NAVIGATING THE
Employee Experience

CHAPTER 1

FACTORS THAT IMPACT

EMPLOYEES' EXPERIENCE

William A. Howatt

Foreword

Each employee comes to work with a perception as to how they expect their day will unfold with respect to it being positive or negative for them. These perceptions are often formed based on what the employee experiences. The employee experience is, in essence, everything the employee interacts with that can influence their perceptions, which includes their attitude and career decisions.

These perceptions can change, based on what they're experiencing. A new manager can be a wonderful, positive change, but a realignment of work responsibilities can be a negative change.

The purpose of this e-book is to explore some factors that can positively or negatively influence the employee experience. Factors such as culture and leadership play an important role in shaping the employee experience.

Each article has been created to help influence the employee experience in a positive manner.

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Leadership preparation and learning transfer important for organizations

Putting unprepared employees into leadership positions can be costly.

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How does your organization prepare employees to become leaders?

One common path is an employee who is a proven subject matter expert excelling in their assigned function is promoted with little to no preparation. Within a few months, many such new leaders are struggling, or even failing; a smaller percentage thrive. The cause of failure is often overlooking or a lack of consideration for the importance of the micro skills required to be an effective leader. Selection decisions are based solely on the individuals' technical skills and industry expertise.

Some reasons for the above are a lack of HR succession planning, capacity building and effective training and development.

How much does your organization spend on training and developing employees? The Conference Board of Canada reported that Canadian employers spent an average of $800 per employee on staff training in 201415, up from $705 in 201213 and $688 in 2010. Having a training and development budget and plan is an important first step toward developing leaders.

Research is influencing employers to shift their training and development from simply focusing on desired output and behaviours to having training more focused on facilitating behaviours for managing impairment in the workplace.

Providing employees exposure early in their career to developing foundational intrapersonal skills can promote better coping skills that improve resiliency. These skills enable new leaders to manage their emotions under pressure and to create conditions to effectively engage employees in two-way, trusted conversations.

Putting unprepared employees into leadership positions can be costly. Dr. Brad Smart's research suggests that the cost of a mis-hire can be 15 times the leader's salary. This includes costs of hiring, compensation, maintenance, severance, lost productivity and disruption in the function.

The solution for developing leaders is not to simply spend more money on leadership training. If it were that easy, we'd have more effective leaders in the workplace today. Sadly, billions of leadership development dollars are wasted every year due to gaps in human resources and senior leaders' knowledge with respect to adult learning.

It's not the training that's the problem, in most cases; it's a lack of awareness with respect to how people learn and retain information. Whether a leadership program costs $500, $5000 or even $50,000 often doesn't matter. Why? Because many of these programs – regardless of price or stature – make the same mistake.

They provide learners with prep work with clear learning objectives, as well as useful content, exercises, case studies and practice. They deliver assigned learning objectives, and learners find them of value upon completion. However, the programs fail to appreciate how to close the gap between information received in a training becoming ingrained and applied to the job.

The real issues begin when the training program ends. A lack of planning for the forgetting curve (i.e., the amount

of information forgotten after the learning ends) results in rapid decay of information covered in the training. Research on the forgetting curve shows that within one-hour people will have forgotten an average of 50 per cent of the information presented; within 24 hours, 70 per cent; and within a week, 90 per cent.

SLOWING THE FORGETTING CURVE IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

- **Have a post-program plan** – Ensure the leadership design provides repetition post-training. Research shows that reinforcement on the job after training strengthens memory and increases the likelihood leaders can use the information in their work.

- **Use blended learning** – In addition to classroom learning, set the expectation that after or between classroom sessions learners will engage for a defined period in peer mentoring activities, lunch-and-learn refreshers or online learning that provides information in small chunks that take less than 10 minutes to complete.

- **Leverage online learning for leadership development** – The price point and value for online content is often well beyond what a learner would get in a two-day program. It can be done around employees'

It's not the training that's the problem, in most cases; it's a lack of awareness with respect to how people learn and retain information.

schedules; it provides ongoing access over an extended period; it allows for repetitive lessons; and it promotes learning in small chunks that strengthens knowledge transfer. Proceeding at their own pace, learners can do their learning when they're focused and motivated, repeat any modules desired, and use it as a support system to ask questions.

- **Leverage leadership coaching** – Coaching provides leaders one-on-one attention and the ability to design a leadership program to meet the learner's specific developmental needs and goals. It spreads learning over a period (typically six months) that provides time for reinforcement, repetition of learning and practice that supports the learner to learn and grow. Coaching provides a safe place for problem solving and role playing difficult conversations. It challenges learners' negative assumptions about themselves, and prompts them to look ahead to define the kind of leader they really want to be. It also gives them a coach to walk the path with them.

Change is constant; can impact employees' mental health

Every organization is left to determine how it will implement change

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When you hear the term change management, what type of thought comes to mind – positive or negative?

If you Google change management, you'll find over 70 million results – evidence that there are many points of view on this topic. The concept of change management originated from behavioural and social science, information technology and business. As a result, there's no single, accepted best practice. Every organization is left to determine how it will implement change.

Reasons organizations make change vary from macroeconomics trends, new technology, competitive dynamics, operational inefficiency, financial issues and HR policies in response to new legislation. Most organizations are going through some form of change, whether minor, medium or major. It's not unusual for an organization to have more than one change initiative happening at a time.

When done correctly, change management initiatives support employees to navigate change that directly impacts them. However, what's often missing when implementing change is consideration for the impact on employees' mental health.

CONSIDERATIONS WHEN MAKING CHANGE

Employers can consider several factors when designing a change management strategy, to reduce the risk pending change will have on employees' mental health.

For your average employee, consider the relevance of each of the following change terms, on a continuum from: not at all relevant (1) to very relevant (5). The higher the score, the higher the probability change is having a negative impact on employees' mental health.

• Change confusion – A decree has been made that something will be changed, but it's unclear what the specific changes are, who will be doing what, and how the change will impact employees. This can result in feelings of stress, fear and lack of clarity.

• **Change resistance** – Change has been a constant over the past couple of years. While there have been lots of change announcements, due to lack of follow-through many employees have learned that often nothing happens. There's lots of talk but no action. This results in feelings of sarcasm, apathy and ambivalence.

• **Change fatigue** – Before one change is completed, another is announced. Each change creates additional work and demands for time and resources. Employees feel overwhelmed and trapped in a marathon with no clearly defined time when change will slow down. This rapid change cycle increases employees' risk for burnout and mental health issues.

Communicating a change alone is not change management. When done correctly, change management supports, influences and educates the workforce to move from one way of doing things to another. Some employees' mental health can be negatively impacted when they're not prepared to cope with pending change.

Some actions that can be layered into an organization's change management strategy to reduce effects on employees' mental health:

- **Clarify and define how the organization facilitates change** – Educate the workforce on what change management means within the organization, and the specific change management steps. This can help employees be ready to cope with change. When on-boarding new hires, train them in the organization's change management strategy and the tools that can help them move through change.

- **Avoid taking shortcuts** – Treat change management initiatives like any structured process, to avoid shortcuts. Following a structured change management plan can ensure that proper communications are put in place to reduce employees' ambivalence and questions. It's important that employees are clear of WHY the change is happening, WHAT will be changed, and HOW the change will be implemented.

- **Provide employees an opportunity to offer feedback** – Encourage feedback on what's working and what's not. This helps ensure that employees who have

When done correctly, change management supports, influences and educates the workforce to move from one way of doing things to another.

a need to share their opinions have a forum to do so. As well, it can provide information that uncovers blind spots to help the organization learn how to be more effective.

- **Monitor the amount of change happening** – Consider how much change will be implemented at any one time. Any change may create some degree of stress within a workforce. Sometimes it's the not the change but the degree of change happening at once that can tax employees' mental health. Considering employees' mental health can influence decision making and the pace of change that will be implemented.

- **Measure how employees are coping with change** – When surveying employees on their opinion (e.g., engagement surveys or total health assessments) it's helpful to measure the average employees' perception with respect to how they're coping with change. This insight can be used to evaluate the current change management strategy and identify potential gaps.

How leaders can influence a workplace culture

Culture is the personality and moral compass that shapes the social interactions among employees within a workforce

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How much influence do leaders have in shaping a workplace culture?

Many will respond quickly with a general statement such as, "A lot." The response is based on the premise that most would agree. However, this response doesn't provide insight on the how. Perhaps a better question to ask is how leaders can influence a workplace culture positively and negatively.

To answer this question accurately, it's worthwhile to not assume that we all use the same frame of reference when defining the word culture. Culture isn't what's written on paper or posted on the walls of an organization. It can be defined as the personality and moral compass that shapes the social interactions among employees within a workforce.

Culture is the result of what the average employee does and thinks each day. For employees who have learned to adapt to the cultural norms, their actions are genuine. Those who are unable to adapt often end up leaving because they're not a cultural fit. A workforce culture not only impacts employees, it also influences customers', vendors' and partners' experiences and decisions on whether they want to be associated with the organization.

A healthy workplace culture is a social determinant that promotes and supports employees' wellbeing. It facilitates empathy, appreciation, strategy and programs for employees' development and health, and takes proactive steps to protect employees' psychological and physical health. It's in this kind of culture that employees often thrive to their full potential and maximize their productivity and performance.

What ultimately shapes a workforce culture is what employees and leaders accept as the social norms for how the workforce will behave and treat each other, as well as treat their customers and partners. What is interesting with respect to social conformity to rules, standards and expectations for the average employee is that their compliance often happens outside their awareness. People learn by observation, and often mirror what they observe or experience.

Social conformity is ultimately how culture is shaped with respect to what will be accepted, allowed and enforced. I regularly take Hwy 101 from the Annapolis Valley to the Halifax airport, where the speed limit in some sections is 110 km/h. Many drivers have learned that in these sections the real speed limit is 119.

Those who drive for periods of time at 130 km/h know that there's a high probability the RCMP will eventually catch them, and they'll wish that they had stuck to the speed limit. Though painful, a speeding ticket is often a reminder to get back on track.

Leaders can help shape culture by role modeling the behaviours and standards as defined by senior leaders who define the cultural playbook. Winning cultures start at the top, where the most senior leaders set the tone and expectations for how they expect employees to behave with each other.

Leaders also play a role in encouraging and enforcing cultural norms through informal and formal communications and by correcting behaviour when needed to give an employee an opportunity to get back on the right track. An example is a respectful workplace issue where one employee's behaviours and words are

on the fringe of being disrespectful and hurting another employee. In such a case, the focus is not on good or bad but on intervening and guiding the employee on how their behaviour is not aligned to the values of the culture, and resetting expectations for how employees are expected to act and speak to their peers. Leaders who treat all employees firmly, fairly and consistently with respect to culture put themselves in position to earn trust and respect from their employees and peers.

Leaders can influence culture and create climate changes within their team with respect to cultural expectations that can be both positive and negative. For example, a new leader within a short time can reset a team's cultural norms to be more positive by what they do and what they acknowledge, enforce and correct.

> *Social conformity is ultimately how culture is shaped with respect to what will be accepted, allowed and enforced.*

COACHING TIPS FOR LEADERS:

- **Trust building** – To influence their team and contribute to building a positive culture, a leader must first earn their team's trust. This is done over time by role modeling the key attributes that represent the culture and by following through on setting and enforcing standards fairly and equally to all team members.

- **Talk about culture** – Leaders can influence culture by not assuming that all employees use the same lexicon to define words. Through discussions and describing the kinds of behaviours that demonstrate the core value and expectations of the culture leaders reduce assumptions and provide clarity.

- **Tell employees** – When employees demonstrate behaviours that are aligned with the culture, reinforce them and show appreciation. Catching employees doing what's right is many times more powerful for shaping a culture than just correcting what can be improved or is not acceptable.

Emotional engagement matters in the workplace

The theory is, the higher the engagement scores, the more likely employees are engaged

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If you work in an organization that does an annual engagement survey, how much importance does your executive team put on the organization's annual engagement score?

Employee engagement is a concept that many organizations have adopted as an approach to gain insight on the average employee's experience in the workplace: what they value, what they like and what they don't like.

The theory is, the higher the engagement scores, the more likely employees are engaged. This means that they're less likely to quit, will be more productive and more likely to be positive about the organization to new potential hires.

There's some evidence to suggest that this theory makes sense, and there often are some positive correlations between engagement levels, retention and productivity.

What may be missing from this conversation is clarity and a fuller understanding of what an engagement score really means.

To provide context for this conversation, let's begin with a standard engagement example:

- Company ABC uses an engagement survey that has 60 items that measure several factors that have been reported by the survey provider as predicting engagement.

- The survey results provide a global percentage score that can be viewed as an overview score cut by location that enables benchmarks to be compared year over year.

- Scores of factors and individual question items also are reported in the results package, to provide more colour on what's bringing the global engagement score up or down.

- The results package often reports correlations of what factors are most predicting and influencing engagement. These can be used to help pick areas to focus on.

- Company ABC makes an action plan based on results, communicates results to its workforce, and implements an action plan.

- The cycle is repeated in 12 months to see what improvement has been made year over year.

The above process is being used in some form or shape by thousands of organizations each year. Unfortunately, it focuses on engagement outcomes, not on what the term engaged employee really means.

One reason may be that human resources and senior leaders may not be familiar with Gallup Poll 2013 research that reported worldwide, 13 per cent of employees are engaged at work.

I'm betting that most of you reading this have never seen a set of results that suggested only 13 per cent of the workforce is engaged, 63 per cent is not engaged, and 24 per cent is actively disengaged.

Why? Because Gallup, when talking about engagement, is focused on the degree the average employee is psychologically committed to their job and the degree they want to make a positive contribution each day.

Gallup research suggests that many organizations are measuring cognitive perceptions (e.g., what employees are thinking) versus psychological commitment (e.g., passion for work).

Another way to think of this is the degree of emotional commitment employees have for what they do at work.

For example, I've recently become a grandfather, and am highly emotionally committed to my granddaughter. I enjoy seeing her and want to spend time with her, and with every interaction I want to have a positive impact. A cognitive commitment may be more cerebral and is focused on what I believe a good grandfather would do, such as purchasing a bond for her future education or providing guidance when asked.

EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT IN ACTION

What percentage of your workforce comes to work each day because they want to, or think they must?

- Want-to-come-to-work employees demonstrate emotional engagement – they have a sense of passion, joy and reward from coming to work.
- Must-come-to-work employees are cognitively engaged – they have a more cognitive approach; they see spending the day at work as time tax to get a paycheque.

We all can relate to days when we fell in either option. We also know the days we're at work just checking off checkboxes, not being very productive. Interestingly, most engagement surveys don't separate results by the two categories of "want-to employees" and "have-to employees."

What percentage of your workforce comes to work each day because they want to, or think they must?

Most employees who fall in the must-come-to-work-each-day category answer their engagement survey items honestly. That may be favourable, but doesn't mean that they're emotionally engaged.

TAKEAWAY CONSIDERATION

Gallup is viewed by many as one of the global standards in engagement research. It seems to me that many organization engagement surveys may be more focused on measuring what employees think rather than what they feel. We're emotionally-driven creatures; what we feel passion for is what we often push and thrive to succeed in.

- Consider adding a factor to your engagement score that's aligned to the Gallup engagement design, so you can gain insight on what percentage of employees are psychologically committed or, as I have suggested, emotionally engaged.
- Be OK, as Jim Collins coaches, with accepting the brutal facts before you begin that you may have only 13 to 15 per cent of your workforce psychologically committed. When you have the facts, you're better positioned to determine what can be done to positively impact employees' experience, with the goal of driving up emotional engagement.

Why good intentions can result in failure

Most ideas that fizzle do so in one of four periods. Each period plays a role in an idea evolving to become a pillar within an organization's DNA.

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Have you been involved in a new idea that started off with lots of hype but within a few months fizzled out?

Perhaps the real question is who has not had this experience in their work life. This is often referred to as the idea of the day: lots of hype, focus and excitement followed by a lack of follow-through.

Let's explore some of the reasons why this happens, why good intentions can result in failure that not only prevents a desired change from occurring, but can also negatively skew employees about future initiatives.

Most ideas that fizzle do so in one of four periods. Each period plays a role in an idea evolving to become a pillar within an organization's DNA.

Incubation period – For context, let's begin with how new initiatives get created. Typically, one or more leaders make an observation, based on available data, that there's a defined gap or opportunity. This sparks thinking, problem solving and decision making, and is where ideas are born.

- **Missed-step examples:** When an idea is formed, is not socialized, and there's no buy-in from key stakeholders, its success may be at risk. In addition, not doing a cost benefit analysis on the idea's value, impact and payoff can result in unrealistic expectations that can erode momentum.

Preparation period – After an idea is formed, the next step is to explore how it can be moved from a concept to something that's concrete and can be implemented. During this period, the people and financial resources to launch and maintain the idea are assembled. As well,

oversight, change management, a communications plan, policies and procedures are developed and evaluated.

- **Missed-step examples:** Gaps in planning and assumptions around communication, ownership and resources needed to move an idea to reality have not been fully thought out. The need to move fast and rush to launch when not ready can result in a bumpy and stressful implementation of a new idea because of gaps in anticipating risks or contingent planning.

Launch period – The new idea has been deemed ready. Once it's launched, the audience will assume the idea will do what it claims it will. This is a critical period, as users of the idea will be judgemental and will evaluate whether it does what it claims to do.

- **Missed-step examples:** Gaps in the ability to fix issues that often arise after a launch, get feedback from users, evaluate whether the idea is doing what it claims, and constant due diligence until the idea becomes mature, which typically can take several months to go from a new idea to being a part of the day-to-day business.

Maturity period – The new idea has made it to its first milestone (e.g., in the organization and doing what it's supposed to do for a minimum of six months). Each idea will set its threshold that provides evidence that it has graduated to be a part of the organization's DNA. This is the period where an idea is monitored for its sustainability.

- **Missed-step examples:** Taking an idea's longevity for granted. This results in a loss of focus and attention to detail. When this happens, micro decisions over time

can take an idea that has been working well to one that becomes a risk, or even fails.

To test the above model, take an idea that you've personally experienced that started out as being one that sounded like it would be great but within a few months fizzled. This typically happens because one of the four periods did not have all the ingredients needed for success.

TRANSFERRING IDEAS INTO LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY AND REDUCING THE FIZZLE FACTOR:

- Taking ideas to concrete reality requires passion, drive, persistence, patience and a champion. Once these basic tenets are in place and there's a commitment, the next step is to utilize a process that can help to ensure an idea has a chance to mature.

> *Take an idea that you've personally experienced that started out as being one that sounded like it would be great but within a few months fizzled.*

- Rush often creates more future pain and risk for mistakes that need to be corrected, such as costs with respect to people time and financial resources
- Adopt a model such as the above four-period model for how an idea will be matured. The key point is there may never be an end, meaning that most things we want to keep need to be maintained to keep them alive and well.
- Set realistic expectations. Great ideas are born, and like any birth require time to mature.
- Keep all ideas humble; let the results do the talking.
- Pay attention to each period in an idea's evolution and anticipate risk in planning for each period.
- Follow-through and continuous improvement increase sustainability.

Improve the overall experience of surveys for both employees and employers

Many times, the average employee who completes a survey doesn't know how the data is being used, nor are they clear on what happened as a result of the survey

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What is one of your biggest considerations when deciding on a survey for your workforce?

As you ponder this question, see if you can relate to two common responses. Some will default to the length of the survey; others will focus on the number of surveys that have been circulated so far in the year. There can be many more responses, but these seem to be two popular ones. Interestingly, neither is strategic. Both are based on preferences that come from some perceived bias.

Surveys are an excellent way to quickly obtain information from a workforce to help make decisions. Workplace surveys are typically one-way interactions. Employees fill in their responses and their data is collected, stored and aggregated. Some type of analysis is performed, and a report of sorts is created for the person who requested the survey. Sometimes employees hear what a survey said and the actions taken as a result. Many times, however, the average employee who completes a survey doesn't know how the data is being used, nor are they clear on what happened as a result of the survey.

Following are some considerations that can improve the overall experience of surveys for both employees and employers.

Data collection strategy – One challenge with many organizations when it comes to the use of surveys is failure to educate workforces on their annual survey data collection strategy. This strategy provides an overview of the surveys and spells out the reason for each and how the data will be used. Ideally, once a year the organizations define the number of surveys to be used, such as customer satisfaction, employee engagement

and cultural audits. This provides a clear line between surveys and the annual assessments through which employees get results and feedback in real time, along with direction for action.

Employers create a single communication at the start of each calendar year to advise their workforce when to expect surveys and the type of communications that will be used to support each. Employees are informed how they will be reminded to participate and the type of incentives that may be available.

This annual discipline reduces unplanned and random surveys of the workforce. Of course, there are exceptions, and it's okay to tell employees that a new initiative will be added to the annual plan. The goal is to gain the workforce's confidence that there's a strategic purpose for every survey. One challenge when employees are sent surveys randomly is that they feel like the flavour-of-the-month. Such random acts can result in decreased motivation to participate. The number of surveys may not be as important as insights for the workforce of how each survey fits within the organization's strategy and purpose.

Clarify the value to the employee – One constant is the perceived lack of time. Many employers are moving to micro surveys that they believe will be easier for employees to focus on and complete.

One reason for this trend is information overload. With all the data being directed towards employees daily, some providers are selling the notion that to get employees to focus it's best to ask them to do short, pulse-like surveys instead of long ones. Rather than having an employee do one 20 minute survey, they

want them to do four short ones. Some employers are using several of these a year. What's missing in this logic is employees' motivation to act differently after they participate.

Interestingly, the length of the survey may not matter as much as employers think. What matters to every employee doing a survey is understanding what's in it for them and how it benefits them. Asking someone to do four small surveys versus one longer one can feel like additional work, as they have four tasks instead of one in an already busy schedule. As well, there's a risk of employees dropping off between surveys if there's any desire to aggregate multiple pulse surveys. If employees don't see anything change between surveys, their length won't matter.

Our society seems to be wired to move fast, and buying into the notion that no one can focus on anything for more than 10 minutes may be feeding an already ADHD–like culture. When determining the length of a survey, employers may be better served by being clear on what the end goal is, what information is needed, and how the

> *The goal is to gain the workforce's confidence that there's a strategic purpose for every survey.*

data will be used. They should then ensure that employees understand how their contribution can help both themselves and the employer make better decisions.

A FEW FINAL THOUGHTS

· Collecting data without knowing what to do with it leads to "dumb data." Data that sits around and is never used to make strategic decisions is a waste of time and resources. If you're collecting data, have a plan for how it will be used to make decisions. Be specific on the questions you want answered.

· Take IT security seriously. At a minimum, ensure that every survey uses a secure URL. Make it clear to employees that their identity and confidentiality are protected. Ensure that all data is stored securely and encrypted, and have clear policies and procedures on how data will be managed and for how long it will be retained.

Managing the gap between words and actions

Employees who feel valued and important by their employer are more likely to feel trusted and want to help the organization achieve its desired outcomes

BILL HOWATT

How important are people to your organization's success?

When a senior leader is asked this, it comes off as a rhetorical question. They naturally assign a high score, to assert that people are, indeed, important. What senior leader would want to be quoted on the front page of the paper saying, "Our people aren't important to our success"?

One challenge many organizations have is managing the gap between words and actions. Telling employees why things are good is never the same as employees coming to this conclusion based on their personal experiences.

Perhaps a better question is: How confident are you as a senior leader that the average employee believes they're valued and important to the organization's success? Followed by another question: Based on what facts do you know your response is accurate?

The reality for most organizations is that a percentage of employees come to work each day because they want to. They enjoy and are fulfilled by the work they do. Others show up because they believe they must; they feel trapped by financial stress, so need money to pay their bills. Getting 100 per cent coming to work because they want to may be unrealistic, but the higher the percentage who do, the higher the likelihood these employees believe that what they do is valued and important.

Workforce productivity research continues to demonstrate that employees who feel valued and important by their employer are more likely to feel trusted and want to help the organization achieve its desired outcomes. The more employees who feel

this way, the more likely this becomes a defining characteristic of the organization's culture.

One challenge and reality for many senior leaders is the system they're in and what the system values most. Some organizations can be profitable and still have many unhappy employees. What may be missing on the corporate scorecard is a metric that reports a missed opportunity, such as lower numbers of employees who feel valued and important.

Senior leaders' behaviours drive organizational priorities. These shape the percentage of energy leaders focus on business decisions, financial issues, growth strategy, risk management and operational metrics. For many, this can take 90 per cent or more of their day-to-day focus, leaving not a lot of energy to focus on people.

One reason for this is that most senior leaders are recognized and paid based on organization results, and in some cases engagement results. However, the challenge with traditional engagement scores is they fail to provide insight into engagement sustainability (i.e., percentage of workers who are both highly engaged and healthy). For example, while burnout continues to be a growing risk factor, traditional engagement surveys don't detect what percentage of employees are at risk for burnout.

People priority is a commitment by senior leadership to focus on understanding. They need to close any gaps between what senior leaders believe to be true and what the average employee believes with respect to perception of employee importance and value. People priority is valuable only to senior leaders who agree with the thesis that the more employees believe they're valued and a

priority, the more likely they'll perform to their full potential daily.

- **Get a baseline** – Compare the average leader's perceptions to the average employee's on the topic of people priority (demonstrated through percentage of interactions, communications, obtaining input). One way to obtain this is to add questions to an existing engagement survey or to create a pulse survey to obtain perceptions such as:

  - On a typical day, what percentage of time does the average leader focus on employees (e.g., team meetings, one-on-one formal and informal interactions)?
  - On a scale of one to 10, how important does the average employee rate leadership?

- **Explore any perception gaps** – Senior leaders can demonstrate people priority when they seek to understand why employees perceive what they do. Through confidential focus group and one-on-one interviews, senior leaders can discover in their culture the kinds of behaviours that are generating employees' perceptions. This step can uncover key insights to closing any perception gaps. This action moves past words and demonstrates senior leaders'

> *The challenge with traditional engagement scores is they fail to provide insight into engagement sustainability.*

commitment to ensuring the average employee has evidence and experience that they're a priority and important to the organization's success.

- **People priority action plan** – There are many levers senior leaders can pull to facilitate action that improves employees' perception around what leaders think and do to demonstrate that people are important and a priority to the organization.

  A few examples:

  - move away from annual performance reviews to an agile performance coaching model that promotes more interaction, development and feedback
  - set an expectation for a minimum monthly amount of time every manager spends with their employees
  - increase visibility by senior leaders, both formally and informally
  - implement a meaningful recognition and rewards model that provides employees with feedback for good work on a regular basis
  - increase senior leadership communications and provide transparency on performance results, as well as obtain input on how to make improvements

Corporate responsibility becoming critical element in sustainability plans

An organization's CSR priorities are expected to continue to be an important influence on potential hires' interest in joining its workforce

BILL HOWATT

How knowledgeable or engaged are you in your organization's corporate social responsibility (CSR) behaviour?

CSR describes how an organization behaves to improve society. The key word is behaves, meaning what the organization does. This concept has evolved from being how much an organization engages in philanthropy, such as donating to a charity, to CSR becoming a critical element in its long-term sustainability plan.

If you're a leader with any responsibility for attraction and retention of talent, you will want to pay attention – if you're not already.

Meister, in *The Future of Work: Corporate Social Responsibility Attracts Top Talent,* reported one study that found, all things being equal, 35 per cent of employees would take a 15 per cent pay cut to work in an organization committed to corporate social responsibility. A second study found that 80 per cent of the future workforce (ages 1325) prefers to work in organizations that care about their impact and contribution to society.

An organization's CSR priorities are expected to continue to be an important influence on potential hires' interest in joining its workforce, as well as a motivator to retain talent.

Canada has about 17 million people working full and part time, whose taxes ultimately pay for the benefits we all have, including highways, schools and hospitals. Employers who invest in CSR can make a difference in the lives of their employees (e.g., pride, personal fulfillment) as well as help contribute to a better society.

CSR can have tangible benefits for employers, such as improved brand, reputation, increased sales and customer loyalty. It also contributes to operational savings, helps attract talent, and improves financial performance because of a more engaged and committed workforce.

Employees observe internal and external factors when they evaluate the degree to which their employer is committed to CSR.

To evaluate your organization's CSR activities and maturity, rank each of the following points on a scale of one to 10. This is an awareness activity only. It's not meant to indicate that employers must participate in all activities, only to provide some examples of the diversity of activities they can engage in.

Internal focus – how the organization behaves ethically when conducting business, such as:

- Preventing unnecessary inequities by engaging diversity and inclusion best-in-class practices to ensure all employees are treated fairly and equally.
- Willingly providing employees who are in need safe and meaningful accommodations (e.g., mental health).
- Maintaining environmentally friendly policies (e.g., green, energy saving), as well as its record with respect to adherence to environmental standards set by government (e.g., carbon emissions).

External focus – what the organization does to improve society by:

- Supporting its workforce to volunteer outside work by providing set periods of time employees can be

released from work responsibility to volunteer in the community.

- Engaging its workforce to participate in raising money and donating to chosen charities and non-profits.

- Taking on social causes that have a definable goal and a set target population.

- Using its profits to support local community initiatives.

- Sponsoring social research to credible non-profits whose focus is providing insight that can help Canada's society, economy and workforce

An employer can demonstrate their commitment to CSR in a variety of ways. However, they should be mindful not only of what they're doing with respect to internal or external CSR initiatives. They should also be aware of the degree that their workforce, customers and community

Employers should be aware of the degree that their workforce, customers and community at large are aware of their behaviours.

at large are aware of their behaviours. They need to monitor how their CSR initiatives are positively impacting employees and society, and reporting results back to employees on a regular basis.

The more regularly employees are educated and engaged in an organization's CSR initiatives, the more likely they will look for opportunities to become involved. While most employees are bombarded by communications daily, employers will benefit from accepting promotion and communications as an important part of their CSR strategic plans.

It's helpful to have a defined communications plan that informs employees on what the organization is doing and learning from its CSR initiatives. Ultimately, CSR is not about checking a box; it's about making social change.

Is your career choice right for you?

Some leaders acknowledge that they feel trapped and suggest that there are no options, they don't see any, or they rationalize that life is supposed to be hard

BILL HOWATT

Are you wondering if your career choice is right for you?

If so, you're not alone. Life moves fast, and even though we may have questions, if we don't take time to think we can end up being caught in our day-to-day routines. This can lead to a pattern of behaviours that fuels the status quo, meaning we focus on what we're doing instead of thinking about what we're doing.

This mindset can result in blinders that don't allow space to ask ourselves if what we're doing today is what we really want for our future. When we don't ask these questions to challenge the status quo we risk hard-wiring our belief system to keep working hard and hope that things somehow will get better tomorrow.

From my experience coaching business professionals and leaders I have observed highly-skilled professionals who become trapped on this treadmill. Some acknowledge that they feel trapped and suggest that there are no options, they don't see any, or they rationalize that life is supposed to be hard.

Why? There are many reasons, from change being viewed as scary, thoughts of giving up being perceived as bad, or gaps in self-confidence.

As a professional coach, when I have a client presenting the above symptoms it can be a wonderful opportunity to help them pause for a moment and consider what a reset could look like for them. This can vary from creating a new beginning in their current job and career to exploring alternative career options.

> *Ultimately, it's up to each of us to define our career fulfillment.*

The purpose for pressing the reset button is to achieve internal peace of mind. This can help a person take an inventory and stock of what they're doing today and to determine what changes, new knowledge, skills and outcomes would increase their internal peace.

The interesting thing about pressing the reset button is that there's no right nor wrong outcome; it's meant to step back and reflect, get off the treadmill for a moment and explore whether there are things to consider or do differently. Ultimately, it's up to each of us to define our career fulfillment.

One reset activity I've explored with professionals in a coaching setting is to ask five questions. How they answer these questions helps us determine the next steps.

I pre-frame these questions with their purpose, to help the person challenge their internal belief system. Each question typically generates a conversation, as there are no yes or no responses. If you do these by yourself, write out your answers, and if you don't have a coach, consider having a conversation with a trusted advisor about your motivation for doing this exercise. Discuss your responses and your goal to get their input, suggestions and questions.

Pressing the career reset button:

P – On a typical day, what degree of **passion** does your career bring you?

E – How does your career meet your **expectations** for growth, learning, impact, creativity and interests?

A – Do the **actions** of your career give you a sense of purpose?

C – How **connected** are you to the things that matter most to you, such as family and community?

E – When it's all said and done, will your career provide you the lasting memories you want when you **end** your work life?

The answers to these questions often lead to more questions. The goal of this exercise is to uncover some of the problems that result when a person feels trapped in their job or career.

Many times, when we change how we think about something or develop new coping skills we see things differently, leading to new decisions and actions. Many may not need to find a new career to find peace. Pressing our reset button to define the type of career we want to have and to enjoy can help us find more joy and excitement.

What kind of culture do you work in?

Many leaders promote the importance of culture and understand that cultural perception and experiences can help attract and retain top talent

BILL HOWATT

Take a blank piece of paper, find a quiet place and take five minutes to write out how you would describe the culture you work in each day. This exercise will describe your perception of your workplace culture. If you ask five peers for their perceptions, they may have some similarities and some differences.

This kind of exercise typically uncovers a range of cultural perceptions such as how employees treat each other, the experience employees have with their direct managers and senior leadership, the level of pride, the degree of psychological safety, general attitude of the workforce and the overall expectations for employees.

Culture ultimately defines a workplace's social norm and the degree of social conformity with respect to the experience employees, managers and customers can expect.

When senior leadership fails to clearly define them, some type of culture and strategy will emerge by default. It wouldn't take an expert in culture and strategy long to categorize an organization with respect to the kind of culture (e.g., reactive) and strategy (e.g., chaos) it has in place.

Work cultures can be described as positive, negative or some combination of the two. When an organization's culture is put into the public domain it can attract or turn away new employees. Perhaps this is why some individuals, before applying to or joining an organization, do their own research to understand what employees in a particular work culture have experienced.

Online websites like Glassdoor are places where people can go to share their perceptions, which can influence a potential hire's decision to apply.

Many leaders promote the importance of culture and understand that cultural perception and experiences can help attract and retain top talent. So, it's common for an organization to spend time and money creating its purpose and core values to help align workforce expectations and to influence the organization's culture.

Why do some organizations struggle to build their desired culture?

The concept of designing a desired culture in theory makes sense, but expressing the kind of culture senior leadership wants and achieving it are two different things.

One step sometimes missed in culture design is mitigating what I call cultural confusion. Cultural confusion is a simple concept to relate to. It's when employees are sent memos on their organization's culture, are told in meetings by leaders how wonderful it is to work in the kind of culture they do, or hear that the organization has won an award because of its culture.

Cultural confusion occurs when there's a difference between what an employee hears or reads about how the culture is supposed to be, compared to what they experience. The consequence of negative experience is it can decrease loyalty, trust and commitment.

The percentage of employees who are experiencing cultural confusion is important to understand. The

degree of confusion can become the perceived norm and what this group of employees believes can influence their behaviours and ultimately the culture, if the numbers are high enough.

What senior leaders can do to reduce cultural confusion:

- **Describe the top five culture experiences every employee can expect** – Have a group of senior, middle and frontline managers and employees collaborate to pick what they believe are the top five experiences that are critical for every employee daily to create the kind of culture senior leadership wants for all employees. Write a short sentence that describes each desired experience (e.g., All employees are empowered and encouraged to provide their direct manager their ideas without invitation).

- **Get employees' perception on a regular basis** – Every two months, have employees complete a short pulse check that captures the current workforce climate with respect to perception and experience against the top five. Less is more. Having a laser focus on five things that have been defined as being critical for the culture is worth monitoring. Employees come and go, and managers change,

> *Cultural confusion occurs when there's a difference between what an employee hears or reads about how the culture is supposed to be, compared to what they experience.*

making culture dynamic. Monitoring the percentage of employees who don't score at least a four or five on a Likert scale of one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree) provides senior leaders with factual input on employees' experiences and the degree of cultural confusion.

- **Address present cultural confusion** – Building a culture takes commitment, being open to feedback, and acting on it. Addressing present cultural confusion requires getting a baseline to understand the percentage of the workforce who are not feeling the five experiences and then finding out why. Employees will believe in the culture when they see action by senior leaders to understand why there are gaps and are acting to close them. This may require training managers, replacing ineffective managers, or dealing with some employees who aren't adhering to minimal expectations. A consistent determination and discipline by senior leaders to get the top five expectations for all employees' experience is how they can reduce cultural confusion and its associated negative consequences. The upside is creating a culture where employees want to come to work to each day.

It's never too late for leadership development

New boss shows interest in all her employees and what they think about the organization's culture and their teams

BILL HOWATT

To most onlookers, Jack appeared to be a seasoned supervisor and was classified as an average performer in his organization for the past 15 years.

A subject matter expert with excellent technical skills in his industry, his daily challenge was that he wasn't the most engaging leader.

Jack found dealing with his team the hardest part of his job. He didn't naturally interact with them. His interaction consisted of giving instructions, correcting mistakes, and following up on results. His team meetings were short and one-way. He didn't ask for feedback, and when he got it he often seemed disinterested.

Jack's boss never paid any attention to his weak people skills. As far as he was concerned, Jack achieved the minimal required results each year. He didn't talk to Jack much other than when he needed to get him to do something.

But then things changed. Jack's boss retired, and a new boss was assigned with a completely different approach. Mary was interested in what all her employees thought, as well as what Jack thought about the organization's culture and his team. She asked Jack more questions about his leadership style in their first meeting than he was asked by his old boss in 15 years.

Mary wanted to know what training and coaching Jack was used to getting to support him with his team. This line of questioning was difficult for Jack, as he wasn't aware that he needed training or coaching. In fact, he never had any performance management or development since becoming a leader. Once a year, his old boss would go through the numbers with Jack and they would discuss next year's organization goals, but never his professional development goals.

Mary determined after observing Jack that he was rough around the edges, not really an engaging leader. However, he had a strong work ethic, was dependable and committed to the organization.

Mary had dealt with Jack-type leaders before and took the position that it's never too late for experienced leaders to learn new skills. However, this required bringing this conversation to the leader's awareness.

Mary asked to meet with Jack, as she wanted to share some of her observations after a month of watching him.

She started the conversation off by asking, "Jack, how do you know things are going well for your team and if they're satisfied with how things are being done?"

Jack replied that he didn't think there were any problems with his team, and if there was any area of concern he would fix it. Mary's response was, "Thank you Jack, I'm not suggesting there are any problems; I'm simply asking how you know when things are going well with your team and how they're satisfied with the organization or you as a leader."

Jack appeared to be stumped by this question. He couldn't answer it, nor was he clear what Mary was looking for. For Jack, it was simple: if his team showed up to work each day, they must be fine.

Mary knew this was a coachable moment. She decided to move the conversation from Jack so he didn't feel

like he was under a microscope. She shared that in her old organization she had observed there were some leaders like Jack with lots of experience who may have never been exposed to leadership development or coaching, or had a manager who was focused on developing leadership skills. Mary made it clear in her story how important it is for her to support her leaders and that she has the support of human resources and senior leadership to focus more on her 15 supervisors.

Mary knew Jack was processing this information and was not quite sure what was happening, as he had never been in a conversation like this before. She wanted Jack to know that she would be evaluating his leadership skills and would work with him to make skills development a part of the performance review process. She made it clear that it was not a negative and that in her group leadership would be a top priority to help attract and retain employees as well as to maximize productivity and business results.

Mary provided a clear pre-frame and expectation for Jack. She made it clear that any of her leaders who

> *Jack was processing this information and was not quite sure what was happening, as he had never been in a conversation like this before.*

were not willing to learn from their reports or be open to feedback and coaching would struggle working with her. She also said that she would be looking for input from Jack on what she could do differently and that she was committed to working with him, as he was important for her success. She could get improved results only through her team and each supervisor's team.

Mary set the stage that all her leaders, both new and experienced, would be exposed to leadership training and provided coaching when needed. She believes that for a leader to evolve it's important for them to uncover their blind spots and to challenge any less effective routines, habits and thinking that may be negatively impacting their direct report engagement and job fulfillment.

How is your organization supporting its Jacks? It's not only new leaders who can benefit from leadership development training and coaching. The first step is for organizations to ensure they have Marys who are interested in developing leaders, identify the Jacks who aren't getting support, and then setting the expectations and rationale for why.

Are you maximizing your employees' experience?

Too often employees are unclear on the intentions and procedures of strategies, policies and processes and how they can be of personal value to them.

BILL HOWATT

Do you know the number of strategies, processes or policies that have been designed to support employees to thrive in your organization?

Some examples of the elements that can be put into a policy, process or strategy are: people, retention, engagement, mental health, hiring, training and development, attendance and disability management, flexible work locations and schedules, return to work, succession planning, on-boarding, compensation and retirement, benefits, culture, occupational health and safety, respectful workplace, impairment, off-boarding, performance management, recruiting, employee value proposition and management effectiveness.

How clear are you on the reasons for including those elements and how they have been implemented? What level of confidence do you have that the average employee knows all the elements? It's not uncommon for the response to be "low confidence."

Each element can directly or indirectly impact an employee's mental health. Without good mental health, it's normal to believe that one has nothing. In this mental state, safety, engagement and productivity are at risk.

At a recent presentation to the Conference Board of Canada Health and Safety Leadership Centre and Council on Workplace Health and Wellness, one theme that came from the group of over 50 leaders from public and private organizations across Canada is the positive role employers can play in influencing employees' experience.

INFLUENCING EMPLOYEES' EXPERIENCE

One common challenge in many organizations, whether public or private, is how often the above kinds of elements are not aligned, integrated or communicated, or has their value ever become fully appreciated by most employees. While there may be good intentions and lots of good work, too often employees are unclear on the intentions and procedures of strategies, policies and processes and how they can be of personal value to them.

Strategy impact test:

- Randomly pick 20 employees from different levels and ask them three questions: Why do we do X (e.g., mental health strategy), what is X, and how is X having a positive impact on you?

- Evaluate the degree of consistency among the 20 responses against X element's goals.

One way to mitigate having a bunch of unintegrated policies, processes and strategies and silos is to stop having a bunch of strategies. Consider for your organization the benefit of having just one integrated employee experience strategy. The primary goal is to support health, engagement and productivity across the employee's career lifecycle.

The desired length of the average career lifecycle can play a role in the degree of investment employers are prepared to make.

Regardless of the average career lifecycle goal (e.g., 10 years) when designing an employee engagement strategy, it's valuable to consider what elements will be covered.

One way to start to reframe from multiple strategies to one employee experience strategy is to determine what elements will be included. The primary goal is to facilitate the average employee's day-to-day experience in the workplace by making targeted elements such as training and development relevant, accessible and meaningful.

Begin with no more than five elements: perhaps mental health, on-boarding, performance management, occupational health and safety and respectful workplace. This provides more ability to integrate and align each element's strategy, policies, process, programs and metrics into one framework. Before adding additional elements, ensure the average employee understands why and how all elements can support their experience.

A committee of key stakeholders from all levels and groups within the organization may be formed to choose and frame the foundational elements to be used in an employee experience strategy. The committee's role will be to:

· Define the purpose and objective.

· Determine the first elements that will be covered. Some may be new (e.g., on-boarding) and others have some operational form (e.g., respectful workplace).

· Define each element's critical purpose and primary goals, along with what success will look like and how it will be measured.

> *One way to mitigate having a bunch of unintegrated policies, processes and strategies and silos is to stop having a bunch of strategies.*

· Define how each element will support employees' health, engagement and productivity.

· Adhere to the mnemonic KISS (keep it simple, stupid). Simple assists in educating and knowledge transfer to employees.

Key factors that will assist in the design, integration and evaluation of the strategy:

· Diversity and inclusion to be considered for every element.

· All new hires will be on-boarded on the organization's employee experience strategy and followed up at three, six, nine and 12 months to ensure they are experiencing the benefits.

· All employees will be asked to evaluate their experience yearly with respect to each element that supports the strategy.

· Every element's financial value will be evaluated to provide senior leaders with evidence of the benefits of making the investment. The end goal is maintaining funding support.

Ultimately, every element that supports health, engagement and productivity can fall under an employee experience strategy. Starting slow, with a measured approach, can be helpful for getting evidence-based results through ensuring elements are aligned, integrated, accessible and purposeful, and that the organization is committed to measuring impact and continuous improvement.

About the Author

Bill Howatt is Ph.D., Ed.D., Post Doctorate Behavioral Science, University of California, Los Angeles, Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior, RTC, RSW, ICADC. He is the Chief of Research, Workforce Productivity at The Conference Board of Canada, leading the Board's applied research programs in workplace wellness, mental health, and workforce productivity. Prior to joining The Conference Board in 2018, Dr. Howatt worked as Chief of Research and Development, Workforce Productivity at Morneau Shepell, where he launched a total health consulting strategy designed to improve health engagement and productivity in Canadian organizations.

Dr. Howatt is known as one of Canada's top experts in mental health issues in the workplace and has more than 30 years' experience in the field of mental health, addiction, and human resources consulting. As a highly respected columnist for the *Globe and Mail*, author, clinician, consultant and speaker, he effortlessly engages and inspires both individuals and groups.

Dr. Howatt is the Chair of CSA Standard Z1008: Management of Substance Related Impairment in the Workplace. He is the creator of the online Certificate in Management Essentials program, a Senate-approved leaders program that offers eighteen courses through University of New Brunswick. He is also the creator of Pathway to Coping, an online course at the same university that is grounded in the cognitive behavioural therapy approach, and an online course on cannabis for employees and leaders.

Dr. Howatt has published numerous books and articles, such as *The Coping Crisis*, *Pathway to Coping*, the Wiley Series on addictions, *The Human Services Counseling Toolbox*, and *The Addiction Counselor's Desk Reference*. He is a regular contributor to *The Globe and Mail 9* to 5 and Leadership Lab columns and *The Chronicle Herald*.

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