



GLOBAL EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE TRENDS 2023

# Strength in the Beauty of Consistency

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Translating Employee Experience  
into Business Outcomes

**KINCENTRIC** A Spencer Stuart Company

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There's a well-known parable about rocks, pebbles, sand and water filling a glass jar. In this story, a teacher brings a large, empty glass jar into the classroom and fills it with big rocks. He asks the students if the jar is full. The students reply that it is. The teacher then takes a bag of pebbles and adds them to the jar. As the pebbles fill in the gaps between the rocks, the teacher again asks if the jar is full. The students once again say that it is.

The teacher then brings out a bag of sand and pours it into the jar, filling in the remaining gaps. The teacher asks if the jar is full now. The students agree that, yes, it is finally full. Finally, the teacher then takes out a pitcher of water and pours it into the jar, where it seeps into the spaces between the sand.

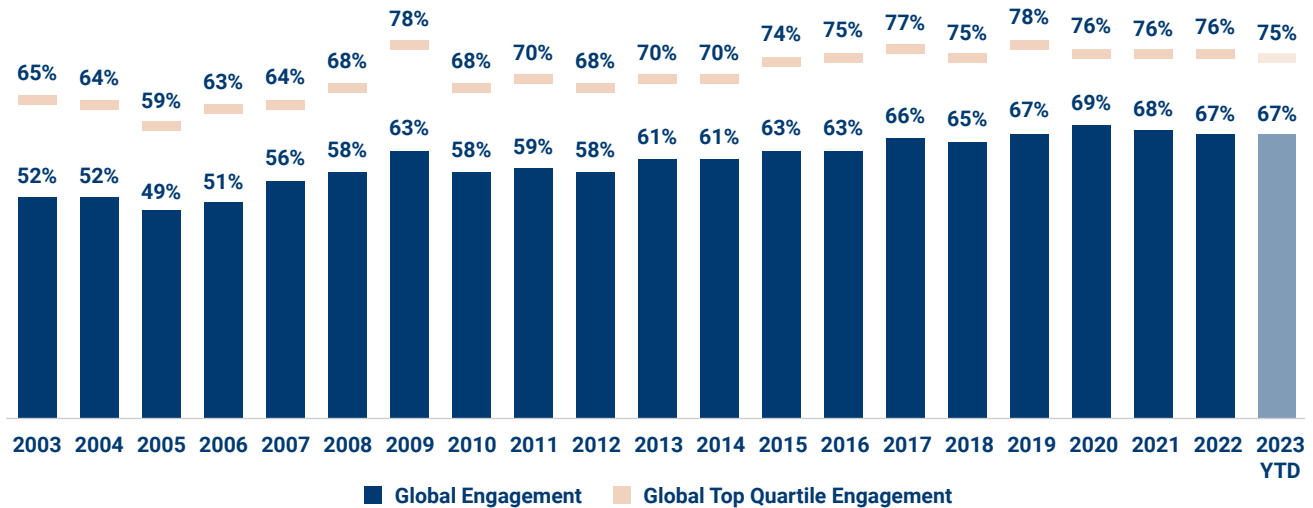
Although the lesson of this parable has been interpreted in various ways, it serves as a powerful illustration of the maturation journey when building an engaging work experience. The rocks and pebbles represent the foundational elements of an engaging experience — those basic processes and behaviors that are critical in order to develop engagement, such as training to do one's job, role clarity and trustworthy leadership. The sand and the water represent the more mature and unique elements that have evolved beyond the foundational elements to further enhance the work experience.

High-performing organizations add sand and water by looking for ways to ensure the employee experience consistently supports the business goals, and by “personalizing” the work experience to address the needs of different cohorts and groups. This creates a more cohesive and distinctive experience.

Kincentric has been measuring and consulting on engagement for over 20 years using a standardized six-item measure of engagement (our “Say, Stay, Strive” model). Looking back at 20 years of engagement trends, what we see suggests that although companies may have mastered the foundational elements of an engaging experience, they may be stuck and unable to evolve further, struggling to identify and implement the elements needed to create a truly differentiated employee experience (EX).

In the early 2000s, around 50% of employees surveyed had scores in the “engaged” range. Over time, as more companies have focused on and taken actions to drive engagement, the number has steadily increased<sup>1</sup> to the point that we now see scores consistently falling in the high 60% engaged range over the last six years or so.

**EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT IS PLATEAUING**




The question at this point is whether engagement can go further, or if we have reached a true upper limit. If there is any benefit to going further on this journey, how do we move engagement to new heights?

<sup>1</sup> There are some notable spikes in periods of global crisis: 2009 results show engagement levels in the midst of a global recession during which people tend to show high intent to stay, driving up engagement scores, and in 2020 during the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Going back to our parable, we find that many organizations have put rocks and pebbles in their proverbial glass jars. That is, they have implemented the basic processes and activities that help to create an engaging work experience for the majority of their people. But many have not yet gone further — adding in the sand and water that can create an experience that can help shift the organization from average to top-performing levels.

In other words, the approach to action and change that was effective for companies that had about 50% engaged is not going to have the same kind of impact now, when engagement is notably higher. Addressing the foundational change allowed companies to focus on major “rocks” that were not working, and that focused effort helped move the engagement needle. However, as organizations have become more mature, they have shifted focus to refining and personalizing the experience in a holistic way, requiring a new way to approach change.



Engagement still matters, but organizations need to rethink how they approach engagement and find new ways to move forward and create meaningful change to drive it.

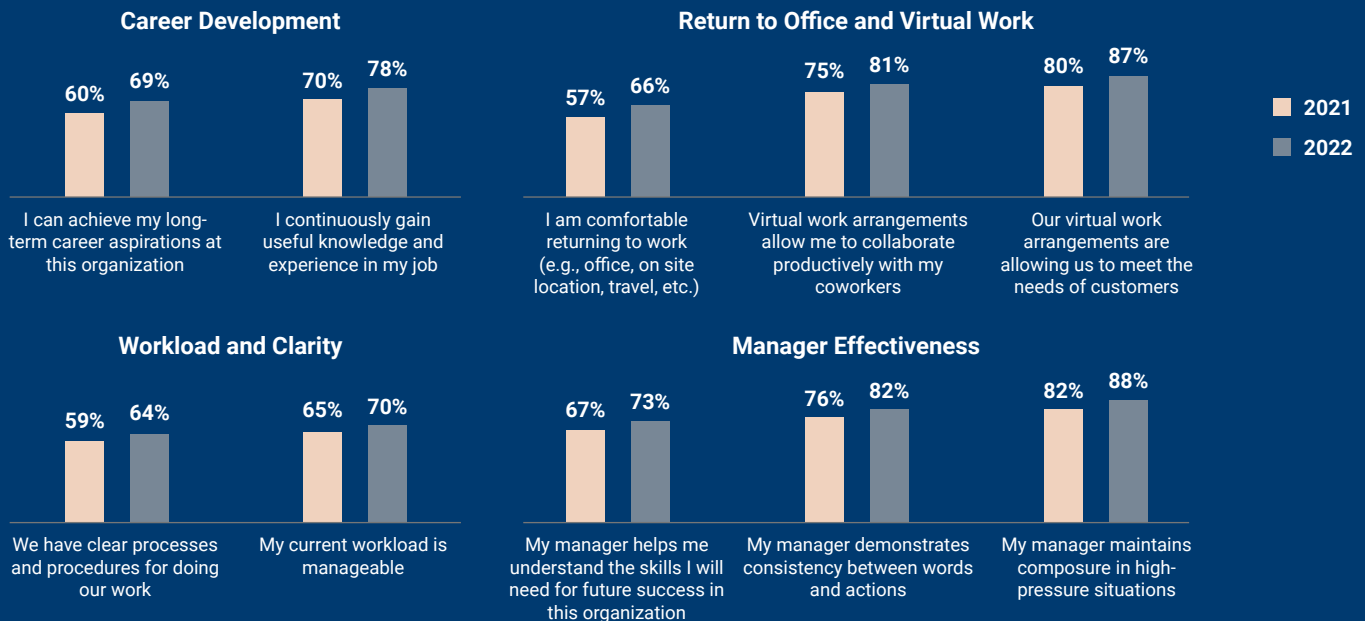


# Engagement trends current state: A new normal with new expectations

Looking at current trends from our global employee database of more than 9 million respondents from over 2,500 organizations, across 162 countries and 62 industries, we see some indications that there is a return to more stability in the work experience post-pandemic.

Global trends reveal that employees have more optimism about their personal future and general work experience than in the previous year. There is also more confidence in the effectiveness of virtual work – both in meeting the needs of customers and being able to collaborate productively with coworkers.

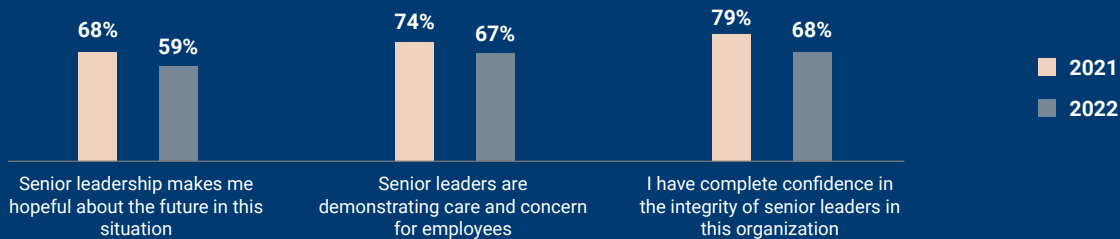
## SEVERAL ASPECTS OF WORK EXPERIENCE HAVE IMPROVED OVER THE LAST YEAR



In general, employees also seem more positive about having clearer work processes and procedures and have indicated that workloads are becoming more manageable. Perceptions of managers have strengthened as well, with greater reflection of trust, handling of stressful situations and helping prepare for the future.

However, not everything is moving in a positive direction. Employees are becoming more demanding regarding what they want from their leadership and work experience. Perceptions of senior leaders are falling back to pre-pandemic levels in terms of showing care and concern, keeping people informed and creating optimism about the future. In addition, despite being confident about collaborating virtually, fewer feel they are getting the connection and support they need from their work group and only about half feel their ideas and suggestions are being heard.

**PERCEPTIONS OF SENIOR LEADERSHIP DROPPING OFF POST-PANDEMIC**



Even though more people feel they have a good understanding of their organization’s values, fewer feel their organization is demonstrating those values every day or that leaders are making decisions that are consistent with those values.

**ORGANIZATIONAL VALUES ARE BEING UNDERSTOOD, BUT NOT BEING DEMONSTRATED**




Over the course of the pandemic, employees felt heard, considered and cared for in many ways. As we return to a “new normal,” there may be a shift in the expectations that people have of their leaders and in how values are not just expressed, but truly lived in day-to-day work experiences. In other words, the care, compassion and connection people experienced throughout the pandemic are things they expect to continue moving forward.

These gains and decreases in trends may signal a shift in what people want in their work experience. It is no longer enough to have just the rocks and the pebbles — people want to feel understood and cared for by their leaders and aligned to their organizations in a meaningful way.

Yet many organizations are falling short in meeting these demands, with just over half of the respondents in our research<sup>2</sup> indicating that they feel their organizations are delivering on the experience they were promised.



feel that their organization is delivering on the experience they promised



So what can leaders do to balance the change in expectations and break through the barriers they may face to create a more engaging work experience?

It comes down to three powerful factors:

- **Connection**
- **Consistency**
- **Courage**

<sup>2</sup> Kincentric Global EX Panel Study 2023



# Connect employee experience to culture and business strategy

Employee experience must be put into a broader context – it is not something that should be worked on independently of your business goals and organizational culture, but rather a natural extension or reflection of your strategy and culture. If this connection isn't made, then no matter how positive the employee experience may be (and the strength of the engagement that comes from it), your organization won't be able to fully realize the potential it can deliver. You'll have actions and processes in place that may not support – or even worse, may work against – the business goals you are working to accomplish.

## Opportunity:

Engagement is

5.5X

higher when EX is aligned to culture and strategy

## Challenge:

Only

36%

of organizations have indicators that strategy, culture and EX are truly aligned

## A holistic approach to drive business impact

Every employee experience effort (both measurement and transformation) ultimately should start with business strategy. What are you trying to achieve for your organization? What problems are you solving for and what capabilities are needed to be successful? When there is clarity around the strategy, it becomes easier for people to align to it. Imagine putting together a 1,000-piece puzzle, but with no picture of what the puzzle should look like in the end. You can figure out the edges fairly readily, but it will become a real struggle to put the rest of the puzzle together. Clear strategy is like the picture on the puzzle box. It helps people put the pieces together within the framework and minimizes guesswork in terms of priorities of actions and areas of focus.

Business strategy should be connected to the culture of your organization as well. Culture defines the values, beliefs, behaviors, artifacts and reward systems that ultimately shape how work gets done. When your culture is not aligned to business strategy, the ability to deliver on the strategy may become blocked by the culture itself. But when culture and strategy are connected and aligned, success in achieving business goals is greatly enhanced.



## Overcoming the disconnect

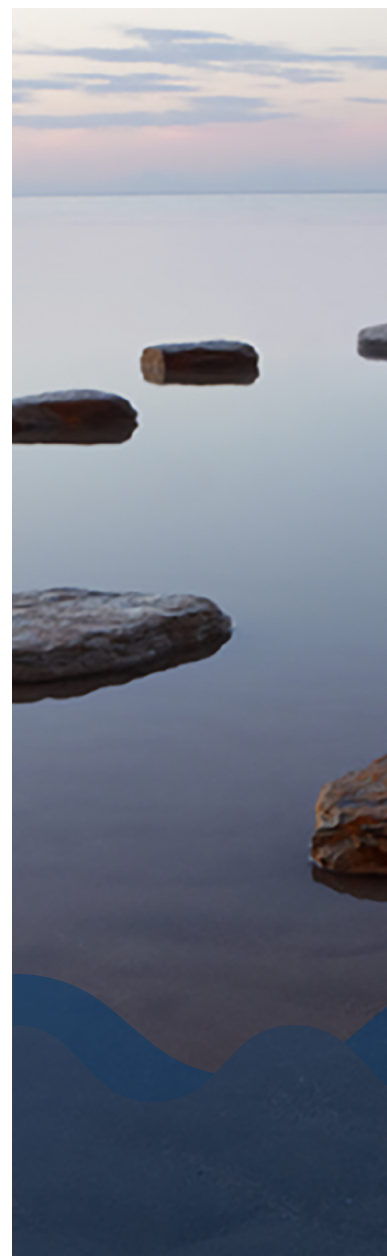
Going back to our long-term trends, it is possible that many organizations are feeling “stuck” in their engagement journey because there has been a disconnect between the employee experience and the big-picture strategy. There are three general factors that may be contributing to this disconnect between business strategy and employee experience<sup>3</sup>:

- 1. Over-reliance on managers to drive/own the employee experience:** Relying on managers alone to shape experience often results in actions that are quite removed from the broader business strategy. It becomes more about what the manager thinks they can make happen versus what the organization needs to focus on.
- 2. Overfocus on engagement as a metric, rather than a focus on the experiences that drive engagement:** Although well intentioned, solely aiming for high engagement scores often results in companies (and managers) driving the number instead of working to create the right experiences that naturally result in high engagement. This can lead to actions that are often not really aligned to culture and strategy, and results in no meaningful impact on business outcomes.
- 3. Survey measures as a “feel-good” process rather than a tool to drive change:** Many organizations tend to only measure the same (often foundational) things rather than leverage a survey to help design and drive more challenging experience elements. To get unstuck, you need to think differently about your employee experience, as well as what you are trying to achieve with your listening efforts.

Many aspects of these disconnecting factors can be resolved by shifting focus toward *consistency of experience* and not just the outcome of engagement.

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<sup>3</sup> Survey technology in the last decade was developed to support these factors and may contribute to the disconnect. Instead of looking at technology as a “solution” for creating engagement, it should be considered as a tool in supporting organizations to drive change. See Kincentric Insights Zone for deeper discussion. <https://www.kincentric.com/insights/not-getting-traction-on-your-engagement-survey>



# Consistent employee experiences translate into business outcomes

We should first remember that engagement is a business outcome itself — it is a reflection of the experience employees are having. Given this, it is critical to remember that high scores on engagement come *not from any one thing* in the experience, but from a *combination of factors that are happening together* in the experience. The more favorable work experiences an employee has, the more likely this translates into a higher level of engagement. In other words, the experience is reliable enough for one to feel engaged.

Think about the impact of consistency this way. Imagine going to three different restaurants.

1. Restaurant One has good food, but service is spotty — sometimes great, sometimes not. You go in not knowing if you'll get served quickly and accurately.
2. Restaurant Two has great service, but the food can be lackluster, and the restaurant doesn't always have the nicest environment — music can be too loud or things aren't as clean as you would like.
3. Finally, Restaurant Three has consistently great food, service and atmosphere. You can trust that when you go there, you know what to expect and they will deliver favorably on these expectations.

Which restaurant are you most likely to endorse as being a great restaurant that you would return to? Most would choose Restaurant Three — because it isn't good at just one thing, or good at some things, some of the time. You endorse it because it is good at most things, most of the time.

## Opportunity:

A consistent EX results in

2X higher

ratings of financial performance

## Challenge:

Only

42%

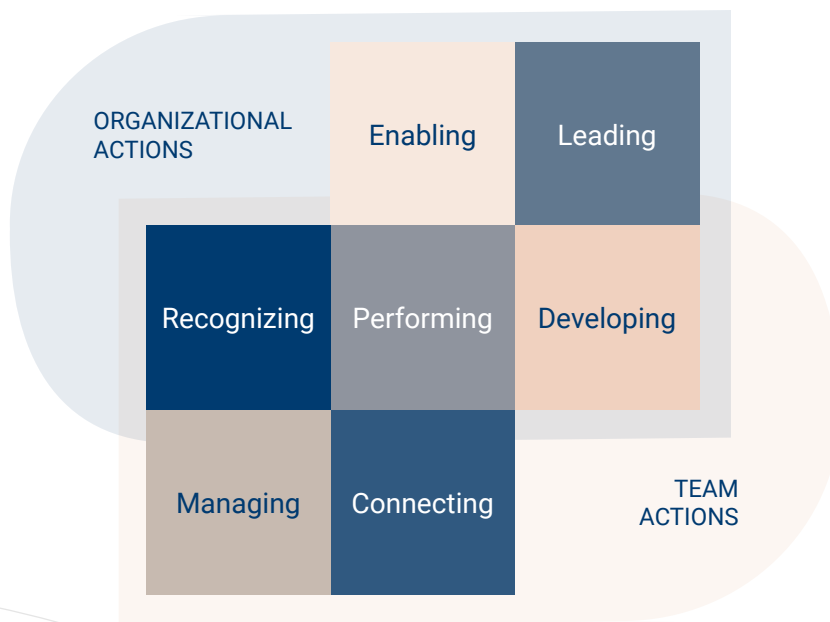
of employees globally have a consistent EX

An engaging work experience is similar – it isn't about providing one or two elements well or having it right sometimes but not others. Rather, engagement comes from experiences that employees can *trust*. The more consistent the experience, the more this experience can also translate into higher business performance.

To understand the power of consistency in driving engagement and business performance, we first reviewed years of survey data, employee comments and research to identify the most common and critical aspects of the work experience. Through this, we identified **seven key elements of employee experience** – each represented by a range of items that reflect the underlying construct.

### CORE EXPERIENCE ELEMENTS

Seven core elements of the employee experience, grounded in strategy, culture and maturity



Although all elements may be served by actions from the top or at team level, “Enabling” and “Leading” tend to be influenced more by *organization-wide* or top-down initiatives. “Managing” and “Connecting” tend to be more influenced by *team actions* (e.g., changes in manager behavior, day-to-day enrichment). “Recognizing,” “Performing” and “Developing” are influenced by *both organizational and team actions*, with organizational actions being more focused on processes and structures related to these elements, and team actions being more focused on enacting on these processes reliably, while also adjusting to local and individual needs.

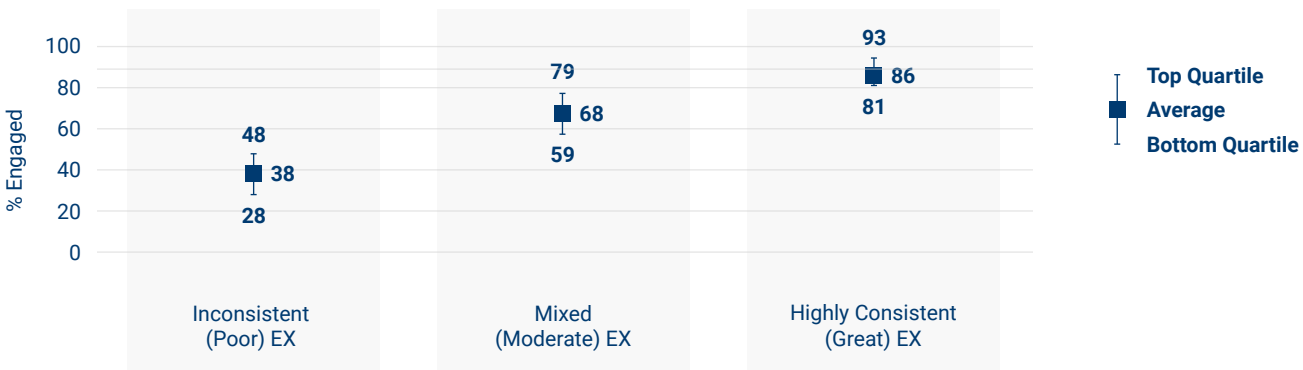
Using the last three years of data from Kincentric’s employee experience database, we evaluated the range of consistency in experience based on responses within a survey (i.e., for all items in a survey, were the responses quite variable from item to item, or more consistent?).<sup>4</sup> Each employee was categorized as having low, moderate or high consistency of experience based on responses. High consistency would mean favorable responses across most or all experience items.

Evaluating results across the three groups, we readily see that consistency of experience was related to engagement levels, with those demonstrating low consistency showing the least engagement ( $r = .44, p < .001$ ). Furthermore, the range of engagement scores was limited by level of consistency. Those with low consistency at best were less than 50% engaged, whereas those with high consistency showed no less than 81% engaged. Moderate consistency shows some possibility of achieving above-average levels of engagement, but most fall within the average range.

**Study 1**

EX consistency ranges

**CONSISTENT EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCES LEAD TO HIGHER EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT**



This pattern helps to illustrate the opportunity to go further in your engagement journey by focusing on driving consistency of experience.

<sup>4</sup> Individuals who provided “straight-line” responses (i.e., same response for all items) were excluded from the analysis, as these do not typically represent a thoughtful evaluation of all the items throughout the survey.

**Study 2**

Kincentric Global EX Panel Study 2023

In a second study of almost 9,500 full-time adult workers from 19 countries and across industries, we evaluated the seven core experience elements — looking at how many were “active” at the same time for a given employee (active meaning that overall ratings for that element across items were consistently favorable).

We looked at how many employees had all seven elements “active,” versus six elements, versus five elements, and so forth down to zero elements active (meaning they did not have a strong positive endorsement of that experience element across items). Looking at the distribution, we found that many employees fall along the extremes in terms of active experience elements: 33% indicated that all seven elements were active (favorable) for them, while another 27% indicated none of the seven elements were active.

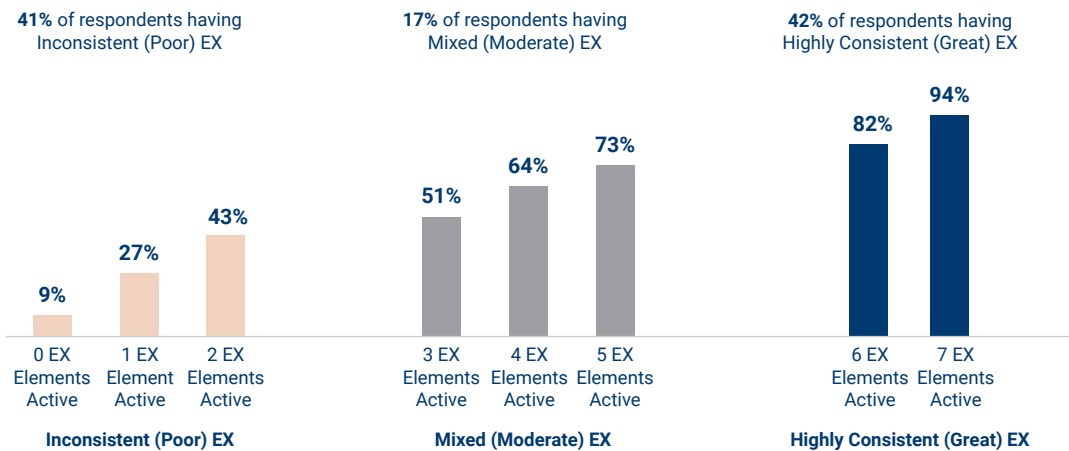
We categorized these respondents into three groups — those having a **highly consistent** (great) work experience (six or seven elements active), **mixed** (moderate) work experience (three to five elements active), or **inconsistent** (poor) work experience (zero to two elements active). Overall, we found a highly consistent work experience positively impacts both employee engagement and business outcomes:

**Consistency across experience elements has a dramatic impact on engagement levels**

Employees with a highly consistent experience are more than 5X likely to be engaged than those in the inconsistent experience group, and intent to stay was over 2X higher for the highly consistent group than for the inconsistent group.

Employees who had a mixed experience only had average levels of engagement.

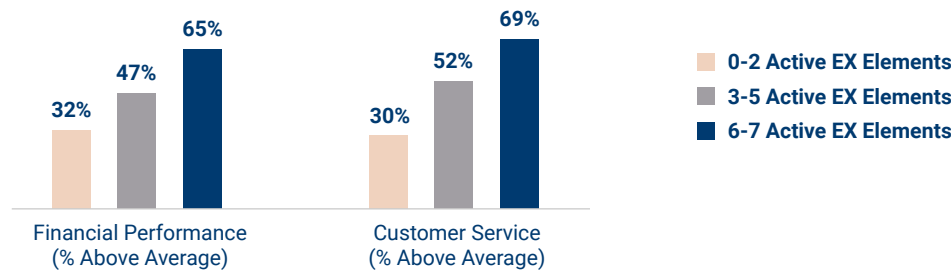
**CONSISTENT EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCES DRIVE HIGHER EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT**



### Consistency has a notable impact on business performance outcomes

Respondents provided an evaluation of their employer’s business performance and customer satisfaction levels (from well below average to well above average). We again see over 2X differences between highly consistent and inconsistent groups – with about 65% to 70% of the highly consistent group respondents rating their organization as above average or better on financial performance and customer satisfaction, compared to only about 30% of those in the inconsistent experience group. Here, too, being in the moderate group doesn’t take performance beyond average performance – you need to have consistency across most of the elements, not just several of them, to get the largest potential payoff.

#### CONSISTENCY TRANSLATES TO BETTER BUSINESS OUTCOMES



We also identified respondents from companies that were included in various “best places to work”/“most admired company” lists (those that are providing a positive work experience as well as performing well). High-consistency respondents were 2.5X more likely to be from a high-performing company than inconsistent respondents.

These findings suggest that a highly consistent, great employee experience has the biggest positive impact on business performance. Conversely, less consistency suggests excessive “noise” or *inconsistency* in the experience, which can often hamper business performance.

Reducing the noise in your work experience by making it more consistent across all elements and all employees is how you translate employee experience into real business outcomes.



# Courage from the C-suite makes employee experience a business asset

Given that a consistent employee experience translates into business performance, we then sought to identify those things that can help enable organizations to create a highly consistent experience. Our research has identified three critical factors that contribute to a more consistent and connected employee experience:

- **Shift the ownership back to top leaders**  
Senior leaders must set the priorities, provide clear direction and lead the change to create a truly engaging and consistent work experience.
- **Empower managers to amplify through personalization**  
Support managers to enrich and personalize the day-to-day experience through the priorities and processes leadership and HR have established.
- **Drive HR with intention**  
Drive HR with intention and cohesion to deliver more mature, personalized experiences.

## Opportunity:

C-suite can

drive  
business  
results

through EX with courage,  
commitment and alignment

## Challenge:

1/3

of employees do not feel  
senior leaders take the  
necessary actions now to  
position the company for  
long-term success

## Shift the ownership back to top leaders

Although there has always been some expectation around the role senior leaders play in driving engagement and employee experience, the reality is that over the last decade or so, the focus and expectations for actions toward engagement have been placed heavily upon managers. This stems in part from belief in the misconception that “managers own engagement,” which was introduced in the early 2000s.

The intent of the research behind this was not to absolve senior leadership’s involvement in creating an engaging experience, but practical adoption of the concept fell to managers because they were perceived as being a larger part of employees’ day-to-day experience. Although that may be true, it ignores the reality that employees are embedded in an experience that is *ultimately shaped by top leaders*. Furthermore, over time the role of the middle manager has evolved as well, with more responsibilities and less time for people management-related activities, resulting in an even greater need for leadership oversight.

Looking across our client surveys over the years, we find that the more prevalent drivers of engagement often include measures related to senior leadership, but not managers (who often fall much further down the ranking of drivers).

This makes sense, as senior leaders set the priorities (dictate what is important) in their organizations, are the ultimate owners of the processes that people engage with in their work, have oversight of these processes, and are able to determine when changes are made and to what end. Influence and support from both levels of leadership are required, but while managers play an important role in creating an engaging work experience, research shows senior leaders have a stronger level of influence.

Senior leaders’ actions\* have

1.5X

greater impact on employee engagement than managers’ actions and behaviors\*\*

If we focus on the consistency of the EX (versus employee engagement), the relationship is even stronger.

Senior leaders have

6X

more impact on the consistency of EX than managers

\* communication, building confidence and connectivity

\*\* fairness of treatment, trustworthiness and support provided to the team

## GLOBAL EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE TRENDS 2023

These findings suggest that actions that influence employee experience (and drive the consistency of that experience) should **start with leaders**. Confidence in leadership and vision as well as perceptions around leadership showing care and support of employees continue to be among the top drivers of engagement. Leaders should take heed, as current trends also show that confidence and trust in leadership is fading — perhaps because we are moving away from “crisis” mode, in which leaders tend to make more efforts to be visible and communicate with employees. As we fall into a “new normal,” leaders may become less intentional with these valued communications and connections. The result can be less consistency of experience, with people becoming less aligned and priorities less clear.

### How to shift ownership back to top leaders

Without clear guidance and direction from leaders, the work experience becomes murky — making it difficult for people to identify the true priorities. Without a true north star to guide them, people will set their own path, which may or may not support the true goals of the strategy and culture set by leadership. This can lead to even more inconsistency, as every part of the organization is off doing their own thing — all well intentioned, but not in a way that will coalesce into meaningful momentum for the business.

To mitigate this risk, senior leadership should:

- **Have a strong overarching strategy and vision that is translated into priorities and employee experience.** This helps to align everyone around a common set of goals and allows disparate actions that might otherwise seem like separate priorities to come together under the same “umbrella” of the vision.
- **Ensure consistency in messaging from leader to leader.** When different leaders have conflicting priorities, it can not only lead to confusion, but create mistrust. If leaders aren’t aligned, your employees may question their vision, strategy and capability.
- **Make sure that the priorities themselves are seen as consistent.** Even if leaders are aligned, shifting from priority A in one month to priority B the next may lead people to question whether leaders know what they are doing. Be sure you have a strong overarching strategy that provides context and demonstrates how seemingly different priorities are aligned to the same goals.
- **Be visible to employees — involve them, get their feedback and leverage their ideas.** Intentional involvement helps your people understand expectations and chart a path toward meeting those expectations that is relevant for them. This allows them to feel like an active part of the experience (and thus more likely to see the experience favorably) versus creating a passive feeling that the experience is happening to them (which most likely will be seen unfavorably).



# Empower managers to amplify through personalization

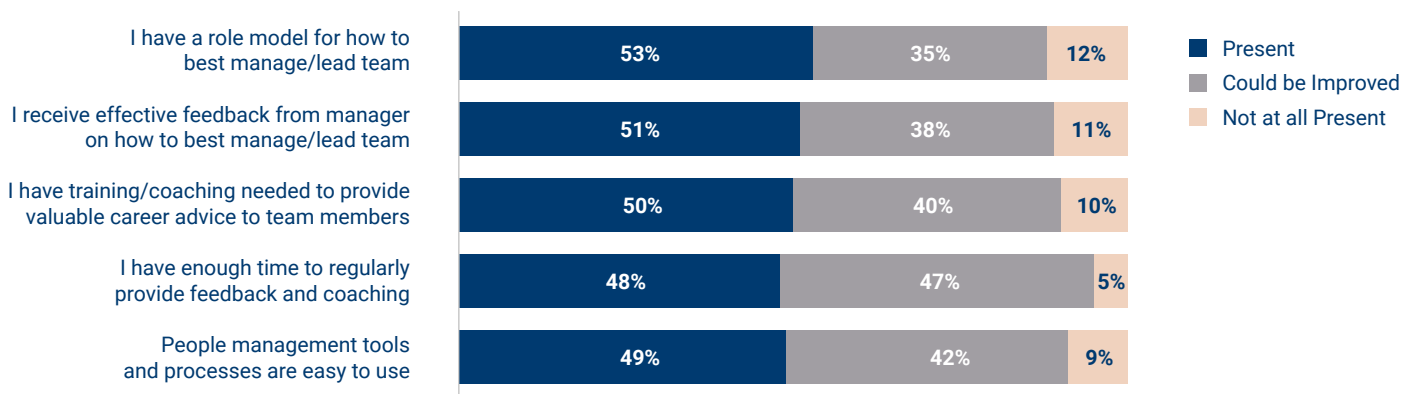
Although senior leaders are critical to driving consistency in experience, managers still have an influential role. But instead of bearing the full ownership of employee experience, the role of managers is to help amplify and support the priorities and processes set by leadership. Senior leaders set the priorities, while managers help bring them to life.

The adage that “people leave managers, not organizations” rarely holds true. While a lot of noise is made around “toxic” managers, only about 10% of full-time employees indicate that they left or would leave their current role due to their manager. In fact, perceptions of managers tend to be among the more favorably-rated areas of employee experience.<sup>5</sup>

Organizational leaders can leverage the positive manager/employee relationship to amplify their own efforts to create a consistent work experience and drive business outcomes. However, this does not happen by chance. Organizations must support people managers in bringing the organizational vision to life.

We asked people managers to rate the support they receive, from “not true for me” to “could be improved” to “true for me” across five key areas (see chart). Only about half of people managers felt any one of five areas was true for them, with the other half looking for improvements in how they are supported in these ways. And although half of any given support element is present, only 16% of those people managers report being supported across *all five* of these elements. A similar number (16%) do not feel any of these elements are fully present for them and half (49%) only have two or fewer present. These supportive behaviors play a critical role in amplifying leadership impact and driving a more consistent experience, and yet, rarely are all five fully present. Enhancing manager support across these five elements can have a significant positive impact and represents an opportunity for many organizations.

## PEOPLE MANAGER SUPPORT IS LIMITED



<sup>5</sup> In our global employee database, ratings of managers tend to be about 10 percentage points more favorable on average than ratings of leaders, and among the more favorably rated items on surveys in general. And as noted earlier, ratings of managers have improved in the last year.

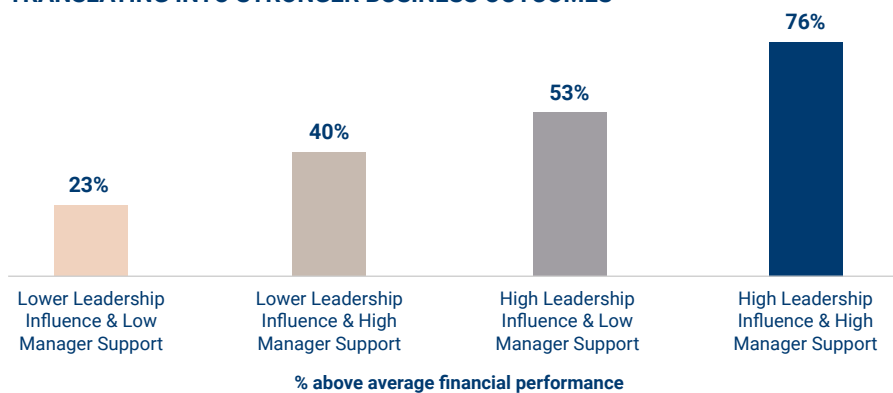
**The best of both worlds – strong leaders and supported managers working together**

In addition to the level of manager support, the strength of leadership influence also has an impact on consistency of experience. When there is strong leadership influence, consistency improves, especially with high manager support (1.2X compared to low manager support). Conversely, we see the least consistency of experience when senior leadership influence is weak, regardless of whether manager support is high or low. However, high manager support can help to amplify impact in the absence of strong leadership influence, somewhat improving the employee experience. But as we noted in the previous section, consistency of experience is not the responsibility of managers alone – strong leadership influence is also required.

		Active EX elements (0 to 7)	Variance across EX items (lower score = more consistency of EX)
<b>Weaker senior leadership influence</b>	Low manager support	0.8	.84
	High manager support	3.3	.77
<b>Stronger senior leadership influence</b>	Low manager support	5.4	.66
	High manager support	6.6	.56

Not surprisingly, our findings suggest that the same correlation exists around financial performance. Of organizations whose financial performance was rated above average or better, those with both high senior leadership influence and high manager support outperform those with low senior leadership influence and low manager support by over 50%. The extra manager support helps them bring leader vision and priorities to life in a more consistent way, which in turn can translate into stronger business outcomes.

**MANAGER SUPPORT BRINGS LEADER PRIORITIES TO LIFE IN A CONSISTENT WAY, TRANSLATING INTO STRONGER BUSINESS OUTCOMES**



## How to empower managers to amplify through personalization

There are many elements of the work experience that are enhanced and enriched by managers, effectively moving from foundational elements (the rocks and pebbles in our parable) to more mature elements and even personalization (the sand and water) to create a great employee experience. For example, it is foundational when a manager provides clarity around expectations of an employee's role. From there, it can evolve to helping connect the employee's job to the strategy/vision for the organization, followed by providing guidance on how the employee can grow their career in a way that aligns to the organization's future. However, as we see in our research, this **maturity requires time, training and feedback to enable managers to learn** how to do this. The more care organizations take in providing this support at each level of maturity, the more effectively (and consistently) managers will be able to apply and help generate a more powerful experience for their people.

But without strong support, managers may struggle to deliver a consistent employee experience. First and foremost, **ensure your managers are provided with a consistent experience themselves**, which will enable them to amplify and activate the vision and strategy of senior leadership. Managers should also be encouraged to advocate for the kind of support they may be lacking. This can range from serving as a "voice of the customer" for HR tools and systems that they leverage for people management to seeking out role models to learn from to asking for feedback and coaching on people management skills.

It is equally important to **ensure both your managers and senior leaders have a clear understanding of their authority to make decisions**, particularly as it relates to processes and procedures that can shape the employee experience. Both senior leaders and managers need clarity around influence and "ownership." Make time to differentiate and clearly articulate those decisions owned by managers and those owned by senior leadership to ensure each level is spending their time appropriately and has the support needed to create a real, tangible impact on experience.



## Drive HR with intention

Just as managers must move beyond a mastery of the foundational elements of experience (from rocks and pebbles to sand and water), so must your HR processes in order to create a more impactful, consistent employee experience.

HR processes that influence experience should be challenged to go beyond the basic needs. You must intentionally decide on how to build on the foundation in ways that support your organization's unique strategy.

### **Creating impact on engagement and performance outcomes**

Although we find that high-performing companies do a better job of creating a consistent work experience, they are not able to differentiate themselves on the foundational items alone. Our research shows the gap in percent favorable scores between average and high-performing companies ranges from approximately six to eight points on foundational items. However, on more mature items, the gap essentially doubles – and we often see **high-performing companies measure 12 to 15 percentage points higher on these mature experience elements.**

Foundational items cover the basic expectations of the work experience and are those that tend to be more easily implemented by organizations. For example, if we look at the core experience element “Developing,” foundational items would include things like providing employees with the training needed to do their current job. With respect to the element of “Recognizing,” foundational items might include ensuring employees understand how performance is being measured and are paid fairly, while for “Performing,” foundational items might cover things like ensuring basic staffing levels are met or that people are being held accountable for performance. Generally speaking, organizations score higher on foundational areas on their employee surveys.

More mature or evolved items tend to reflect more specific – and in some ways more personalized – experiences. Although some may consist of unique programs or approaches, most simply take the foundational experiences further, reflecting how organizations are bringing (or can bring) more value to the experience.

For example, more mature items around “Developing” might include such things as having a mentor to provide valuable coaching and guidance about one’s career. Similarly, for “Recognizing,” a more mature experience might include creating a stronger link between performance and reward and for “Performing,” maturity might include readily investing in new ideas that drive future success and having decisions made without unnecessary levels of approval.

Keep in mind, maturity exists on a continuum, with different steps in the journey to maturity as an organization progresses from foundational (for example, providing training) to more evolved (providing individualized career coaching). The goal is to continuously build on and improve these key processes. Each step up the maturity ladder helps enrich the overall employee experience, which in turn helps build consistency and will be more likely to translate into positive business outcomes.

**But while successfully executing foundational elements will definitely improve your performance, there is a ceiling effect. Mastery of foundational elements alone will not push your organization into the level of experience that can create meaningful business impact.**

High-performing companies often challenge themselves to push their processes beyond the foundational – building on what works rather than accepting the foundation as being “good enough.” For example, HR processes are often geared toward fulfilling the needs of the lowest common denominator – the most basic, foundational needs. High-performing companies instead tend to gear themselves toward the highest common multiple – meaning enhancements to [the processes that will have the largest impact](#) on employee experience, and in turn, business outcomes.

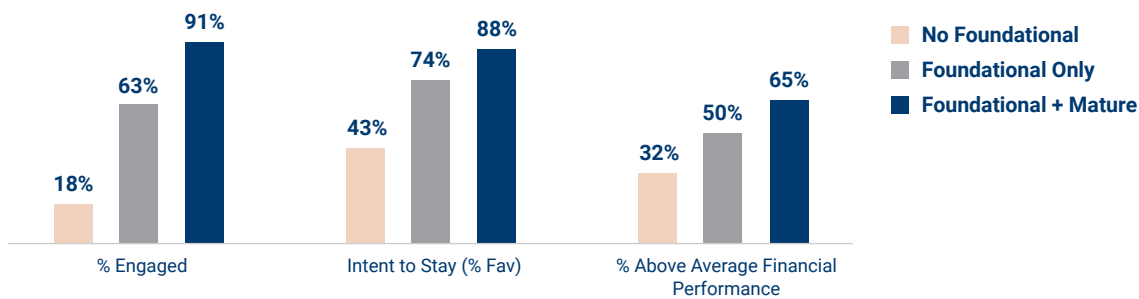
To better demonstrate this, we selected three experience elements that HR processes tend to have the greatest influence on: Recognizing, Developing and Performing. For each of these experience elements, we identified one foundational and one mature item from our global trends database. We then examined the level of maturity – from *no* foundational items present to *only* foundational items to both foundational and *mature* items being present, along with the corresponding impact on engagement, intent to stay and financial performance.





When moving from no foundational items in place to having just foundational elements present, we can see a notable jump in the average impact on engagement, intent to stay and ratings of financial performance. However, with only the foundational elements in place, performance in these areas does not exceed the average range for these outcomes. It is only when we layer in the more mature behaviors that the performance in these areas jumps dramatically.

**HIGHER MATURITY CREATES BUSINESS PERFORMANCE**



In other words, simply ensuring consistency in the foundational items of experience elements is not enough to deliver a real advantage — you must also evolve, expand and enhance your processes, adding in more mature items to bring more value to the experience. In doing this, you get a return on that experience in a way that can drive positive business outcomes.

To illustrate this, let’s go back to our “rocks in the jar” parable. You can keep working with just the rocks and pebbles, and even polish them up nicely, but that alone won’t fill the glass jar completely. At some point, you need to add in the sand and water to completely “fill” the jar. In the same manner, high-performing companies are those that do the right foundational things consistently (provide training, set performance expectations, hold people accountable), but also create additional value in the experiences they bring through more mature, evolved elements, which provide more personalization of the experience (e.g., coaching, recognition of effort, decision-making empowerment).

## How to drive HR with intention

Too often, organizations focus on individual HR processes in isolation from one another. For example, the design and execution of career development programs may not be coordinated with performance management efforts. Even though they should all be aligned with the same strategy, in our HR transformation work with clients we find that this is not always the case. More often than not, organizations may think there is alignment, but in reality, they have created disparate programs with the hope they are all driving toward the same end goal. However, you can't rely on hope — **you must intentionally align your critical HR programs so that they cohesively reinforce the same overall experience.** The better the holistic alignment of HR programs and processes to the business and talent strategy, the more effectively those programs will translate into a consistent employee experience.

Recall earlier, when we looked at how many of the seven experience elements needed to be active to have a meaningful impact on engagement and business outcomes. Being good at just one or two is not enough, nor is being good at most of them just some of the time. Rather, you must **be good at most of the experience elements most of the time** — it is a consistent experience that brings all these elements together in a coordinated, cohesive and intentional way to support the strategy and drive business performance.

To this end, **leaders need to move away from “silver bullet” and “one size fits all” thinking** — how the parts come together to serve the bigger picture is just as important as what any one effort or change can do. This doesn't mean working on everything all at once, but it does emphasize the value of using your strategy as the starting point and then building out a journey aligned to reaching your goals.



# A path forward

## Consistency and personalization: A magical combination

As we have shown, consistency of experience creates high engagement, which translates into better business outcomes. This research supports what we have already learned from our high-performing clients over the years: to drive success, it is not about being great at just one or two things, but being consistently good across a number of critical elements and then evolving those elements further.

**It is important to note that achieving consistency does not mean that everyone's specific experience is the same – rather, it means that every experience strives to give people the same effect.** Positive perceptions about core EX elements such as Developing, Recognizing, Managing and so forth will come from the experiences that are most relevant to both the individual employee as well as various cohorts within the organization.

For example, our research reveals that younger workers with lower tenure place a high value on learning and development that gives them exposure to a broader range of opportunities – a chance to explore. More tenured workers, on the other hand, look for opportunities that can help them deepen their skills in their area of interest or prepare them for the next step on their professional career path. So, if both exploration and depth of development are present in your career development experience, both younger and more tenured employees will be more likely to perceive “Developing” favorably. It is the same outcome, but with different paths needed to get there – in this situation, based on age and tenure.



It is also important to recognize that you can't necessarily do all things for all people all at once. Realize that this is a journey, and the best place to start is to identify what is working universally — what rocks and pebbles you have in place for your employee experience — and verifying their alignment to your strategy and culture. If those foundational elements are solid, you can take the next step to identify where experience needs to be enhanced further and take actions from there (sand and water).

- When an experience element is universally *not working* (broken), you should step back and evaluate its foundation to determine what is missing and rebuild. You may discover that your experience is not really lining up with your business strategy or culture (e.g., wanting risk taking and agility in a rule-bound and compliant culture).
- Conversely, you may find a situation in which, although the foundation is sound, certain elements of experience seem stuck — you are probably doing many of the right things, but the organization is not really challenged to push things further. In this instance, you should examine your HR processes and explore which may be evolved further to go beyond serving just the least common denominator. You will also want to be sure that you are leading change efforts from the top, and not relying solely on managers to drive employee experience transformation efforts.
- In situations where consistency of experience is present for many but not all employees of your organization (be it subpopulations or entire business units), personalization of experience becomes critical. These gaps suggest that what is working for some is not necessarily working for all (remember, no one size fits all). **Personalization efforts allow you to enrich the processes in a way that is more meaningful for select groups while retaining what is working for others.** We find experience design efforts can be powerful tools in this situation to identify what is working for each part of the specific experience journey, as well as what can be enhanced.

## Hitting invisible walls

In some instances, organizations may feel they have made a concerted effort to drive change from the top, but are not seeing meaningful adoption or a real return on these efforts. It's as if you are trapped behind an invisible wall – you know it is there, but you are unable to see it or move past it.

At times like these, **it is important to step back and take a closer look at your business strategy and culture to ensure they are aligned to your employee experience.** Remember that to be effective, your employee experience needs to be a reflection of both. When there is misalignment, even the best intentions and efforts to enhance the employee experience may have a limited impact on the business. For example, you may wish to create an inclusive experience, but if your business strategy or culture strongly reinforces hierarchical decision-making, it may prohibit input from those most affected by the decisions, resulting in efforts to drive inclusivity to stall out or fail. Unfortunately, great intentions do not create great experiences.

Of course, the invisible wall might just start with your strategy itself. Strong engagement and consistent experience will not result in better business outcomes if your business strategy is flawed from the start. Aligning to a faulty business strategy will lead your engaged people down the wrong path. Furthermore, if your strategy and direction for the organization is constantly changing, it can undermine your employees' confidence in your leadership and strategy. And if confidence in leadership is lacking, your employees may look elsewhere (local leaders, mid-level managers or fellow team members) for direction and to establish priorities for their work, leading to inconsistency across the organization.

Evaluating top leadership alignment and confidence in the strategy (along with appropriate stress testing of the strategy) can help verify if this is one of your underlying challenges. If you are contemplating changes or shifts in your business strategy, be sure to lock it in first and clearly communicate it throughout the organization to get the most out of the employee experience enhancements that will support it.



## Creating a safe harbor for your people

Creating consistency of experience can help focus the energy your people bring to your organization to create strong business outcomes. But there is yet another benefit of consistency – it can also provide employees with a safe harbor of sorts in a BANI world (i.e., one that feels brittle, anxious, nonlinear and incomprehensible).

At a time when people may feel that so much is out of their control, providing stability and creating a consistent employee experience can help both individuals and the business thrive. It promotes a focus at all levels to control what one can control (versus trying to change things one cannot), and to build on what is working as well as identify what can be expanded further or enhanced.

This can help to create an environment employees can count on – the work experience will be what they expect (and need), even if and when things outside the organization are not as certain. This enables people to focus and align to the right priorities in their work (which helps with performance) and instills confidence that the business is going in the right direction (which helps with retention).



## Using employee experience as a competitive edge to unlock business vitality

New realities, new employee demands and higher engagement maturity all point toward the need for a bold refocus. What has worked for organizations in the past may no longer drive the same results. Employee engagement still matters, but our research shows that this is just one of many powerful business outcomes that derive from the employee experiences you create. Through the strength of consistency, the power of connection and the courage of leaders, your employee experience can lead to *so much more* for your business — creating a unique competitive edge and unlocking organizational vitality.

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## About Kincentric

Kincentric, a Spencer Stuart company, helps organizations unlock the power of people and teams to ignite change and drive better business results. With decades of experience and specialist expertise in areas such as culture; employee engagement; leadership assessment and development; HR and talent advisory; and diversity, equity and inclusion, we use data-driven insights to architect solutions that add value, enhance agility and increase organizational effectiveness. For more information, visit [kincentric.com](https://kincentric.com).

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