



“Are we doing it right?” The quest to progress on employee experience

Summary - For EX leaders and practitioners wondering if they are 'doing it right' when it comes to EX, this article reveals four parameters that frame what it looks like to productively progress on EX: the only currency that matters, the way to start, the summit to reach and the capabilities you need.

May 8, 2023 by Stephanie Denino

A few weeks ago, I spoke to a new employee experience (EX) leader who described how they had been progressing in this space by documenting future state journeys maps across 7 experience areas and planned to continue to do so over the next 6 months. They were very proud and confident in their approach, describing their use of human-centered methods to go about this exercise. And yet they still were curious on my take: “Is this how others are approaching EX work?” Behind this question is a reflection that many EX leaders may have but few may voice: are we doing it (EX work) right?

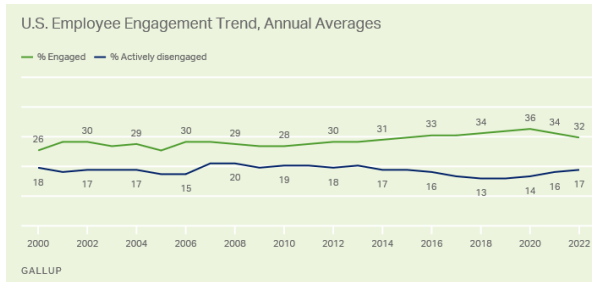
Given my work at TI People, an employee experience consultancy that works with organizations across the globe, I often get to hear stories of how organizations get started on employee experience. As I reflect on just the last 10 organizations I’ve interacted with, each of their approaches when getting started has been different, in part because of how inconsistently this young discipline is defined, as I’ve written about [previously](#).

Having spent many years in this space (personally since 2016 and TI People as an organization since 2017), we’ve learned that it is very easy for organizations to believe they are approaching EX work in a productive way but end up having little impact to show.

In fact, 2-3 years into an organization’s intentional focus on employee experience (especially if they’ve created a team that bears this name), we have seen leadership teams question whether this investment has led to the scaled impact they hoped it would. As a result, EX teams have at times been surreptitiously repurposed to focus on strategic projects the CHRO has in mind and/or be given some experience-related topic to manage (e.g. return to office, hybrid work, well-being). Do these still count as pure EX teams? I may not think so, but some CHROs may believe that as long as they have a named EX leader/team which is focused on something they deem valuable – they are on the right path.

When these EX leaders/teams were starting out, never did they think they would be at risk of being re-considered – these are often the all-star teams that everyone wants to work on, serving as a magnet for HR’s (and the broader organization’s) best and brightest talent, eager to disrupt the status quo when it comes to the experience of work. And for this reason, EX leaders can fall into the trap of believing that their EX mandate is safe in their organizational context.

Despite this overconfidence the aggregate picture remains bleak: two undeniable outcomes of employee experience – employee engagement and employee retention – show no major sign of progress over the last 7-10 years wherein the focus of EX has steadily grown.



<https://www.gallup.com/workplace/391922/employee-engagement-slump-continues.aspx>

<https://www.bls.gov>

Why is this? My hypothesis: commitment and effort is one thing, execution excellence is quite another. In other words, most organizations are spending lots of time and effort trying to improve employee experiences, but few have cracked how to continuously improve employee experiences in measurable ways, at scale.

So how does a leader know if they are approaching EX in the “right” way? Admittedly, there are different paths one can take depending on the organizational context – but there nonetheless are some important guideposts. Regardless of how you organize structurally around this topic in your organization, these four parameters offer a frame for what it looks like to productively progress on EX.

The only currency that matters

The most important currency when it comes to EX work is impact, i.e. improved experiences for people that can be *measured*, and which leads to results – i.e. improved business outcomes (people, operational and financial). While quotes and positives stories from employees may allow for some accumulated goodwill from your leadership team, measurable impact is what will repeatedly earn you the right for more work in this space, not to mention protect you in an economic downturn.

What to avoid / beware of:

- *Thinking*: “we have time before we are expected to show impact”
- Mistaking anything other than visibly improved experiences as impact

The way to start

The way to start is by building momentum through a first experience improvement project that shows measured impact. This project should improve a specific experience for a targeted group of people and avoid being sprawling in nature, because the ‘size of your bite’ matters to ensure quick impact. Senior stakeholders often have little patience for teams talking a big game but

accomplishing little. The guiding mantra here is: “don’t tell me, show me.” And in fact, so often, especially in organizations that may claim to have been focused on employee experience before anyone even used this term, this is an opportunity to show the rest of the organization what this ‘new wave’ of EX work looks like and enables.

What to avoid / beware of:

- Spending lots of time communicating the why for EX and getting people onboard – often these ‘roadshows’ end up inflating expectations and distracting organizations from the real work of actually improving experiences
- Spending lots of time documenting future state journeys (as noted in my opening paragraph) – often, these end up quickly feeling like wasted time as organizations start thinking about how to make progress and realize they feel like a too distant future in the current reality, and they get shelved.

The summit to reach

The summit to reach is to become an organization that knows how to repeat and expand impact, endlessly. This means the organization is continuously improving experiences with its people, with ever-expanding scope in terms of what it improves and for whom. In this reality, the EX leader (when they exist) plays a key role in orchestrating cross-functional collaboration between key players (including HR, IT, business, employees). When every function in the organization knows their role to play and is equipped with the data and practices needed to improve experiences, the progress on EX is powerfully scaled; EX becomes an enterprise-wide sport.

What to avoid / beware of:

- Thinking a big transformation will get you there - it's an evolution that requires know-how and time.
- Mistake being recognized as a ‘top employer’ with already being “great at EX” and knowing how to continuously improve experiences, at scale.

The capabilities you need

There are two capabilities you need to build as you go, to excel in this discipline: being data-driven and human-centered. When these two capabilities exist fully and simultaneously, an organization can: 1) uncover poor experiences, from the perspective of its people, 2) relentlessly prioritize the most important experiences with this data (not leader gut-feeling or anecdotal evidence), 3) improve experiences with (not for) people to ensure real impact is made, and 4) prove impact.

What to avoid / beware of:

- Thinking you can be 'data-driven' without the right kind of data to drive experience improvement work: experience interaction data. To be clear, this is not the data you get from your typical annual or quarterly surveys aimed at understanding employee sentiment, but a differently structured and more detailed data that helps uncover what is getting in people's way as they try to achieve their goals at work.
- Thinking being human-centered means sprinkling in a few methods here and there, but that overlook certain key principles of this work. Perhaps most notably, we see this mistake: just because the work started with the voice of your people, doesn't mean you can build solutions that will meet their needs, without them.

Final thought

If you are carrying the mantle for EX in your organization and would benefit from discussing your approach or getting plugged into a powerful network of EX leaders (called the EXchange) – please reach out to me. It's through this kind of collaboration that we'll continue to build the confidence that "we are doing it right".