

Leadership is key: my UX journey

Anneli Friberg

Book Chapter

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Leadership is key: my UX journey

(UXLibsV keynote)

Anneli Friberg @fribban

Linköping University, Sweden

When I was growing up, my grandfather John was my very best friend. I was four years old when I became a big sister. I think my parents were afraid I would feel ignored when my brother was born, so they often asked my grandpa to spend time with me. He did, and I loved it. We both loved it. He was my hero, and I know I was his pride and joy.

So, what did a 4-year-old girl and a 70-year-old man do in the mid '70s in a small Swedish town? Well, apart from playing cards and other games, we often went for a walk. Regardless of where we were walking, I always said “hello” to people we met. My grandpa would look at me and ask: “Who was that?” and most of the time my answer would be: “I don’t know.” And that was true. Because it would be kind of unusual for a 4-year-old to know a whole lot of people. Even in her own neighbourhood.

Grandpa John had many skills, but one in particular: he never made me feel like I did something wrong. Not even when I actually did something wrong. Quite the opposite; he turned it into something good. Like the time when I was 10 and cooked for him, and the dish turned out to be inedible. He said: “Well, you might have failed this time but try again and next time you’ll do better.” Regarding the fact that I said hello to almost everyone we met, he told me that it was ok for me to say hello to people I didn’t know. It’s was ok for me to take up space. Even if I was just a little girl. Most people smiled and responded to my greetings, but of course some didn’t. And when that happened, he assured me: “This has nothing to do with you. You’ve done nothing wrong; you were just being polite.”

I didn’t realise at the time what impact this would have on my future professional life. But I can see now how much he taught me – without actually teaching me. Positive reinforcement builds confidence and trust. It made me feel safe and it gave me a certain mindset: ‘it is ok to try things, even if I don’t know anything

about the outcome or the result.’ Apparently, I’ve always been a people person, so no wonder I’ve dedicated my whole professional life to working with people. I’m passionate about people and leadership. And in my opinion, leadership and UX are strongly connected.

UX is all about people

As most of you know, working with UX is all about interacting with people. It doesn’t matter if you’re doing user research or prototyping: you *need* to approach people. Invite them. Talk to them and engage with them; different stakeholders such as colleagues, managers and of course the users. Working with UX means a lot of different challenges depending on what position you have in your organisation. I’m a manager now, but when I started working with UX about five years ago I wasn’t.

I could stick out my chin and say that I am the one and only reason UX is on the agenda at my work. But obviously, I’m *not* the only reason we are working with UX in my library. I do know I was the initial driving force, but of course it wouldn’t have been possible without a few other engaged colleagues. And it definitely wouldn’t have been possible without the support of my boss. Also, I am pretty sure my previous experience as a manager helped as well.

I know that some people struggle on a daily basis to engage co-workers and department heads in carrying out and embedding UX. And I know what that’s like. I know how frustrating it can be, trying to get somebody to understand and buy into something you feel very strongly about. It’s hard work. It really is. Hopefully some of my experiences that I am about to share can inspire you not to give up. Because honestly, I don’t think my UX journey is unique and I think it includes elements that a lot of people will relate to.

UX and leadership

To me, UX is as much about leadership as it is about doing user research, analysing data, prototyping, testing and implementing. Leadership is key if you want to embed UX. I’d like to stress that I’m not only referring to top leadership, but leadership on every level: of team leaders, project leaders and, maybe most important, self-leadership and leading by doing.

Introducing UX in a library can be quite a challenge. Andy Priestner outlines eight different institutional barriers to UX research and design in his chapter in this

book, and I think I've experienced them all. However, I believe those barriers can be removed by a clear vision, leadership and a whole lot of patience. And some guts as well.

There is one hurdle Priestner didn't mention, or maybe it's just me having experienced this? It has to do with the mindset of UX. One thing I realised early on was that sometimes people were provoked when I started talking about UX. They said things like: "Why is this important to us and what's new about this? We always have a user perspective on things we do and say." And I couldn't agree more. We do, and we're usually *very* good at it. But having a user perspective is not the same as having a *user's* perspective, because the former is to me an inside-out mindset, while the latter is outside-in.

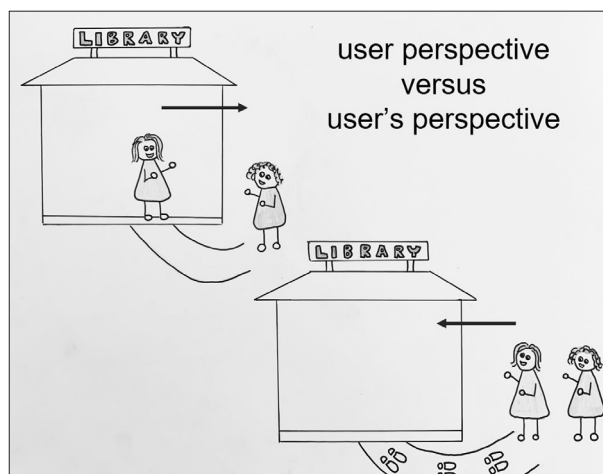


Figure 1 Change of perspective. © Tuva Friberg, age 13.

You might not agree, but I think this is the basis of UX: *the change of perspective*. UX is a mindset, not a quick fix. It's about wanting to step out of the library and out of our offices. It's about us wanting to find out and experience things from our users' point of view. Whenever I talk about UX in libraries, I draw a picture like the one shown in Figure 1 as an attempt to illustrate what I mean. It shows the small, but very important, difference between 'the user experience' and 'the user's experience'. We can guess what it's like from our users' angle. But, better yet: we can involve them in the UX research and design process, invite them to co-create with us and then we don't have to guess.

UX maturity

You might be lucky enough to work at a library where senior management realise the benefits of embedding UX. But you might not. I am that lucky now, but that wasn't the case a few years ago. How well integrated UX is, often depends on how mature the organisation is.

I must admit, I am a bit ambivalent to UX maturity models. But I want to say a few words about them anyway, because I feel it's important to recognise what kind of organisation you work in. I know it helped me when I was super frustrated, to think that it might not have anything to do with my efforts (at least not entirely) ... but rather something else: culture and the fact that my library wasn't mature enough to respond to my UX work.

There are a lot of different models, and each of them has their pros and cons. Andy Priestner presented his 'UX adoption in libraries' model at UXLibsIII in 2017 and I think it is a great and useful model (Priestner, 2017). But when I started working with UX in 2014, I felt the need for a model in Swedish. I couldn't find one, so I made my own. During that time, I was inspired by a few different models which I merged, and the result is shown in Figure 2 (translated into English).

In the beginning, when I started to introduce UX at my library, it seemed important to me to use Swedish phrases to get management and colleagues to buy into the UX mindset. I could sense that some of my colleagues lost interest and stopped listening when I talked about UX, using English UX lingo. Consequently, I really tried to find Swedish terms and expressions. I assume this is an unfamiliar

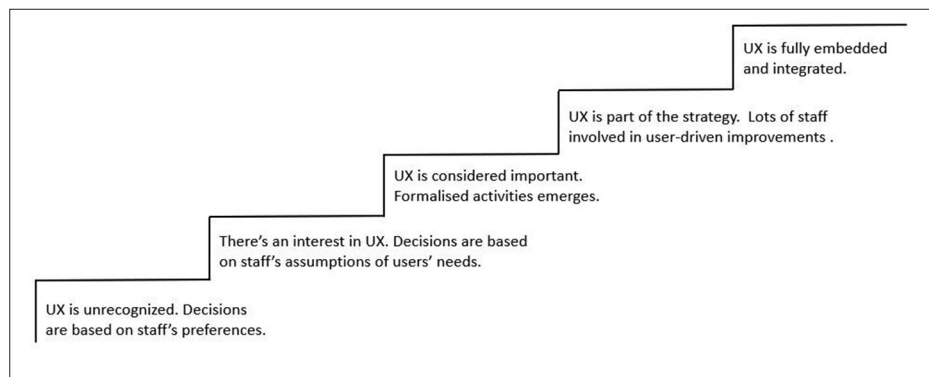


Figure 2 My maturity stair.

problem for those of you who have English as your first language. Anyway, I can see now that this most likely was a natural reaction – for my part, as well as my colleagues – considering we were on the lower steps on the staircase.

It is important to keep in mind, though, that these models are tools and that they don't say anything about the whole picture. Because reality is often much more complex than what can ever be explained by a simple staircase. I used the maturity stair as a basis for discussion with senior management as well as colleagues. And that's the greatest value with this model, I think: to use it as a motivation for discussion, but also to let my colleagues reflect on where they are on a more personal level.

As I mentioned earlier, my boss was very supportive, and he asked me to make a UX vision for the library. I wanted to keep it simple, so I actually used the staircase. There have been times during the past few years when I've been close to giving up but looking back I can see how far we've come, considering we were somewhere between the 1st and 2nd step from the bottom in 2014. We still have a long way to go, even though I would say we're somewhere between the 3rd and 4th step today. Because, just like UX research and design isn't a one-time effort but an ongoing process – so is the process of embedding UX.

UX and networking

One thing that helped me a lot, when it felt like we weren't making any progress at all at my library, was my external network. I was lucky to connect with a group of people in the fall of 2014, and we had our first meetup in January 2015. This informal network has been very valuable to me during these years. We've supported each other through thick and thin and given each other strength to continue working with UX in our different libraries. I've learned a lot from this network. So, to all of you who don't feel the support from managers or colleagues – reach out and connect with people outside your own organisation. Networking can be very beneficial, in so many different ways.

UX and culture

Between 2013–2017 I had a position with responsibility for customer service and user experience. Every year I made strategies and action plans that would take us closer to the vision. So, we had a vision and we had an ambassador (me) who

made different strategies, but you know what they say about strategy: ‘Culture eats strategy for breakfast.’¹

A friend of mine once asked me: “Do you know why so many bosses say that they support UX but when it comes to actually supporting it in more than words, they don’t really live up to what they say?” I think it’s a fair question, because I’m sure my friend isn’t the only one having this experience. I know I have experienced this as well – not from my immediate manager, but from a few other managers at the library. Unfortunately, I don’t have the answer, but what I *do* know is that working with UX requires a certain workplace culture. In fact, in my opinion most of the barriers Andy Priestner mentions in his chapter are strongly connected to the organisation’s culture. As leader and manager, you have a strong influence on the culture. So, if you want to move towards a more agile and user-centered way of working, you need to shape the culture in that direction. Again, I’m not only referring to managers, even though they often set the tone. I am talking about each and every one of us because leading by example is a power one shouldn’t underestimate.

Compassionate leadership behaviour

I strongly believe in collective leadership, as opposed to traditional leadership where the thinking is that one person, often the manager, has the skill to create success. I believe success comes from collaboration between people with diverse perspectives and different skills.

Professor Michael West at Lancaster University Management School often talks about a compassionate and collective leadership in a way I find very inspiring (West, 2018). He says: ‘The core of leadership is compassion and kindness,’ and I think that’s significant for UX as well. West has identified four core principles for a compassionate leadership behaviour: attending, understanding, empathising and helping. I think the reason I find these elements so easy to relate to, is the fact that they’re so close to UX work and mindset.

Attending: paying attention to staff, and the ability to listen with fascination. This, I would say, is also crucial when doing user research.

Understanding: understanding what staff have to face and having an ongoing dialogue with staff in order to get a shared understanding of things. The parallel to UX would be the understanding of user needs and behaviour.

1 A phrase originated by Peter Drucker

Empathising: empathising with those we lead, in the same way we empathise with our users. It's about our ability to put ourselves in another person's shoes.

Helping: taking action to serve or help. And isn't that exactly what we're doing when working with UX?

UX and failure

One of the institutional barriers Andy Priestner mentions is 'fear of failure'. I think this one in particular is strongly connected to workplace culture. From time to time, I used to be a little frustrated by the fact that we often said it was ok to fail, but we never did. Mainly because we hardly ever tried new things unless we were 100% certain they would succeed. And that is not the kind of culture you want to support when trying to embed UX.

And then suddenly it happened. We tried a pilot and it failed. User research showed that students wanted to be able to connect with library staff without having to leave their study space. In short, we wanted to find a way for students to get our attention without having to go to the desk. We had some idea generation workshops together with students and came up with a few ideas, such as: roaming librarian (which actually isn't a new thing at all), library rounds (like hospital rounds), and on-call.

The idea we decided to try was 'librarian on call'. We put signs on the tables in different study areas saying: 'Do you need help? Call or text this number for assistance and we'll drop by.' Most of my colleagues were doubtful, and some were worried that the phone would ring all the time. I, on the other hand, was worried the phone wouldn't ring at all. Honestly, in my heart I didn't really believe in this pilot, and I actually expected it to fail. But I didn't share my hesitation, for two reasons:

1. I thought we needed a failure, to set an example.
2. UX is all about testing, and getting your assumptions verified, so who was I to say it would fail before we even tried it?

So, how did it go? Well, we offered this service during one semester and it was a complete failure in the sense that we got less than a handful of calls. I was happy, though, to finally have a failure to refer to. It was a small, but significant, step towards a 'failure-allowing culture'.

A mandate and leeway

Today, UX is not considered foreign at my library. Also, I don't have to work that hard anymore to remind our management team about UX. In hindsight, I can identify one key success factor that I think made a difference when we first started to work with UX: the fact that I was trusted with leeway. I was allowed to experiment and introduce UX in any way I wanted, so I did. I tried different ethnographic methods, I ran workshops for colleagues, and I talked about UX whenever I had the chance, in formal as well as informal situations.

I'm convinced that if you want to make a change on a wide front, you need an ambassador. One, or maybe even a few ambassadors, that are given a 'protected or preserved zone' where they can operate. A task force, who are allowed and encouraged to try new things, to bend or even break some rules. And with one objective only: to explore and come up with some hard evidence that can be used to take things further. In my experience, this is sometimes a necessary first step. At my work, I became the UX ambassador.

In the autumn of 2014, I was involved in forming a usability team, which consists of five people with different skills. Only three of us are librarians, and the fact that the team members have a mixed background affects the work in a positive way. We do usability testing monthly during the semester, which gives us about eight test sessions per year. We recruit randomly chosen employees and students as test participants, three to four per test session. At the beginning of each semester we decide what to test, but the plan often changes. What we actually test depends on different projects in progress at the library. We never test systems or interfaces that we can't improve or modify ourselves to some extent. The method we use is a combination of observation, think-aloud protocol and capturing screen activity.

Between our monthly test sessions, we conduct so-called guerilla testing, which is an agile, flexible and low-cost way of testing, where basically we approach people in the library or elsewhere on campus and ask them to give us quick feedback. This fits well with our thinking that some testing is better than no testing.

Just a small warning, though, for those of you who haven't tried usability testing: it can be super painful. Watching different users getting frustrated over the same feature repeatedly during a test session *is* painful. Especially if you've invested a huge amount of time developing this specific feature. This actually shows the necessity and value of getting feedback at an early stage of a development process.

Supposedly, Mark Twain stated that 'continuous improvement is better than

delayed perfection,’ and based on my experience, systematic usability testing can and should be a part of the regular library activity. Well, that was the ‘easy’ part, so what next?

Introducing the same UX mindset and doing usability testing in the physical library... that was a whole different story. It was a much bigger challenge. Getting buy-in from colleagues wasn’t easy. It took quite a while to convince them that the qualitative data we get from ethnographic methods is a valuable and necessary complement to the quantitative data we’ve got. For a long time, I was the only one conducting user research, which basically made me a UX team of one.

In retrospect, I could have done things differently in those first years; for example, I should have tried harder to involve more colleagues earlier on in the process. Then again, I try not to be too hard on myself and to remember that it was a learning process for me, as well. Today, I wouldn’t say I’m a UX team of one anymore. I have several colleagues doing user research, prototyping and developing new services (mainly digital, but still). My role nowadays, apart from still being part of the usability team, is more as an in-house UX expert and consultant. I do some UX training, facilitate workshops and focus on making sure we move forward on a strategic level.

So, giving staff a mandate and leeway is *one* thing managers can do to support UX. But let’s say you work in an organisation where management *don’t* see the value of UX. Well, then you might need to get evidence to convince them.

Evidence for UX

I’ll give you an example of how one single photo can make a difference. I took the picture shown in Figure 3 in 2015 at one of our campus libraries. We have four libraries, on four different campuses in three cities. Back in 2015 we didn’t have adjustable height tables in any of our libraries. Now we



Figure 3 Students with chairs on the table.

have several in each library, and they're very appreciated by the students.

I'm convinced that it helped to show real data, even if it was just a snapshot from the library. The picture says it all: the students' need was pretty obvious. My job was to make sure senior management was given this evidence just in time for budget planning.

Figure 4 shows another example of things you can learn if you are open to what's going on in the library. A few years ago, I noticed when passing by this student how creatively he was using the book spines to hang his coat. Since then we have plenty of coat stands and hooks in all of our libraries.



Figure 4 Student using book spines as coat hanger.

In conclusion

Remember my grandpa John? No wonder I often preferred his company as a child and teenager. He embodied a compassionate leadership by being present and attending, and since we spent so much time together, he had a good understanding of my needs. He was kind and empathic, and always willing to help and serve. Actually, he would have been an excellent UX librarian!

So, what about leadership and UX? To me, each and every one of us working with UX is a leader. I am aware there is a difference between being in a leadership position and leading by doing. If you are a manager, here are a few tips for if you really want to support UX work at your library:

Lead by setting a good example – you don't need to be a UX expert, but you might want to try to apply the UX mindset on your staff, in the same way that your staff is applying it on users.

Lead by clearing the path – help to remove the barriers, take a look at your workplace culture: is it fit for supporting a user-centered way of working? Also, make sure you don't prevent a pilot from happening, even if you can sense a failure – it's only a pilot.

Lead by empowering your staff – make sure you give them a mandate to try new things without having to ask for permission. Why not even encourage them to break some rules? Because sometimes, that's what it takes to break new ground and to make a significant change.

And to the rest of you who are not managers but leading by doing, here are a few tips for you as well:

Be smart – go for low-hanging fruit, keep it simple and start with small changes with big impact in order to convince management and colleagues. Use what you have right in front of you, such as visions and strategies in order to empower the work you're doing. Or just use a camera. Try to keep an open mind when spending time in the library. Be observant of what is going on in the room: what objects are being used? And how are they being used? As they were intended to, or in a way that expresses a need like the two pictures above?

Be brave – if you want to change things, you have to be brave. To drive development takes courage and to develop new library services takes some guts, because people won't always applaud what you're doing. Interaction with users is fundamental when working with UX, and I am aware that, while it comes relatively easy for me, not everybody feels comfortable in approaching random users. But remember, this is something you can work on! It is possible to overcome this discomfort by practicing. You can start small and bring a colleague the first few times. As a matter of fact, if you're doing interviews, I would strongly recommend you do it in pairs. Then it's so much easier to focus on the user. It might also help to think about one of Michael West's four core principles: attending. You don't need to come up with solutions when interacting with users – all you have to think about is being present and to listen with fascination. And this goes for most parts of the UX research and design process: when doing user research, when getting feedback... it's mainly about listening.

Be patient – but don't sit and wait. Don't give up too soon. Sometimes it takes time to see progress. Change takes time. But that is no excuse for not initiating

or doing things. In my experience, working in libraries, we often have more leeway than we think we do.

So, let's get out there and get shit done!

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