





Conversing
with workers
is the first step
in determining
how to improve
your company's
employee
experience.

BY RACHEL COOKE

Dialogue Over Surveys

From employee attitude to satisfaction to engagement and now experience, organizations have long sought to understand how their employees are feeling and faring. And as competition for talent keeps getting fiercer, products become more commoditized and replicable, and increasingly more human tasks become automated, the feeling and faring of talent matters now more than ever.

The wisest employers understand that talent is their most valuable asset. And workers have high expectations of their employee experience.

But *employee experience* is a chameleon of a phrase, taking on different meanings in different situations. It is sometimes disguised as a platform or a program; other times it's confused with free food or foosball tables. Also, leaders often consider employee experience an extra—something to attend to once the “real” work has been done. But in reality, it's none of those things.

The employee experience is not an afterthought to the real work. In the parlance of the late Harvard Business School professor Clayton Christensen, the employee experience is a “Job To Be Done”—to equip and empower talent to do incredible work; work that engages teams, delights customers, and drives business results. It fuels, rather than follows, the real work.

A framework for employee experience

The employee experience that triggers a virtuous cycle for the employee, customer, and business is the experience designed to create the conditions in which employees can deliver, develop, connect, and thrive.

Deliver. Gallup research has demonstrated year over year that when someone is considering a potential new job, the “ability to do what they do best” is one of their top considerations. Employees want to do great work. However, so often, employers inadvertently obstruct that work.

Back-to-back meetings without clear objectives; bottlenecked decisions;

unclear communication; silos that inhibit collaboration; lack of clarity in roles, responsibilities, or priorities—the workforce accepts all those factors as organizational realities, but they obstruct efficacy, inhibit creativity, and drain engagement. So, creating the conditions in which individuals can deliver their best work—where they can execute, generate ideas, make decisions, access tools and resources, and consume critical information—is vital to the employee experience.

Develop. Employees strive to grow new skills and capabilities, take on new challenges, and feel stretched and invested in. An impact-making employee experience provides a blend of formal development programs, coaching and feedback, mentorship, on-the-job opportunities, and the time and space where employees can do development.

Connect. With work no longer having a formal time and place, the need for connection is greater than ever. Workers want to connect with their teams, with a sense of purpose, and ultimately with the customer. They want trust and transparency. While the practices that drive connection may differ for teams that are remote, hybrid, or co-located, a resonant experience of connection matters deeply to the employee experience.

Thrive. Staff need to feel appreciated, respected, well, and whole. The ability to set and hold boundaries, to keep burnout at bay, speak up, and believe their work matters ladders up to an employee experience that drives loyalty and engagement.

When employers successfully create those conditions, their people enjoy an

experience that incentivizes them to not just stay with the company in terms of employment status, but to stay fully in spirit—produce, create community, be invested in the customer, innovate, collaborate, and ultimately make the organization stronger and healthier.

Listening sessions yield insight

This framework for improving a company's employee experience provides direction—it shows employers where to hunt and where not to in determining what matters to their employees. However, it doesn't reveal specifically which actions to take. That is by design, because the right actions are the ones the employees choose, driven by their specific needs.

The best way, for example, to help workers deliver? It depends on what holds them back. In some organizations, it's a prioritization issue. In others, it may be meeting overload or decision-making bottlenecks. Or it may be the lack of tools or the complexity of systems and processes. Only individuals within a company can know, so that's the expertise to tap.

I advocate for listening sessions—human dialogue over surveys. Surveys are one-way, static means of capturing data. While surveys may deliver statistical significance, they miss the nuances that an employer can only capture through dynamic conversation.

I'd rather speak live with 10 people who can offer ideas that I can clarify, probe, and challenge, than to receive data from 1,000 survey respondents. If eight people tell me prioritization is a big problem, I don't need statistical significance to justify fixing that.

A well-designed listening session includes a group of employees (ideally eight to 12) who share some language and experience, whether they're on a single team or have a need to collaborate in their work. The shared vernacular enables everyone to participate constructively in the conversation and delivers a richer set of outcomes than a series of interviews would.

The setup is important. Upon being invited, each participant should under-

stand the session's purpose and the role the company would like them to play. Some essential elements of an invitation include such statements as:

- We seek to understand your current experience and listen to any suggestions you may have to enhance it. This is an opportunity, not a punishment.
- We will treat anything you say in the room with full confidentiality—we'll share themes but won't attribute anything to a single person.
- Your active participation in the dialogue will only help us enhance your experience (that enables someone who doesn't want to speak to opt out).

Also set and share some ground rules, such as respectful speaking, listening, and turn taking. Ultimately, strong facilitation is key. I allow some space for venting as needed, but once I believe participants feel heard, I direct them toward problem solving. I may also encourage those who have not yet spoken to offer a comment or idea.

Where possible, either a third-party facilitator or an internal HR business partner should run the initial sessions, because employees may enter the conversation with a certain degree of cynicism or mistrust, and speaking up to their leader may feel intimidating. Over time, as momentum builds and employees see the company considering and acting upon their ideas, listening sessions may evolve into business-as-usual check ins—and team leaders can step in to take on the role of asker and listener.

Start by asking:

- What's working well (that you want to highlight and amplify)?
- What's not working well (that needs shifting or tweaking)?
- What actions may move the needle in the right direction?

A conversation builds trust and engagement

Hosting listening sessions, asking great questions, probing, and empathizing will provide employers with heaps of insights and ideas. The next step is finding and crafting a compelling narrative that opens the door to ongoing dialogue.

Participants in the listening sessions will be waiting to hear more. Thus, once the company has collated key themes and ideas, someone with a platform (either an HR or business leader) should articulate back to participants:

- What they heard (validate employees' current experience)
- What they will do next (a commitment to action)
- What they will need from the workforce (create accountability for everyone's participation in experimenting and learning)

This moment becomes a missed opportunity in so many companies that spend months crunching reams of quantitative data and building out complex road maps while employees are left to assume their employers have dismissed or ignored their responses and inputs. Deep analysis or robust plans are not necessary. Employees will want assurances

that the company's ask was genuine and that their participation will lead to action. Rather than swim lanes and lists of initiatives, they simply need a summary and a next step.

This brand of employee experience design happens from the ground up. If the organization communicates quickly, captures a few hearts and minds, and finds some quick and simple wins, your coalition of the willing will begin to build itself.

What constitutes a quick win? Strip a frustrating step out of an overwrought process. Empower a team to start a business book club. Cut default meeting times from 60 to 45 minutes. Declare an hour a week dedicated only to personal development. Find ways to give high-potential team members exposure to other leaders in the organization.

Action should be responsive and highly visible

The company or team leaders should aim to solve a couple of pain points quickly and simply. Then they should tell everyone what they did and why it mattered. That triggers momentum, which becomes vital.

In one client organization, a leader heard from his team that their workload was overwhelming, and they were struggling to set boundaries and experiencing burnout. That was a big problem requiring a menagerie of solutions.

But the leader opted to begin with a simple step. He crafted an experiment he called self-care-share. In this experiment

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Questions to Gauge the Employee Experience

While the questions team leaders or listening session facilitators ask employees should feel authentic to your organization's culture, here are some to consider (and adapt as needed) to get started.

Deliver

- How clearly does the company define its expectations of you?
- How would you describe our decision making as an organization?
- What moves you forward and what holds you back from getting great work done?
- How clearly does the company define roles and responsibilities?
- Do you have the basic tools, resources, and information required to do your best work?
- Overall, what changes would most enhance your ability to deliver great work?

Connect

- Can you draw a line from your daily work to a customer impact or outcome?
- What practices make you feel most part of team or community?
- How authentically are you able to show up at work?
- Do you feel safe in speaking your mind and asking “dumb” questions?
- What practices help you to feel most connected with your colleagues?
- How would you describe your ability to collaborate across teams or functions?
- What practices have you seen leaders use in meetings to improve connection?
- Overall, what changes would most enhance your experience of connection?

Develop

- How would you describe the quality of feedback and coaching you receive?
- Do you feel appropriately challenged in your current role?
- How do you prefer to learn new skills?
- What forums or practices does the company have—or that you wish it had—to facilitate greater learning and development?
- How would you describe your potential for career growth at our company?
- Overall, what changes would most enhance your experience of developing?

Thrive

- What makes you feel most valued and appreciated for your contributions?
- What are some of the most significant, nonmonetary recognition strategies?
- How easily can you set and hold boundaries and find the balance you need?
- How comfortable are you asking for help?
- Are you able to bring your full and authentic self to work?
- How would you describe the company's wellness and well-being resources?
- Do leaders role-model self-care and setting boundaries?
- Overall, what changes would most enhance your ability to thrive?



It takes just a few early wins to
get things going.

(which required no permission or funding), he began a team meeting by sharing one self-care practice he had done that week. Then he invited two to three team members to share their own. It took five minutes—and the team loved it.

Here was the key: The leader didn't label the experiment as The Solution. He simply acknowledged that he had heard their need and was taking a small step in what he hoped was the right direction. He was also clear in that he would need their feedback and their ongoing willingness to experiment along with him.

One month later, self-care-share was there to stay. But that was only the beginning. The leader had also reprioritized projects and modified practices to help employees manage their workloads, assisted his team in navigating the company's suite of wellness resources, and made the personal commitment to not send email or Slack messages between 6 p.m. and 6 a.m. Each action was a small needle move.

He was not only taking action, but he was also continuing to link each action to the employee experience. He had built a coalition of willing participants who were collectively taking accountability for creating their own experience.

Turn early action into sustained momentum

It takes just a few early wins to get things going. Here are some practices to help the employee experience work permeate an organization.

Connect the dots in the rear view.

As Steve Jobs famously said in his 2005 Stanford University commencement speech, "You can't connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backward." That applies to employee experience design in that as your company begins to make changes, employees need a unified story that demonstrates momentum.

Looking back and saying, "We heard that meeting overload and complex processes were holding you back from delivering, so we've reduced meetings and simplified XYZ processes to empower your work. And by streamlining your work, we earned back some time that we now invite you to use for your own learning, development, and internal networking. And as you build your networks across teams, we're beginning to see enhanced collaboration ..." Employees won't see how all the moving parts accumulate unless the company crafts the narrative that reveals it.

Monitor over measure. Measurement is fine. It's helpful hindsight data that reveals how the company or a leader did. But at the end of a year, on its own, it's too little too late.

Leaders need to know in real time how it's going. Monitoring mechanisms—regular check-ins with team members—will help leaders amplify and course-correct in the moment. They should build five to 10 minutes into team meeting agendas to ask: "What's better and what's worse?" or "What's one new

thing we can try to enhance your ability to deliver?" And then they must take action. There's no need to wait a year.

Create practice-sharing forums.

As leaders begin to experiment with their teams and discover what's working, create forums for discussion in which leaders can come together and learn from—and with—each other. Allow the most successful practices to catch on and find tentacles throughout the organization.

Celebrate action over outcome.

Crafting the employee experience is active—it's never finished and should always be in motion. Therefore, just the act of taking action deserves celebration. When someone offers an idea and is willing to test and learn, that deserves voice and celebration. Don't save celebrations for the "successful" experiments. The action itself needs positive reinforcement.

By recognizing that the employee experiences with the most impact are those that companies or leaders design collaboratively, iteratively, from the ground up, and with work and the customer in mind, your organization will be on a path to not just capture but truly captivate talent, amplify results, and maximize customer delight.

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