

Leaders, Listen!

You Make or Break the Employee Experience

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Where do leaders typically spend their time?

This question is not about the **intention** of each leader. It is about the **actual** activities that fill leaders' days and how those activities affect the employee experience for better or worse. One way to determine this is to examine what is called the "whirlwind" of **urgent** daily events versus the **important** organizational goals. The authors of "The 4 Disciplines of Execution" define the whirlwind as the urgent daily activities that rob you of time and energy. They also say the whirlwind is not bad because it keeps your organization going and can positively influence employee experience.

Consider, though, the author's insights on the whirlwind, the urgent, and the important this way:

"If you ignore the urgent, it can kill you today. It's also true, however, that if you ignore the important, it can kill you tomorrow."

When you hear leaders say they are putting out fires all day or that they feel they didn't get anything done, that's because the whirlwind of the **urgent** consumed their day. If these sentiments are routinely expressed, the whirlwind is winning, your leaders are missing opportunities to lead, and employee experience suffers. The question then becomes, "What didn't get attention that is **important** to our organization's growth?" Does the answer reveal a lack of leaders' attention on employee feedback management and the employee experience?

In the competitive environment of hiring and the dangerous state of employees quietly quitting, attention on the employee experience is paramount for both organizational growth and employee growth, satisfaction and loyalty. Leaders have tremendous influence with their employees. That last sentence is putting it mildly, according to Gallup. Here is how Gallup describes the significance of a leader's influence with their direct reports.

"Of all the codes Gallup has been asked to crack dating back 80 years to our founder, George Gallup, the single most profound, distinct and clarifying finding – ever – is probably this one:

70%

of the variance in team engagement is determined solely by the manager."



Gallup has further shared that up to 85% of the world's workforce is not engaged at work. These are the employees just going through the motions. This is why employee experience is so critical. When Gallup was asked what "lever" can be pulled to turn disengaged employees around, they said, "Usually, there isn't a single lever to create change. In this case, there is: It's the manager."

Employee engagement is a part of the employee experience. The employee experience is the combination of all that an organization does to improve the employees' well-being - from the hiring process, onboarding, benefits, meaningful

work, development, and career growth to the moment an employee leaves. This journey is the entire employee experience.

A report from IBM's Smarter Workforce Institute and the Workhuman Analytics & Research Institute notes that the employee experience is "a positive and powerful - and ultimately human - experience, in which employees are able to invest more of their whole selves into the workplace. Leaders can make their workplaces more relational rather than simply transactional and gain employee engagement and commitment."

Employee Experience



What are your employees saying about the employee experience at your workplace?



How is this measured?



What role and responsibilities do leaders recognize and act upon regarding the employee experience?

This gets us back to the “whirlwind” of the **urgent** versus time spent on the **important** aspects of the employee experience. Let’s examine this by looking at activities that can fill the time of people managers. It is important for leaders to be aware of what they learn about their employees and how they make them feel with every interaction. Keep in mind that when a leader focuses solely on the transactional aspects of getting things done and

neglects the human element of the interaction, the leader can zap the energy and commitment of employees. Opportunities to boost employees’ energy and commitment can be found even when attending to the whirlwind. The employee experience depends on the leader’s intentional focus on the whole experience rather a single focus on performance only.

Leader activities with the employees on their team	Examples of how to make progress with the employee experience (important) while tending to the whirlwind (urgent)	
	URGENT	IMPORTANT
Making rounds to check in with team members (with remote and in-person employees)	Ask for the status of a project	What did you learn during that interaction about the people who are your employees? Anything about what they like or dislike in or outside of work? Any understanding into strengths? How can these insights be used to ignite the employees’ experience and performance?
Responding to emails	Answer questions and give direction	Is there a genuine opportunity to express appreciation to employees or acknowledge progress? This can positively influence emotions, decision making and focus.
Team Meetings	Provide corporate updates and changes	Did you ask questions to give employees a genuine opening to express concerns and/or support about the corporate updates and changes? An example is to generate discussion by first asking the team to answer both of these questions: 1. What is good/beneficial about the corporate update/change? 2. What challenges might exist for this team with the corporate update/change?
One-on-one coaching	Give performance feedback	Is this a conversation rather than a one-way talk? Do you encourage the sharing of opinions, experiences, and questions? Do you learn about the employee’s point of view of the situation? Does your feedback include relevant positive and corrective aspects to the employee’s performance?

The questions posed in the **Important** column are to encourage reflection on how you as the leader facilitate those typical activities. We have experiences every day. ***We only learn from those experiences when we take a few moments to reflect and think about what went well and what could be done differently next time to enhance performance and employee experience.*** Reflection brings a significant boost to your growth. Harvard Business Review reports the value this way: “Research shows the habit of reflection can separate extraordinary professionals from mediocre ones.”

Many of the questions in the **Important** column focus on creating a positive interaction between you and your employee(s), even if the conversation is on corrective behavior. Science journalist John Tierney and research psychologist Roy F. Baumeister co-authored the book “The Power of Bad.” They cited research from Barbara Fredrickson on the “broad and build” theory: “Positive emotions broaden your perspective and enable you to build skills that help you flourish both personally and professionally.” Generating positive emotions helps the employees be more receptive to your message and engage in each interaction.

In addition, Tierney and Baumeister shared, “We’ve seen that it takes somewhere between two and five good things to offset one bad thing.” They continued to explain, “Emotions make us less rational, and therefore more susceptible to the power of bad.” Questions listed in the **Important** column give you an opening to express belief in

the employee(s), to show caring and let them know their opinions matter. These type of questions help you generate positive employee experiences and encouraging interactions. Remember to think through those questions, like the two below, even before the interaction to help you set up a conversation that will positively influence the employee experience.

- Are you going to ask questions to give employees genuine openings to express concerns and/or support about the corporate updates and changes?
- Are there genuine opportunities to express appreciation to the employees or acknowledge their progress?

After the conversation, remember to reflect on how it went. With this intentional action, you will benefit by creating a distinctive relationship with your employees who will, in turn, be more likely to spend **discretionary** effort when a situation arises that calls for extra effort.

Employee development and growth have a major place in the employee experience. Harvard Business Review reported: “According to a 2019 LinkedIn study, 94% of employees said they would stay with their employer if it invested in their development.” What role can a leader have in their employees’ development? Let’s examine opportunities for leaders to purposefully influence and contribute to their employees’ desire for development.

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Every conversation has the potential to advance their employees' knowledge.

Socratic methodology is the art of asking questions to create thinking in the other person. This transforms the conversation from a passive experience where “telling” is mainly what the leader is doing into an active experience where the employees’ participation helps them learn, retain, and use the knowledge immediately and in the future.

Clear expectations.

How often do leaders talk about organizational goals and how employees’ work ties to that bigger picture. Author Mike Hill said: “Every employee should be able to go home at the end of the day, week, and month and know – based on measurable criteria – how he or she is doing.” That seems very reasonable, and it is documented how engaging it is for employees to know they are doing meaningful work.

Ponder these three questions:

1. How do **you** describe the performance expected of each member of your team?
2. How do **your team members** describe the performance that is expected of them?
3. Are employees directly knowledgeable of the performance measures and how these tie to organizational goals?

The authors of “The 4 Disciplines of Execution” shared this: “One prime suspect behind execution breakdown was clarity of the objective: People simply didn’t understand the goal they were supposed to execute. In fact, in our initial surveys, we learned that only one employee in seven could name even one of their organization’s most important goals.” It is risky to assume your team members know what is expected of them and why it is important. Develop employee confidence and commitment by periodically discussing expectations, the measures that indicate desired performance, and the connection to organizational goals.

Self-awareness is key.

What assessments are available for the employees to learn more about their tendencies and talents? How can you provide opportunities for employees to learn more about their strengths, their emotions and their behavioral make-up? It is important to select foundational assessments and have them interpreted as a holistic view of each individual. Assessments provide roadmaps for us to use our strengths and recognize how to modify our behaviors to improve how we collaborate and innovate with others.

Additionally, when leaders have increased self-awareness, they can provide more relevant coaching for their employees. *Inc.* magazine reported it this way: "Self-awareness is at the pinnacle of psychological health. An organization can only be as healthy as its leaders. Lack of self-awareness can be toxic. In contrast, leaders with a good grasp of their strengths, weaknesses, blind spots, and biases are better equipped to improve upon themselves and their organizations." Employee development efforts from a leader are improved when the leader models the way. Self-awareness is essential.

Avoid blind spots and biases.

Employee development efforts can be derailed if they are initiated because of an unconscious bias on the part of the leader. When leaders and employees have access to measurable data and engage in conversations with qualitative and quantitative information, biases can be avoided. Another way to describe these biases are thinking traps. The Chelsea Psychology Clinic defines thinking traps this way: "Thinking traps are patterns of thought – usually with a negative swing – which prevent us from seeing things as they really are."



Examples of thinking traps are:

Horn and Halo.

The Halo effect is a positive impression that leads to treating someone more favorably. The horn effect is the negative impression that leads us to treat someone less favorably.

What can you do to avoid these thinking traps?

Contemplate your impression of each employee. What words describe this person for you? Then lay out facts about this person's performance, examples of his/her teamwork and collaborative nature with others. Compare your initial impression to the facts and examples. Do the facts and examples support or contradict your initial impression? Consider how this objective approach should influence the development activities for this employee and enhance this employee's experience.

Confirmation bias.

This bias leads us to seek out information that supports our existing instinct or point of view while avoiding information that contradicts it. Consider

this example: a leader is looking to promote a specific person who was thought to be an emerging leader when he/she was originally hired but is not performing well in his/her current role. If this leader seeks out support to promote this person, confirmation bias is at work.

What can you do to avoid these thinking traps?

Seek out opposing information. This is not necessarily an easy thing to do because we gravitate toward wanting to be right. Gather facts and examples of the person's performance using

established leadership competencies. Does the evidence support promotion or another avenue?

Harvard Business Review provides this insight into the need for measurable information: "While we all know how important it is to be data driven, according to Slack's future forum report, 66% of executives reported that they're designing their post-pandemic workforce policies with little to no input from their employees." This leads us to the slippery slope of assumptions, and this is where our biases and blind spots thrive.

**The Employee Experience is not a "nice to have."
It is essential to attract and provide a thriving
environment to retain top talent.**

Find out what your employees want and need. Every interaction with leaders can advance or damage the employee experience. Leaders, listen.

About the Author



Lisa Rike, CPBA

With over 30 years' experience, Lisa Rike continues to immerse herself in transforming leading edge theory and practices into relevant and interactive learning experiences for employees at every level. Her various certifications include behavioral analysis, team development, coaching conversations and instructional design. She has worked with hundreds of organizations in the United States, Canada and Europe. Lisa has a passion for continuous learning and is an avid researcher in the Learning & Development field. Her greatest joys are her two adult children and thinks it is a hoot when they quote her back to her!

She is:

- Certified in human behavioral analysis that creates productive and energizing working relationships.
- Awarded the Master's Designation in Instructional Design by the premier industry organization Association for Talent Development.
- Certified in the analysis of people talents aligned with task execution to create high-performing teams.
- Certified in a coaching approach to develop C-suite and employees at all levels.
- Experienced in creating productive team performance through foundational assessment and facilitated growth.
- Sought after to consult on call center quality programs and employee development at every level.
- Competent in needs analysis and designing/facilitating learning using customer feedback, employee discovery and feedback, and aligning to business objectives.
- Experienced working with Fortune 500 companies to boutique firms and smaller in industries including pharmaceutical, utilities, insurance, retail, agriculture, government, resort vacations, manufacturing, and medical.

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