

Fachbeitrag

Martin Lee and Christina Riesenweber

Challenges for Change Agents. Best Practices at the University Library of Freie Universität Berlin

<http://doi.org/10.1515/abitech-2020-2036>

Abstract: The authors of this article have been managing a large change project at the university library of Freie Universität Berlin since January 2019. At the time of writing this in the summer of 2020, the project is about halfway completed. With this text, we would like to give some insight into our work and the challenges we faced, thereby starting conversations with similar undertakings in the future.

Keywords: Organizational development, agile work, project management

Herausforderungen für Akteurinnen und Akteure des Wandels. Ein Werkstattbericht aus der Universitätsbibliothek der Freien Universität Berlin

Zusammenfassung: Die Autorin und der Autor dieses Artikels leiten seit Januar 2019 ein großes Veränderungsprojekt an der Universitätsbibliothek der Freien Universität Berlin. Zum Zeitpunkt des Verfassens dieses Artikels im Sommer 2020 ist das Projekt etwa zur Hälfte abgeschlossen. Wir möchten mit diesem Text einen Einblick in unsere Arbeit und die Herausforderungen geben, vor denen wir standen, und damit Gespräche mit ähnlichen Unternehmungen in der Zukunft eröffnen.

Schlüsselwörter: Organisationsentwicklung, agiles Arbeiten, Projektmanagement

1 Context

Freie Universität Berlin is one of the major universities in Germany with around 40 000 students and a staff of 4 450 (2018). It has 16 academic departments and central institutes offering over 150-degree programs across a wide range of subjects. Freie Universität Berlin is a leading research institution. It is one of the German universities that was successful in all three funding lines of the federal and state Excellence Initiative. Most recently, the university has been awarded additional funding as part of the Berlin University Alliance.

The university library at Freie Universität Berlin is a system of interlinked departments, including the central library, called Universitätsbibliothek (UB), thirteen branch libraries at different locations, and the university archive. In January 2018, the Center for Digital Systems (CeDiS) was formally incorporated into the library, after being a separate organizational unit for 20 years. This big organizational change was the starting point for our current project, which was initially conceived by our then newly appointed library director, Andreas Brandtner, who joined Freie Universität Berlin mid-2018. Funding for the project is provided by the university leadership, highlighting the transformation of the libraries as an important endeavour of Freie Universität Berlin as a whole.

All in all, our organization includes more than 400 employees. Around three quarters of these work in one of the libraries, with the central UB being the largest of them. CeDiS accounts for about 15 percent of the staff, making it the second largest unit, even before the biggest branch library. Roughly a quarter of all employees are students. The main task of the library is to ensure that researchers, educators and students at Freie Universität have access to the information they need, and that they know how to find and evaluate knowledge. Our work also includes a range of additional services and areas like website content management systems, digital examinations, research data management and trainings to make these tools accessible.

2 “Wandel@FU-Bib” – Project Outline

The project was dubbed “Wandel@FU-Bib”, with ‘Wandel’ meaning both ‘change’ and ‘transformation’ in German. The project has one main goal: We want to put people at the centre of our actions. Rather than focusing our organization and processes on the delivery of objects, tools and services, we want to center on the researchers, educators and students at Freie Universität. But also, our ways of working together should prioritize our staff and our community.

In order to initiate change, four main aspects of improvement are at the core of the project:

1) Integration of the libraries and CeDiS: Both the library and CeDiS act as information and research infrastructure facilities and address the same user groups. In addition, there are overlapping tasks and topics, such as electronic publications, research data or training courses. When CeDiS was first integrated into the university library in 2018, however, this administrative act was not accompanied by structural, organizational or strategic measures. The project now aims at a consolidation of competences, resulting in a unified face to the university.

2) Simpler structures: The libraries of Freie Universität Berlin are organized in a two-tier structure: there is one central library and de-centralized department libraries, with some overlap and duplication of tasks and services. Our aim is to keep working towards a one-tier system, to create a balance between the centre of the organization and the decentral libraries. They should eventually coordinate tasks between them and have clearly distinguished functions for the university. At the same time, the different departments need stronger connections between one another. Only when all parts of the organization cooperate smoothly, we can become a sustainable university library for future challenges.

3) Quality and User Driven Services: The success and the quality of research and teaching at Freie Universität Berlin is dependent on our services as libraries and providers of digital infrastructures. This is why we have to aim at continuously increasing the quality of our services, in order to meet the increasing needs of an excellent university. Additionally, these services need to be created according to the current demands of our users. We want to establish a context in which we can not only perceive these demands, but also react to them quickly. We will place a special focus on changes that occur within the context of the digitalization of higher education. In the long run, ideally, we want to know about our users' needs even before they occur. This is possible by employing new ways of interacting with researchers, educators and students. The library staff need to become active members of communities of practice within the university. This concept also includes the necessity to think of the library as a 'space'. Our libraries should not only be places to work, but also places to experiment, network and create.

4) Flexibility: By integrating CeDiS and the libraries, striving for a one-tier system, high quality standards and a focus on user needs, we will create a university library that is ready to meet today's challenges. In order to create a sustainable, long-term structure for the future, however,

we need to integrate the principle of flexibility into the core of our organization. Agility, innovation and a perspective towards the future need to provide the context for our thoughts and actions. The change project therefore aims to incorporate these principles into our everyday work and our strategic planning. In order to achieve this, we need to do more than merely adjust organizational structures or workflows. We are aiming at a cultural change. This includes uncoupling decision making from hierarchies and enabling true participation and ownership. However, it also means aligning the entire organization towards a purpose agreed upon and changing the modes of cooperation accordingly.

The main context for all of these changes is, of course, the digital transformation, which we address via the elements of strategy, leadership and organizational culture.

Knowing well that these goals cannot be obtained as a part-time task, the initial project proposal contained two features that set this project apart from similar undertakings. Firstly, two employees – the authors of this text – were tasked with leading and managing the project full-time for two years starting January 2019. While reporting to the library director, we carry the main responsibility for seeing the project through successfully. Secondly, we were able to hire consultants to increase the amount of expertise and experience in organizational change for our project. They joined the project in March 2019 with a workload of about one day per week.

3 Changing by Example

The project management team, after moving into a shared office in our central building across from the library director and central administration, became known as the 'Projektbüro', the 'project office'. While our tasks go well beyond project management and include e.g. decision making and strategic planning, for sake of simplicity we shall refer to it as the 'project management team' in this text. The team has a double role: On the one hand, the project management team is responsible for the framework and the process of the project, on the other hand it has a major role in shaping the content of the organizational transformation.

The changes in our organization are not only going to involve departmental structures and infrastructure, but also the way that everybody works together. With the project management team, we are testing and putting into place work methods and communication styles that fit the organization that we will be.

One element where we change the organization by changing ourselves is the use of a variety of agile methods and formats. Since quite a substantial part of our change process can be considered creative, we are employing a large variety of methods to come up with, edit and decide on the value of ideas. A core component of the methods used are iterations with feedback, which are thoroughly considered and are an integral part of the process. Feedback is always embedded in an appreciative mindset and basic principles of nonviolent communication. In general, we acknowledge that there are different types of communication, each requiring space and time. We place a high value on allowing for headspace and opening up ideas and thoughts. This includes a good amount of humour, but also routine check-ins to allow for conversations about personal well-being. We employ ideation processes that are very free and associative as well as focused, result-driven work with strict time boxing. Not everything has to be teamwork, however. Sometimes it is essential to sit together and think about the same thing, other times it is more helpful to divide a task and work alone.

These ideation processes are everyday aspects of our work as the project management team, but we are also incorporating them into our work with other teams, medium sized groups and even large-scale events. Our consulting team has been an extremely important factor in making us realize that our staff is very open to using new methods, encouraging us to consider every meeting as a possible ground for change.

One major aspect of agility within our work is the way that we, as a team, agree upon and divide up tasks. We have been adapting the Kanban method for this. Our Kanban board displays all the tasks that we are currently working on ('doing'), tasks that are lined up to be tackled soon ('to do'), and tasks for the future ('backlog'). Every day in the morning ('daily stand-up'), we check in to see which tasks have been completed ('done') and decide on the tasks that we will work on that day. This way, we have a very clear visualization of our workload and do not lose track of anything. This method of organizing our work has the additional advantage that we always know what the other person is working on, without any control being exercised. This allows for mutual motivation and collegial input. In addition to the daily stand-up, there is a weekly review, where we take a little more time to reflect on the overall picture, but also to check in on the way that we work together and create space for feedback.

One important goal for communication culture is to establish transparency and trust. Therefore, it is a very helpful side effect of the Kanban method that all of our tasks are on display in our office, whose door is usually

open, on a very large whiteboard. Colleagues who meet us here or just walk by in the hallway have a chance to see, at a glance, what we are currently working on. This often inspires conversations that otherwise may not have happened. The Kanban board combined with a lot of workshop material that can be found in our office and our ongoing use of two additional large whiteboards make our space look rather messier than other rooms in the library – but also very creative. The most common feedback that we get from people visiting us is "It looks like there's work being done in here".

As much as we value our office, it is quite a small space, and we can barely fit four people in there for meetings. We know that being in familiar places is important, but sometimes a change of location is especially helpful to foster a creative environment. We try to make as much use as possible of all the locations that are available to us. As a team of two, we move about the campus a lot and even value the power of walking while talking to open up or to focus. But even with large groups of 50 people and more we try to use different locations. We have had a meeting of more than 200 in a traditional lecture hall, but then moved everybody into the hallways to split up into 30 working groups, gathering around standing pin boards. We have used large seminar rooms and the architecturally inspiring Weiterbildungszentrum of Freie Universität Berlin, but we have also had a big team event with about 160 people at the university's centre for water sports close at the shore of lake Wannsee. We have moved around most with our strategy team, which consists of nine people plus our two consultants. We have made use of several locations on campus, ranging from traditional seminar rooms to a very large workshop space above the operating theatre at the department of veterinary medicine. On one occasion, for a two-day intensive workshop, we rented out a workspace off-campus that has been designed explicitly to allow for design thinking methods in Berlin-Kreuzberg. This was an especially inspiring environment, and it was definitely worth the extra investment.

4 Working with Consultants

The initial project outline contained the necessity of incorporating an outside view on our organizational development through hiring consultants. This decision has been met with some critique and suspicion. Especially among our staff, the term 'consulting agency' carried connotations of McKinsey-esque men in suits that are paid for making a company more efficient, saving money and – as

a consequence – letting people go. During the first few months of the project we put a lot of emphasis on making sure that we counteracted these images with the actual work that our consulting team was doing. As facilitators for our process of change, they provide an outside view with experience in organizational development. We have no mission to save money or reduce the number of staff but have set out to make our university library work better for the people that use it and its services. The consulting team, therefore, is more concerned with the relationships between people and departments. They take on the role of a moderator, both on an abstract and a concrete level.

The consulting agency we chose, osb-i, works with a model of systemic consulting, which considers the respective social systems in the given context and, in contrast to content-oriented expert input, provides mainly process-oriented coaching with emphasis on communications. Our consultants, Maik Arensmann and Katrin Glatzel, are not only experienced facilitators of change, but they have worked with organizations within the public service sector before and, even more importantly, with academic institutions.

The consulting team contributed substantially to the design of the entire project, laying out the necessary steps and providing insights on dependencies and potential pitfalls. In the very beginning, they were the ones interviewing staff and conducting workshops in order to get a good insight into the status quo of our organization, enabling us to prioritize certain elements. Their experience also helps us in gauging the speed and intensity in which we make decisions and implement changes.

A concrete example of working with our consultants is the preparation, implementation and follow-up of workshops. In general, the project management team suggests the content and objectives of the event based on the project plan and in consultation with senior management. Together with the consultants, a schedule and script with assignment of roles is developed. Often the consultants are the moderators at the workshops, while the project management team presents input and content. In the follow-up, we reflect on the form of collaboration and discuss what worked well, what could be improved. In addition, we discuss whether the content objectives of the event have been achieved and what the next steps are. Of course, this is a well-known method from the agile toolbox, more specifically from Scrum (e. g. review and retrospective).

Working with two experienced facilitators means that we have access to a wide range of methods. The rationale in employing a large set of formats when working with our staff is not only driven by the wish to see immediate results of any given event. We also want to transfer knowledge

about the methods and formats themselves into the entire organization through experience. Working on workshops with our consulting team, therefore, is always also a learning experience in methodology that all of us can employ and re-use in the long term.

The consulting team is also a very valuable source of reassurance and energy for our work as project management team. Our role in the library is very specific: We are not part of a larger team, we work closely with the library director, we are involved in a lot of decision-making and in a way represent not only change, but also uncertainty. Therefore, the ways in which we can look for feedback and reassurance within the organization are limited. The consulting team steps up to this task, allowing us to reflect on our work, structuring reviews and retrospectives and being a conversation partner. This is particularly important since working on change necessarily creates conflicts, and the consulting team are able to take an outside position vis-a-vis the project management team to mitigate and mediate stressful communications.

5 Participation

The overarching project objective of putting people in the centre naturally also concerns the involvement of people in the project and in the development of content. One major task of the project management team, therefore, is to involve as many people as possible in the change project. The ways in which our staff can be involved in creative processes and decision-making must differ widely between the different phases of our project.

We officially started the project in May 2019 with a large gathering of more than 200 colleagues. In a traditional lecture hall setting, we presented the project outline and introduced the consulting team and ourselves. In a second step, however, we split up the large group (randomly, by drawing lots) into 30 smaller working groups, and asked them to discuss and document their expectations and hopes for the change project. The results showed that the wish and readiness to participate in the change project was very pronounced, but it also revealed that we would have to work on the definition of ‘participation’ in order to manage expectations. On the far end of the spectrum, some of our colleagues in this phase suggested making use of online voting systems to allow for collaborative decision-making, and there was a repeated suggestion of ‘dismantling hierarchies’. This situation asked for a very nuanced communication, which, a year later, is still part of our work. While we ultimately aim for as much shared

responsibilities as possible, sharing knowledge and allowing for faceted perspectives, our task is also to communicate the need for a professional management and highlight decision-making as a specific set of responsibilities and skills, that in many cases cannot simply be shifted towards a group- or crowd-based consensus mechanism.

Our job as the project management team is to put into practice the different modes of decision making that are asked for by the library leadership. In most cases so far, we have operated in a mode where a smaller group of experts dives into a subject, prepares ideas or materials and then turns to a larger group for feedback. This has, for example, been the way in which we devised the strategy. In writing the strategy, an expert team of nine people prepared a strategic analysis, which we then shared and discussed with about 80 colleagues in a one-day-workshop, asking for feedback and starting to develop possible scenarios for the future. The dedicated strategy team then took these ideas and worked them into an actual strategy over the course of about six additional workshops, before discussing a first draft in a big workshop with about 70 colleagues again. The feedback from this workshop then lead to guidelines for review and a careful revision of the first draft, resulting in the final strategy. This way of working is very successful in terms of outcome and resulted in a strategy that a large part of our staff agrees with, because they can see their own ideas reflected in it. But working like this poses some very specific challenges for the project management team.

Participation in all of our change-related activities is voluntary. Which means that the colleagues who take part in the process are highly motivated. We try to work with methods that increase this motivation even more, making the workshops interesting, varied and – very importantly – fun. As a result, we are left with a plethora of ideas after each event, usually documented on flipchart paper, posters or sticky notes. While we usually provide a photo documentary of all the material, in order to be able to work with it in the future, a transcription is very helpful. We found that a good solution for this is, again, participation: By publishing the photo documentary on our wiki, and by asking the workshop participants to transcribe the results together, we arrive at a manageable amount of work for each individual, and a sustainable documentation that can easily be transferred into other formats.

This amount of creativity presents another challenge: The ideas developed in the workshops are never limited to the explicit workshop goals. Especially in the strategy phase, the goal was to come up with overarching themes and relevant topics, therefore being somewhat abstract. But in the process, our colleagues of course came up with a number of very specific, but nonetheless very interesting

and helpful ideas. One of our tasks as the project management team for the second half of the project will be to make sure that these ideas are available for the next steps. Our main approach here is to make sure that the documentation of the project activities remains easily accessible, and to re-arrange the large number of ideas according to topics that we will work on. We want to spare our colleagues the frustration of having to pitch the same idea over and over again. At the same time, we will clearly communicate how participation can work within our organization: it is not only about having a good idea, but also about making it happen. At this point in the project, there is an expectation that we, the change project management team, are the ones who need to start the implementation of new ideas. We are planning to shift this agency towards the members of our staff, starting with leadership positions, but ultimately inviting everyone to bring their ideas to life.

When the COVID-19 pandemic started to unfold in March 2020, we had to (and are still in the process of) rethink our approach to participation. We are very aware that many ways in which we have harnessed creativity, encouraged feedback, criticism and developed new ideas, cannot easily be transferred into digital communication. Highly complex topics can hardly be dealt with using videoconferencing. In addition, priorities have obviously changed, pushing the change project into the background of our organizational issues. We are therefore walking a tight rope when it comes to furthering our change project now. The forced shift to digital environments due to the COVID-19 pandemic has shown more than ever that our libraries and the way we work need to change. On the other hand, daily challenges with the constantly changing situation make it hard to plan. We therefore try to find a sensible and sensitive middle ground.

6 Communication and Documentation

Making sure that everybody has the chance to know what is going on in the project has been one of our main goals from the start. Our organization has already been using a local wiki for internal communication, so we used this space for most of the planning and documentation of what is going on in the project. The default for every event is that documentation is available for everybody, independently of whether they were a part of the event or not. Usually this is done by dedicating one wiki page to the event, including all information, participant list, all used documents like presentations, and, as mentioned above,

usually a photo documentary of whiteboards and sticky notes. We try to structure our events in a way that they practically document themselves, e. g. by asking smaller working groups to present their findings on a poster at the event, which can then become a part of the documentation without an additional step in between. When possible, we also provide video and audio documentation. Especially during the pandemic-related reduction of face-to-face meetings, we make use of the ease in which digital meetings can be recorded in order to allow colleagues to access e. g. presentation later at their convenience.

As project management team, we prepare a lot of communicative activities for our colleagues. In addition to the above-mentioned event documentation, we regularly communicate with everyone via e-mail and send out quarterly status reports. In addition, we visit team meetings both on management level and for individual departments or ongoing committees. In representing the project within our university, we work closely together with the library director. Despite the high effort that we put into communicating with our colleagues, we still get the feedback that we do not communicate enough and that people feel they do not know enough about the details of the project. This is an issue we are planning to address in the second phase of the project by involving even more staff, and more regularly. An important lesson when it comes to documentation is the fact that a change project like ours is so multifaceted and has to do with direct discourse to an extent that makes it practically impossible to document and communicate. Managing expectations about what can and should be documented at all is therefore also an important part of our work.

The way in which we communicate within the change project is meant to set the tone for the entire library. One thing that we collectively still have to learn as an organization is setting the default to sharing information, rather than distributing it on a need-to-know basis. The minutes of most meetings are published in our wiki for everyone to consult if they wish to. The collective mailing list, addressing all employees, is used much more frequently and is not considered a prerogative of top management anymore. Information is forwarded more often and more easily. But we still have a long way to go before the idea of our university library as one big community has become a staple in every office.

The project management team's communication tasks also involve public relations and networking. We have been talking publicly about our project even before the start because we want to be part of the conversation when it comes to organizational and cultural changes in libraries. At this point, the public communication about our

project includes journal and magazine articles, interviews and conference presentations. We consider the public conversation about our ongoing project not as a nice-to-have gadget or vanity, but as a representation of our work values. We are interested in different perspectives on our work, we want to expand our horizon by talking to others, we invite feedback and we are happy to share what we are doing long before we have the final results. In our view, this is the best way to make the change project itself an agile endeavour, allowing for course corrections before it is too late.

7 Making People Meet

We are trying to connect the different parts of our organization and want to make them work better together. Early on, it was clear that this cannot be done by only creating working groups or inter-departmental projects. While these are important aspects of getting people to collaborate more and thereby increasing communication and transparency, we also put quite a big emphasis on making our staff meet independently from their existing work-related connections or necessary lines of communication.

Enabling new relationships has been an important aspect of our workshop planning. Whenever we get people together to work on a specific task or topic, we always try to make sure that there is enough room and time for off-topic conversations, coffee, shared lunch time etc. In every event agenda that we have created you will notice that breaks play an important role, and we always try not to fall into the trap of cutting breaks short just to get in more 'content'. Making people meet each other is always on the agenda for us, because it is a major prerequisite for good communication and joy at work.

During the course of the project, we have created several events and activities in which meeting each other is the main content. On a very small scale, this includes a regular lunch break meet up for members of all departments, which usually attracts around a dozen people and has formed some bonds between locations and teams. On a very big scale, we have hosted both a summer party (in August 2019) and a new year's party (in January 2020) with about 160 colleagues each, which have been met with much enthusiasm and will hopefully be continued. While these events were entirely social gatherings, in the summer of 2019 we also organized a team event at the university's water sports centre. For one day, randomly assembled teams across all departments could challenge each other to small competitions such as the Spaghetti Marshmallow

Tower Contest or volleyball and table tennis. Within just one day, a lot of new connections were formed among our staff. While clearly not everybody enjoys this kind of activity – which is why, again, participation was voluntary – the positive effects were clearly visible and we have seen a continuous rise in the ease with which working together across departments is initiated and conducted. An effect that is specific to German organizations is also notable: more and more people start addressing each other with the more informal ‘Du’ and first name, rather than the more formal ‘Sie’ and last name, even across departments and locations.

8 On being Change Agents

Our role as the project management team and both experts on and agents of change within our organization puts us in a very peculiar position. While being full-time busy with organizational change ourselves, we need to keep in mind that others are primarily occupied with day-to-day operations. We are very much immersed in the content and process of the change, and we are also building our knowledge on the theoretical background of how organizations work. This can cause our thoughts and planning to be in a different mode than those of most of our colleagues. Keeping this in mind, we have to fine-tune our communications carefully, in order to prevent misunderstandings and frustrations on either side. This includes prioritization: For us, the change project comes first, for others it does not, and accordingly we have to be considerate when it comes to scheduling and the allotment of work capacities.

The unique position of our project management team within the organization poses another challenge: We are not part of any of the existing departments or divisions, which creates interesting opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, we are free to push for the changes that are best for the organization as a whole, rather than emphasizing specific or individual interests. On the other hand, we must always take great care to consider all voices from all areas, functions and groups.

At the same time, we are not part of a larger team. This means that we cannot easily distribute workload to other colleagues and have to harness our energy thoughtfully. One of the main lessons of the first year is a direct result of honestly gauging our energy levels: It is a big task for two people, even with engaged colleagues, the support of senior management and an excellent team of consultants. We will address this issue in the next steps of the re-organ-

ization in an attempt to include even more colleagues, not just in the creative aspects, but also in the operational side of bringing the change about.

9 Conclusion: Engine, Hub and Power Source

A lot of the work of the project management team consists of preparing, editing and post-processing content, e. g. the strategy. Equally important is communication: informing, documenting and presenting the project plan, progress and results, preparing and conducting events, meetings and workshops, and much more. It also includes enabling others to communicate, both in terms of content and in terms of methodology.

As the only two people whose main task is the project, the role of propulsion engines falls to us: We set and pay attention to milestones, inspire colleagues for individual topics and activities and thus move the project forward and supply it with energy. At the same time, we are the central place for feedback, suggestions and criticism as well as concerns, wishes and ideas. As the coordinating office for the project, we hold all the threads together so that nothing is forgotten or left unprocessed. We are aware that resistance, uncertainty and fears accompany planned changes. In many cases these can only be met on a personal level. Therefore, we devote a lot of time to conversations and unstructured forms of exchange. Time and again, we try to contextualize decisions and focus everybody’s energy on the aspects that can and should be changed.

This work is very challenging and intense, but also very rewarding and, so we believe, a crucial aspect of the project’s overall success. In order to do this job even better, we are very interested in starting a conversation with other change agents and change management teams in similar situations. So, if you are doing something comparable, or are planning to do so, please contact us.

Authors



Martin Lee
Project Lead Organizational Development
Universitätsbibliothek
Freie Universität Berlin
Garystraße 39
14195 Berlin
m.lee@fu-berlin.de
orcid.org/0000-0001-7550-7365



Dr. Christina Riesenweber
Project Management Organizational
Development
Universitätsbibliothek
Freie Universität Berlin
Garystraße 39
14195 Berlin
christina.riesenweber@fu-berlin.de
orcid.org/0000-0002-7449-9209