

Covid-19 And Civil Unrest Has Disrupted Employee Experience For Good

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The current context of Covid-19 and civil unrest has disrupted most companies, it is actually good.. [+]
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Employee engagement is in trouble. Gallup recently reported the most significant drop in the company's 20-year history of tracking employee engagement in the U.S. Only 36% of employees are currently engaged; 14% are actively disengaged, meaning they "have miserable work experiences and spread their unhappiness to their colleagues." This is not surprising given how dramatically the pandemic crisis has affected employees' work lives and how discrimination in the workplace has recently gained widespread attention. While this new context of Covid-19 and civil unrest has disrupted most companies, it is actually good news for employee experience (EX).

Employee Experience Has Become the Linchpin to Success

For one thing, EX is now a corporate priority. Business leaders can no longer deny how critical their workforce is to success or ignore how employee experience must be carefully designed and managed.

Employers of essential workers have learned from their months-long struggle to keep employees working so their companies can continue operating. Other companies have undoubtedly had difficulty keeping employees motivated and focused, since employees have been struggling to manage parenting and working at the same time, adjusting to new kinds of work and workloads as business operations have changed, and experiencing fear

and even mental health issues. Employee engagement has become even more difficult, as tensions over racism were sparked by the killing of George Floyd and the ensuing social justice movement have increased concerns over the lack of diversity and inclusion at work.

So far, companies have not done a good job with EX. The Gallup report shows employees feeling much less prepared to do their work, rating employer and supervisor communication poorly, and sensing their organization doesn't care about their overall wellbeing. Now, with the pandemic growing instead of abating and stay-at-home orders being extended, practically every company is realizing that this new work context is here to stay.

So the mandate to improve employee experience is clear. Employers need to rethink every aspect of EX – from recruiting, to onboarding, training, communications, performance management, etc. plus all the daily, seemingly small interactions and experiences that impact how employees think, feel, and do their work. Even an organization that had a healthy, effective culture before the pandemic can't assume that returning to old employee practices is going to work. Like it or not, EX has become *the* linchpin in the success of an organization going forward.

Current events have also made it clear that a one-size-fits-all approach to EX won't cut it.

Companies can't ignore the differences in impact that Covid-19 has had along the lines of basic variables between employees – e.g., remote vs. non-remote workers, the presence of dependents at home, gender, socioeconomic level, and ethnicity. For example, McKinsey found during the pandemic that 58% of those without dependents at home report positive

work effectiveness vs. only 20% of those with dependents. Differing roles, shifts, and operating units contribute to more subtle variation in the challenges faced by different groups – customer facing employees vs. not, for example – but they are no less significant.

Plus Black workers have no doubt experienced and are processing the recent occurrences of racial injustice and ensuing protests differently compared to their white counterparts, so employers need to account for variances as well.

Fortunately, these days many companies already have a wealth of research and analysis tools, such as listening channels, pulse surveys, and sentiment analysis, that they regularly use to research customers and design customer experience. So leaders simply need to deploy those resources to understanding employees and segmenting them into discrete groups that can be engaged with strategies targeted specifically to their needs.

Experience As Strategy and Culture, Not Place or Time

Now that fewer employees are working in offices together, attending in-person meetings, and accessing cafeterias or break rooms and other corporate locations, employers can no longer rely on place- or time-based approaches to employee experience. They can't expect to motivate employees with free lunches or parties, or for employees to feel valued after a lavish holiday party or to experience greater comradery by participating in a company-wide volunteer day.

These tactics were never all that effective in creating a unique and valuable employee experience. In fact, for many employees, these perks were mere employment table stakes – benefits they expect from any employer. And they might have made employees happy but they didn't necessarily equip them to do great work and produce the right results.

Now that these methods have gone from being inadequate to simply impossible, business leaders have to take a more strategic, integrated approach to EX. They have to shift from thinking about EX in terms of discrete places and times and start making it an ongoing strategic effort through which they cultivate their desired culture. They have to rethink employees' individual day-to-day experiences and:

- Ensure employees have the tools and access to resources to excel at their jobs
- Set explicit expectations and define success clearly
- Communicate the company's purpose and core values regularly and connect them to individual employees' jobs
- Implement benefits and policies that support employee wellbeing as much as corporate priorities
- Redesign their organizations and operational process to accommodate new ways of working
- Empower employees to work independently and collaboratively

- Provide self-directed learning and development programs
- And more

Above all, employers need to involve employees in the design of the employee experience to ensure they understand what employees want and need and to be able to adapt as those requirements change.

This approach to employee experience requires more effort and potentially more investment than the one-off tactics of old, but no one can deny their importance if the goal is to motivate, align, and focus employees in the new reality.

EX Disruption Is Good News

For all the stress and difficulties that Covid-19 and civil unrest has caused, the way they have issued a wake-up call on the need to make EX a strategic priority is a silver lining. Given that workers, their work, and their workplaces have significantly changed, the old ways of engaging employees no longer apply – and that’s good news.

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Denise Lee Yohn

Denise Lee Yohn is the go-to expert on brand leadership for national media outlets, an in-demand speaker and consultant, and an influential writer. Denise is the author