to influence the whole organization, then go for it! But even as a middle manager or team leader, you have a choice to actively contribute to embedding UX on a strategic level. We strongly believe that as a leader you have an opportunity to make an impact, because there are plenty of ways to promote and support UX. One way is to integrate your vision and ambition regarding UX research and design into formal documents.

In 2016 the SLU library engaged all staff, not just management, in writing a four-year strategy for the library. The strategy had two main themes that aimed to permeate all work in the coming years. One of the themes was UX based: *In the year 2020 the SLU library works strategically with user-centred methods to create relevant, coherent and uniform services.*

This gave the library a long-term goal in which UX work was important, and formed a clear mandate to write our yearly plans of activities to fulfil this goal. SLU also had the opportunity to create a completely new organizational structure that was aimed at fulfilling the strategy. In this structure, a department for organizational support was created, a key member of which was the newly appointed UX coordinator. This work was essential for infusing the whole library with a UX mindset during those years.

One of the driving forces was to build an organization that could move faster, aiming to solve the problems of frustration regarding slow processes and of working in silos. As part of the work with the SLU library’s new organization we wanted to get better at moving faster and acting on user needs and behaviour. We made sure to include this in other formal documents as well, such as our yearly development plan.

Put UX in your yearly plan

In the yearly plan at SLU, apart from adding projects and work that we want to prioritize, we make sure to save time in the planning cycle for added flexibility. Time that can be used for development when there is an issue to address, based on user need. This is an attempt to both plan ahead to fulfil the goals in our overall strategy, but also have the flexibility to be more agile in our work, and not have to wait to implement projects until we plan for the next year.

At SLU we also give the plan for review to our UX support team, who run a service called 'the UX button' (see Dahrén, 2020). The UX button can be called by anyone in the library for support in methods, planning workshops, to access their database of users who have signed up to take part in UX work, etc.

The group works proactively: for example, when they review the yearly plan, if they notice a planned project or an activity that would benefit from added user perspective, they will contact the person responsible for the activity and offer some help to work the user perspective into the plan.

Use existing policies

You can also use whatever existing policies or formal documents you have at hand and focus on interpretation and alignment to empower staff in order to develop operations.

When Anneli worked as a library director at a public library, one of the things she focused on during that period was to link the municipality's vision to the library's operations, aligning the interests of the politicians with the work they were doing at the library. This was one of the things she did to strengthen the staff: showing that what they did at the library was part of something bigger that made a difference to the city. And by being strengthened, they were also empowered.

It was also part of her strategy to show the politicians that what they did at the library mattered to the whole community. It was not 'all about books,' which unfortunately was the existing stereotype they had of the library at the time. It was also about digital inclusion and a whole lot more than lending books. So, this strategic alignment went both ways: inward and outward.

The feedback from the politicians was that they were very impressed because they thought there was so much being done at the library (which of course was true). But it was really about the fact that Anneli managed to match the library's work with the municipality's vision and goals. And the same approach can be used to align UX work with strategic documents.



Strategy work can mean and be different things depending on what kind of organization you work in – identify what it means in your context. And try to find ways to authorize your work by showing how well it fits with your formal strategies. Even small steps lead to change.

This is something everyone can work with. Not only managers but all leaders, and even if you don't have a leadership position it can be of help to align your own work with strategies.

UX mindset is applicable to leadership

If working with culture, values or strategies is somehow not within your mandate, at least UX can help you in becoming a better leader in general. You can use the same empathic and curious mindset of a UX researcher to understand the needs and behaviour of your staff. We often find our operative UX skills helpful in our role as managers.

When a newly recruited manager at SLU needed to get to know her staff, she printed a set of basic emojis showing various emotions. At her biweekly one-to-one check-ins with staff, she asked them to choose the emoji that best represented the mood that they were in at that moment as a starting point for their conversation. The information you can get out of that simple task is remarkable, and a great conversation starter on how things are going right now, especially if you have members of staff that find it hard to express how they feel in words.

The curious and empathic mindset of a UX practitioner matches the facilitator mindset. Being a facilitator does not require formal leadership. In fact, it can often be better if the facilitator isn't the boss, because one of the core things with facilitating is to create safe spaces, where people's minds can expand. Common strategies are:

- Listen to people and observe the room
- Ask open questions
- Keep the energy up
- Be authentic – so that others can be
- Try to be unbiased and be open to ideas that are out of your comfort zone
- Make sure that people feel safe so that they can focus on the creative task ahead, instead of perhaps defending their position in the group. Ways to do that are to make sure that everyone knows who is there and why, what will happen, and that there will be time for individual reflection and of course a coffee break.

Both of us have mostly developed our facilitating skills and methods to engage a group through lots of trial and error, and experience in facilitating workshops of various kinds. We won't cover the art of facilitating further here – we just make the comparison to emphasize how the UX mindset can also make you a better facilitating leader.

Leadership development

At the end of 2020, Linköping University Library engaged an external leadership consultant to facilitate a short course at the library. Fifteen staff members participated, all of them team leaders, coordinators or equivalent. From the feedback after the course, it was clear there was a need for a follow-up.

Anneli decided to do some digging to find out about their needs. The participants were asked to answer a few questions individually, such as: Would you like to continue developing your leadership skills together with other leaders at the

library? If yes, would you prefer mentorship/coaching, experience-sharing or other activities?

A clear majority wanted to continue networking and experience-sharing with colleagues. At Linköping University Library there are 80+ staff members spread over three different campuses in two cities, so experience-sharing must be formalized to some extent in order for it to happen.

Three cross-departmental and cross-functional teams with four leaders in each team were put together. They were given a clear mandate and framework that proposed quarterly meetings, or more often if needed, for a year. They were also allowed to use 20 hours as they pleased for meetings, reading, reflection or whatever was needed.

Apart from that, the only thing Anneli stressed was that it was their needs that should set the agenda. She also made herself available to the teams if they wanted a facilitator or sounding board. Three times during this past year, she checked in with the groups so they wouldn't feel totally abandoned.

Just recently, this leadership development initiative was evaluated by semi-structured interviews with all twelve leaders. The thinking was that operations and competence development go hand in hand. So, it made sense to try to find out what impact this initiative has had, if any.

After every interview a summary was made in running text, which the respondent had to proofread just to make sure there were no misunderstandings. Anneli then used the text to find keywords which she wrote down on sticky notes in order to create an affinity map.

This was very helpful in the process of sorting out the feedback and gave a good picture of the leaders' experiences: what they'd learned, what insights they'd gained during the past year. It was clear that the process had been valuable for them as leaders.

There was also some great feedback regarding the framework. It was much appreciated that the participants were given such huge freedom to make use of the time they were given.

Here are some quotes from the evaluation:

"I feel more confident as a leader"

"It has been so rewarding to be able to exchange experiences with other team leaders"

"This initiative shows that leadership is something that matters and that it's important."

The next step will be to use the feedback to tweak the framework for another round for new leaders, but also to figure out how we can continue to support the ones that have taken part this past year. This leadership development is a very important part in the process of empowering staff.

Is time really the problem?

Finally, we would like to address a common barrier to using UX as a tool for development, and that is the issue of time.

The time aspect was briefly touched upon in the story at the beginning of this chapter about Eva, and how she said: ‘it only took 20 minutes.’ As we as UXers know, asking a few users is usually a much faster method of solving many issues than having meetings, debating, taking staff members’ opinions into consideration, etc.

However, we regularly hear people argue that they don’t have time, or talk about UX as something which is time consuming.

How does this add up? What does ‘there is no time’ actually mean here? What is the *actual need* of your staff member who claims they don’t have time for UX?

If we interpret this as an *actual* lack of time, our experience is that we are often on the wrong track. We have found that often it’s rather a lack of energy or momentum to get over that hurdle of starting a new process, or the perceived energy-consuming work of getting to the point where you ‘just do it’.

Let’s take ourselves as an example. At conferences it’s quite common to ‘mingle and do small talk’. Anneli is really good at this: she approaches people at random with no fear and starts asking questions and listening to answers to keep the conversations going and learning about people. The pure interaction with various unknown people gives her energy.

Anna dreads those situations. Her energy drains from figuring out who to approach, what to say, over-analysing if that person would like to talk or not, and *how* to get away if there is nothing to talk about? The actual *time* it takes for Anna to approach someone, ask a question or ask someone to do something is the same for us both (more or less) – but the loss of energy to get there is huge for Anna while Anneli gets an energy boost.

As a manager it is important and useful to reflect on and understand this to be fully able to support staff.

If you are like Anna and don’t want to put yourself out there, how can you support your staff to do it or make it easier?

One way is for people to work together, at least to get over that barrier of starting. And if you don't have someone to pair the person you want to encourage with... you better just get over it and do it yourself.

Anna still doesn't know how to be good at small talk at conferences after many years and a lot of exposure, but getting over the initial hurdle of starting to talk to people is easier with a clear UX mindset and with the goal of making things better for users. And, once over the barriers, even Anna gets energized by UX work.

We could do another comparison with getting your ass to the gym, but we hope you already get the picture. The point is: find out what the true reason is for you or your staff not getting to work with UX, and work on that. Don't accept 'I don't have time' as an excuse, because in most cases it's up to you as the leader to make sure that your staff's true needs are met so that they can get out there and work with users.

Conclusion

We have touched upon a few things that we find important when it comes to leadership and embedding UX, or any change for that matter. If you are in a leading role of any kind then don't hesitate: take control!

One step you have already taken is to read this chapter. That shows engagement and a will to understand UX and leadership.

Hopefully we've managed to give you some food for thought when we talked about:

- Workplace culture: If you're serious about embedding UX in your organization, work on creating a culture built on commitment, faith, and empathy.
- Empowering people: If you can influence the whole organization – do it! If not, work with your own department or team and empower them.
- Use strategies: One key is aligning formal strategies with staff empowerment and operations.
- UX mindset is applicable to leadership: And if nothing else, a UX mindset can make you a better leader.

Last words from Anneli:

“To me it's important to be curious and never hesitate to ask questions to get a better understanding of things. Or people, for that matter.”

And from Anna:

“Early in my career as a manager, when I had a conversation with my boss about some issue with a difficult staff member who just put a spoke in *every* developing wheel, he told me: ‘Anna, you can find something to love in every person – you just need to listen,’ and that is a mindset I try to live by.”

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