What do you mean by employee experience (EX)? – A tale of the constant misinterpretation of the term 'EX'

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By Stephanie Denino

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Have you ever listened to someone speak about employee experience (EX), only to quickly realize that they are using employee experience and employee engagement very interchangeably? Have you ever looked through an 'employee experience survey' and wondered why it was filled with the same types of questions you'd find in an employee engagement survey? For years, I had wondered why these instances are so common, and why it felt like I needed a decoder to understand what someone meant when THEY said EX.

Over time I've come to learn that the reason for this is that the word "experience" can refer to something incredibly macro, incredibly micro or anything in between. And in fact, there are two main ways the term employee experience is commonly employed: employee experience as a macro outcome and employee experience as a micro phenomenon. The challenge is, most people don't fall in one camp or the other; they often flip-flop between both without even realizing it. "EX flip-flopping" has massive implications for how organizations approach EX work, and for how EX work continues to be approached very inconsistently across organizations.

While most practitioners would agree with a statement such as: "great employee experience drives better employee engagement" (EX > EE), many organizations still use experience and engagement interchangeably when defining what good looks like and when attempting to measure it.

Treating EX as a macro outcome

First, organizations describe employee experience as an outcome they are aiming for if they say something like: "we are committed to providing a best-in-class employee experience!" The organization may have also defined what great experience looks like for their people by saying something like "we want everyone to have an experience where they feel deep meaning and purpose in their work and feel that they belong" – which may even remind you of an employee value proposition you've seen before.

While it is of course completely understandable that an organization may want to aim for this outcome, the problem is, that when used in this way, employee experience becomes indistinguishable from employee engagement and its closely tied topics – e.g. well-being, inclusion & belonging. A sign that someone may be interpreting EX as a macro outcome is that their internal definition for EX starts with "the sum of all…", positioning it as an aggregate concept.

This way of defining great employee experience as an outcome carries over to how organizations attempt to measure it – relying primarily on surveys that pose questions about aggregate feelings that emerge as a result of a collection of interactions (e.g. "Do you feel you have opportunities to learn and grow at our company?"). They may even be trying to construct

a composite EX index to have one overarching score for EX. Everything they do and say ends up describing employee experience as the ultimate outcome, greater or broader even than engagement, flipping the relationship around to suggest that EE > EX. Isn't that confusing!?

Treating EX as a micro phenomenon

If the goal is to make measurable impact on employees' lives at work, practitioners can maintain their EX > EE stance when treating the term "employee experience" as the micro phenomenon it is: the actual things that happen when people interact with people, technologies and physical things in pursuit of a goal. For example, an EX practitioner might say "we want our people's first day here to be an unforgettable experience." Through this type of statement, what becomes clear is that there are a myriad other experiences to be had by employees of an organization.

When it comes to measurement, employee experience treated as a micro phenomenon requires a different question structure to understand with greater specificity the moments and touchpoints that make up an experience and the closely associated perceptions and emotions they may create.

When employee experience is meant in this way, it allows for a productive distinction between employee experience and other constructs such as employee engagement, well-being, inclusion & belonging, etc.

Implications of the 'flip-flopping' for how EX is perceived

If you've in fact seen the term employee experience used to both describe a macro outcome and a micro phenomenon, you may be wondering: "Is that such a bad thing? Isn't any kind of attention toward EX a good thing?" To this last question I would, perhaps controversially, say no. When an emerging construct is defined in ways that make it nearly impossible to disassociate from all that has come before, and if you flip-flop between meanings, you make it extremely difficult for anyone in your organization to understand how this discipline is in fact new and game changing. It makes it nearly impossible for business leaders sitting outside of HR to understand how this "EX thing" is different from all the other things that HR has previously said would be important for them to pay attention to, and to lean into. To them, it may just be the new buzzword that one day will fade, leading them to question whether they should even pay attention, let alone invest.

Implications for how EX work is approached

When leaders in an organization view EX as a macro outcome, they are at risk of thinking anything and everything they do with good intention for their people, will improve the ultimate employee experience. They will brag about big, bold and splashy investments in technology for their people, in well-being offerings put in place, in hours invested in learning, etc. By virtue of

EX being this big end goal, it's easy to overlook the specifics and the granular: did that tech investment actually improve our people's experiences? Did our people actually use and benefit from all those wellness offerings?

Instead, when leaders in an organization are focused on EX as a micro phenomenon, it becomes clear to them that there are an infinite number of experiences that combine to inform the feelings someone has toward work and toward their organization, leading them to feel engaged and productive, or not. It also implies that there are a large number of experiences that can matter and that can be perceived positively or not – which requires that organizations get sophisticated about figuring out which experiences to optimize and for whom. Getting the kind of data that allows for prioritization becomes one of the most critical parts of successfully navigating the world of opportunity when it comes to improving employee experiences. In this context, employee experience work becomes a precise, data-driven discipline that requires a system of practices to be able improve discrete experiences, with ever broadening scale.

One recommendation to avoid confusion

All this leads me to offer the following piece of advice if you wish for people to know what you mean when you say EX: when possible, avoid just saying 'EX'. The two-letter acronym, which I myself am guilty of using too often, doesn't allow people to know how you mean it. Instead, either say that you are aiming for great employee experience (singular – macro outcome) or working to create the conditions for great employee experiences (plural – micro phenomenon). One simple "s" differentiates these to very different meanings.

Try it and you'll see – never has one letter made such a difference.