



## Episode 83 Show Notes: How to Excel at the Employee Experience

Dana Wright Wasson is a global OD consultant who leads clients through transformational processes in strategic planning, employee engagement, and leadership. In this episode, Dana defines the employee experience and outlines the limitations of engagement surveys to measure engagement. She outlines an approach to driving the employee experience, leveraging design-thinking methodologies and shares her experiences on the positive role that HR can play. Be sure to read on for Dana's post podcast reflections.

Dana is the CEO of Take Action, Inc. and the founder of Work Happy Project. Dana is passionate about creating amazing employee experiences. She believes wholeheartedly that engagement is actually an outcome, the result of the way people are treated in organizations, and her point of view obviously has implications for how Dana works with her clients. She has a BA in Psychology and Masters in Organizational Development and has been a visual practitioner for more than 20 years. When she's not working with clients, she is traveling the world - the current count is 38 countries. Dana is also the author of the book, *Talk the Walk: Designing a Clear Path to a World-class Employee Experience*.

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### Key Learnings From This Episode

- **What is employee experience? How is it a more effective way to address employee engagement?**  
Employee experience is the entire cycle of an employee's time with a company, from the first hiring touchpoint through to onboarding, and all the experiences up until they leave the company, whether it is for retirement, another job, or going out on their own.
- **Why aren't employee engagement surveys effective?**
  - They are expensive, consume a lot of time and resources, and they are a logistical nightmare.
  - There's always a struggle to figure out what to do with the results. How to translate the data into action. How to connect the numbers to the people.
  - Ensuring the survey asks the right questions and not asking the questions that need to be asked. Gallup has the Q12, the 12 core questions that measure engagement. What if the issue employees are having does not fall into one of those 12 categories?
  - How do you create the conversation with employees on how to create a better workplace?



- **Does this mean that companies should not survey or that they need to do it differently?** Companies should consider the bigger picture. You want to avoid ‘survey fatigue’ and figure out how to engage in conversations with people. At a minimum, use surveys as a springboard for meaningful conversations between leaders and their teams. Look at organizational trends and how to make the numbers come alive and have real meaning. The survey should not be the ‘be-all and end-all’ tool.
- **Are surveys meant to measure how happy employees are?** Some argue that it’s not the company’s job to make employees happy. Relate it to company goals – how do you make employees productive? How do you create an environment where they can be innovative, where they feel like their results matter, where they feel like they are making progress against goals? For some, being productive does mean happiness. But happiness does not automatically create engagement.
- **What is the definition of what engagement or the employee experience is about?** It is the total collection of things that contribute to that experience. It is also about the culture of the organization. Is it a culture of fear? Does it welcome innovation? Are employees punished if they are innovative, take risks, and fail? What kind of leaders are in the organization? Are they trusting? Is there a ‘buzz’ in the workplace or is it daunting?
- **Are leaders responsible for culture and the employee experience?** The CEO and his/her top leadership echelon set the culture. HR doesn’t have much control over the employee’s day to day experience. HR’s role is to get a pulse of the organization and to assess what the competition is doing. HR should also be mindful about the leaders being hired.

Leaders will be setting the tone for teams. If they are not training and promoting the leaders they want in the organization, things will spiral downward. However, HR is not fully and solely responsible for the experience employees are having.



HR STUDIO PODCAST

*LEADERS LIKE THE NUMBERS ENGAGEMENT SURVEYS PROVIDE. BUT ENGAGEMENT IS ABOUT PEOPLE – REALLY LISTENING TO WHAT EMPLOYEES NEED AND WANT TO BE SUCCESSFUL.*

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- **Hiring Goals: Cultural fit, organization aspirational values, or something else?** HR should become partners in a consultative role. They can help with a cultural audit to understand the culture today and what the organization wants to work towards. They can assess and provide information to help start the conversation. They can also be mindful about the types of leaders they have and want in the organization, what changes need to be made, and what training can be provided to address the skills needed. What's lacking and what coaching is needed for the current leaders? At Google, if a leader is struggling, Google will hire a coach to work one-on-one with him/her. The leader is given a specific period of time, and if things have not improved by the next 'cycle', he/she will leave and will no longer be a leader at Google. It is a supportive role, but there is accountability. If a leader is not effective and aligned, they do something about it.
- **HR's role as facilitators.** Through 'Listening Sessions' HR can hold structured 90-minute conversations where HR asks employees questions. It is the 'live' version of an employee engagement survey. Employees are asked questions related to their work environment, communication, the recognition system, and how they feel change is handled, the primary areas that impact engagement. This is such a rewarding part of HR's job, doing something fun and inspirational, versus their relegated 'police role'. They get to work on change and positive activities.
- **What do the conversations look like?** Dana and her team train on facilitation skills, including what the conversations look like. There is a roadmap and template to follow. When employees have an outlet where they can let go of something that has been held deeply, they feel so much better because they feel like something will be done about it. You do not need to be artistic or creative to do this. It is already scripted and created by Dana and her team. Whether it is a high-tech or manufacturing organization, the conversation is the same because the areas like communication, recognition, change management, and leadership effectiveness are core areas across any organization.
- **What prompted the writing of *Walk the Talk*?** Doing the work with organizations prompted pulling it all together in one place. There were two core things:
  - The need to look at the leadership and culture of an organization, the gears that set the employee experience in motion.



- Applying design thinking methodologies. Leveraging the lessons from the customer experience and having the same conversations with employees. Looking through the ‘customer’s’ eyes, being empathetic with your employees. Go back to the first day, the first employee experience – onboarding. What was an employee’s first experience during onboarding? Did they feel welcome or like they were being thrown to the wolves?
- **How to leverage design-thinking methodologies to assess and improve the employee experience.** Conducting listening sessions are the first stage of design thinking, listening and asking good questions. The next stage is compiling that information and identifying the 3-5 step changes that would make a significant difference. Have employees look at their own data. Have employees sort out the most important things to address and then figure out the solutions. When employees participate, they will feel ownership in how to make those changes, and leaders become involved to help them. It’s a collaboration of how ‘we’ improve the organization for the better.
- **Tips for HR leaders in running listening sessions.**
  - **Allow everyone to participate.** Invite everyone, including the ‘troublemakers’. If you can win them over, they will become your biggest advocates. Getting employees to a different mindset engages the disengaged. When these employees then present to their leaders, the leaders see people in a different light, and it resets their lens.
  - **Do not shorten sessions.** People will not feel heard, they will feel that HR is just running the process.

Listening sessions should be 90 minutes with about 15 participants in each session. Then, have a full day of reviewing listening sessions with specific outcomes/what to work on. Everyone initially participates, and then it is narrowed down to about 20 employees who can be the eyes and ears of the organization and who can sort out problems and come up with solutions.



*LISTENING TO EMPLOYEES TO HEAR THEIR FRUSTRATIONS AND CONCERNS IS IMPORTANT; EVEN BETTER IS INVOLVING THEM IN COMING UP WITH SOLUTIONS.*

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It is also important to ensure people understand they should not pull in their personal agendas. They are there to represent ‘everyone’.

- **Be fearless.** There is a fear in HR that when people come together, they will ask for more money. Most of the time, engagement is not about money. Most of the time, it is issues like there is food in the cafeteria that an employee cannot eat (e.g., health restrictions, religious beliefs, etc.), sick days are not administered fairly, etc.
- **Advice for leaders to drive the employee experience** – Don’t be afraid to talk to people. Creating forums where people can have a dialogue and feel they are in an environment where they can openly and honestly express their concerns is a healthy environment. Be grateful that you are getting the feedback. If people give you nothing, they have given up hope.

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## Reflections from Dana Wright Wasson Post Podcast

- I have a very clear definition of how I use the term “leader” and distinguish it from “manager”: Managers manage things; leaders lead people. So while your official title may be manager or senior manager, if you are responsible for people, you are a leader. Period.
- The worst thing organizations can do with engagement surveys is to administer them, tabulate them, and even distribute the results, and then nothing happens, no changes, as a result. This leads to survey fatigue and worse—people lose faith that the survey has any meaning at all and may not bother to complete it next time.
- The most powerful tool any leader has, an HR business partner has, is to listen. It costs nothing but time, but truly listening is so rare these days, people feel like you care and appreciate the time that is put into truly listening to what they have to say.
- There is an expression: “Culture eats strategy for breakfast”. What this means is, it doesn’t matter how great the people you hire are, how great you try to design the employee experience—if the culture doesn’t support the systems, nothing will stick and the great people you hire will leave.



## Recommended Reading and References From this Episode

- [Talk the Walk: Designing a Clear Path to a World Class Employee Experience](#) by Dana Wright-Wasson
- [Gallup's Q12 Survey](#) - The twelve questions are included on this [SHRM page](#)
- [Take Action Web Site](#)
- [The Happy Work Project](#)
- [Shawn Achor Web Site](#)

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