



DEFINING MOMENTS

A Strategic Framework for Employee Experience That Creates Social Good and Purpose for Employees and Companies

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Moments Define Experiences

Any life is a menagerie of experiences. *I grew up in a small town. I went to college. I've been married for 21 years. I have two children. I've worked in tech for 30 years.*

And the quality of all the experiences we collect over time drives our perception of the quality of our lives. *I grew up poor and had a rough childhood. I went to a good college and made lifelong friends. My wife and I are good partners. I raised good kids. I love my job.*

But experiences are not monolithic in quality. Experiences are big blocks of related moments — these moments exist on a spectrum of good to bad, positive to negative. The closer in time we are to any specific moment, the more these moments drive our perception of life quality. But the further we get from the moment, the more our perception of an overall experience is driven by our reflection on the **most significant moments** comprising the overall experience — moments that define the experience. *Defining moments.*

I'll use a personal example to illustrate the relationship between moments, experiences, and time.



The Trip of a Lifetime

In 2019, I took my family on an a six-week RV trip. Let's call it an RV *experience*. My daughter was 8 years old and my son was 5. I remember that RV experience as the trip of a lifetime. I even have a hardcover coffee table book that captures our greatest moments from the trip. It's titled *Our Super Awesome RV Adventure* and features a photo of the four of us standing in front of Cinderella Castle at Disney World.

I frequently reflect upon that trip because it brings me so much joy. I'll admit that I've forgotten a lot about it (even in such a short period of time). Last weekend, someone asked me about our route and all the places we had stopped along the way. I really struggled to remember most of the details. But I vividly remember these moments:

- **The beginning:** I remember the speech I gave at our farewell dinner to my family and best friends who had joined us to mark the occasion. (Yes, speech. I'm a super-corny dad.)
- **The high point:** I remember celebrating my birthday with my wife and kids while eating dinner at the small dining table in the RV (parked on the beach in Destin, Florida). We had driven from Disney World the day before. We spent my birthday lounging on the beach. My wife made a lopsided cake in the tiny oven. My kids sang to me. It was on the final leg of our trip, and I had never felt a greater sense of calm, togetherness with my family, and achievement for creating a true family adventure.
- **The end:** I remember returning home, sad to be at the end of our journey, but happy to sleep in my own bed. My wife's parents were waiting for us and had decorated the house with big "Welcome Home" banners. And we had a nice meal and recounted our adventures.

The beginning



The high point

The end



How Do You Define “Employee Experience”?

So what does all of this have to do with employee experience (EX)? People have been talking about employee experience for years. But the significance of employee experience has been thrust to center stage during the pandemic. Intuitively, we know that employee experience is important. And, intuitively, we know what employee experience is. But a clear, simple definition of employee experience remains elusive while strategies and initiatives to build an exemplary employee experience remain poorly understood.

This article seeks to provide a clear definition of employee experience while also providing a strategic framework to create a good one. Most important, we suggest that *defining moments* are the primary building blocks of great employee experiences. There will always be ups and downs — for companies, teams, and individuals. But how do we ensure that our employee experience is defined by the ups rather than the downs?





A good start is understanding that we *cannot* control every moment in an experience.

Paradoxically, we must also understand that we *can* control the quality of the overall employee experience by investing in moments that matter most with intent and purpose. Those *defining moments*. The beginnings. The endings. The highs. The lows. If we commit ourselves to creating higher highs and eliminating the lowest lows, and if we pay special attention to the quality of *transition moments* where every new beginning is the end of something and every ending is a new beginning, then we have a better framework for creating great employee experiences without being constrained by the false premise that great experiences are the net sum of every interaction. They are not.

RV caught on fire? It was still a great trip.





Moments Are the Experience

Employee experience is the perception people have about the quality of their time spent with an employer.

That's it. It's just a retrospective assessment of the overall quality of the experience. At the highest level, perceptions exist on a spectrum of good to bad, positive to negative. Though the nature and quality of a positive or negative experience may be nuanced.



Most definitions of employee experience are overly complex, focus on all interactions and moments, and conflate employee experience with concepts like employee engagement. Employee engagement is totally different from employee experience. In fact, employee engagement is only one output of employee experience and relevant only to a couple of subdomains of that experience. One can have a great employee experience and remember their time with a company fondly but not be engaged in their work at all. At the same time, one may be completely engaged in their work, but hate the time they spent with an employer. *But more on that later.*



Traditional definitions of employee experience leave work leaders feeling overwhelmed.

It's simply impossible to control every moment that an employee has with an employer. Yet that's what most definitions of employee experience suggest. Furthermore, most definitions suggest that only by controlling the quality of all moments experienced by an employee, can an employer increase employee engagement, which, these days, has mostly become synonymous with people caring about their work as demonstrated by increased effort. It ought to be incredibly liberating to embrace the notion that employers can create a great employee experience without obsessing over every moment, and that high employee engagement is not the single, measurable result that should be expected from an amazing employee experience.

Let's double-click on the concepts of employee experience and experience domains to gain greater insight.

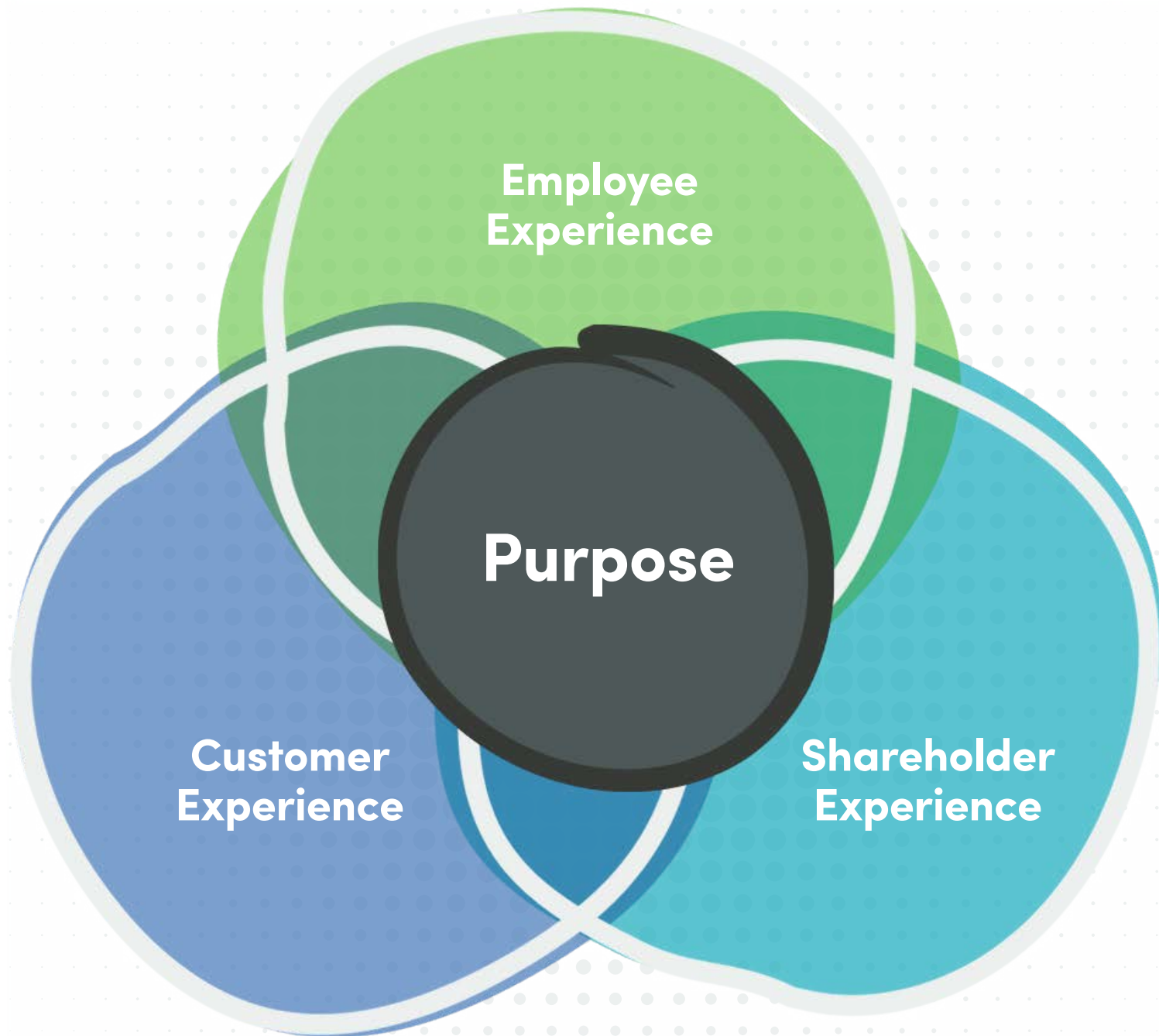




Your Experiences Are Connected

The employee experience is only one domain of stakeholder experience. The other domains are customer experience, shareholder experience, and social good. But employee experience is special because it drives the ability to create great experiences in all other domains. There is no chicken-and-egg argument here. You simply can't have satisfied customers without satisfied employees — at least not for long. And without satisfied customers and satisfied employees, you can't have happy shareholders. And social good? It's hard to contribute to social good if you're sad, poor, and disconnected. Bad companies with bad employee experiences actually become problems that need to be fixed in the context of social good.







The Subdomains of Employee Experience

Much like every experience domain, employee experience may be broken down into several subdomains. Consider, for instance, the relationship between employee experience and customer experience. First of all, we know that a great employee experience is essential for a great customer experience. But the subdomains between each are also very relatable.

EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE	CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE
Employer Brand Experience	Brand Experience
Recruitment Marketing Experience	Marketing Experience
Candidate Experience	Sales Experience
Work Experience	Product Experience
Employee Success	Customer Success



Avoiding the 2 Biggest EX Mistakes

There's no question that we all have a lot to learn when it comes to deeply understanding and creating great employee experience. But we see two big mistakes more than any others when it comes to EX, and these mistakes have profound implications for the nature and quality of our holistic employee experiences.





Mistake No. 1:

EX Begins Before the First Day at Work

Not only do traditional definitions of (and frameworks for) employee experience discourage the discussion of subdomains within employee experience — which misses all of the interrelated issues and opportunities between subdomains like the ones that customer experience professionals have been pursuing for at least two decades. But they most acutely fail to distinguish between *work experience* and *employee success*.

A great employee experience begins long before an employee's first day of work with a company. It includes the perceptions they have about what it must be like to work for a company before they ever sign an offer letter and start working (the employer brand experience). It also includes the experience they had learning about a job opening and applying for an open position (the recruitment marketing experience). And it clearly

includes their perceptions of the quality of the candidate experience (e.g., what the hiring process was like, how the interviews were conducted, how responsive the company was throughout, etc.). **But most definitions of employee experience are limited to the time spent actually working for a company. That's mistake number one. And it's a big one.**

All subdomains of employee experience must be considered holistically, and the continuity between subdomains becomes the most important part. Does the actual work experience end up meeting the expectations set by the employer brand, the recruitment marketing, and the candidate experience? Breaks in continuity cause people's overall perception of the experience to spin negative. *I was told I would have autonomy, but my boss is a micromanager.*



Mistake No. 2:

Not Differentiating Work and Success

But mistake number 2 is even more significant. Without a clear understanding that employee experience (with a capital EX) consists of multiple subdomains, all employee experience initiatives tend to be lumped together. Crucially, there is no consideration for the nuanced differences between *work experience* and *employee success*.

Work experience comprises all the moments related to the actual work of a company. The workflow systems that people interact with. The organizational design that leads to more or less hierarchy. The critical processes that are required to get work done the right way.

On the other hand, **employee success** includes all the supporting initiatives that traditionally — these days, at least — are confused with employee experience. Employee success includes components like well-being, recognition, benefits, DE&I, and others. Employee success is not the actual work experience; it's all the initiatives that help support people so they can fully engage in the actual work.

Consider the relationship between product experience and customer success in the domain of customer experience. The product experience is the experience of actually using the product. Customer success, on the other hand, comprises all the moments that help customers achieve the best direct results using the product along with their business goals and their career goals. Analogously, “work” is the product in employee experience, and employee success is the support function. Both are critically important, but must be considered independently.

Failing to differentiate between the two — and to place them in the broader context of multiple subdomains within employee experience — leaves most work leaders confused about the relationship between employee experience and employee engagement. Employee experience is many things. Work experience is one thing under employee experience. And employee success is yet another. Employee engagement is an outcome that is measured in the subdomain of work experience — not employee success. Nor should employee engagement be considered the primary output of a great employee experience, because EX is a much more expansive primary domain of experience that starts well before the actual work experience or employee success experience.



Example:

How Are Work and Success Different?

Consider this scenario. I know a young person who always wanted to work for Google. Let's call them Finley. In Finley's mind, Google is the best place to work in the world (think employer brand). Finley was extremely excited when Google exhibited at their college career fair. They had an inspiring conversation with the recruiter and decided to apply (recruitment marketing). Finley loved the rigor and creativity of the hiring process — they felt challenged and heard, and they also felt like the opportunities provided by Google were even greater than they possibly could have imagined (candidate experience). Finley got an offer and accepted the position. It was very easy for Finley to be productive at Google. All of the workflow systems, policies, procedures, and team structures were incredibly conducive to high productivity (work experience), and Finley quickly developed a reputation as a high performer. But Finley worked long hours and even worked through the weekends to keep up and to get ahead. Finley found it

difficult to surface these issues with their boss and even harder to find support for their physical and mental well-being (employee success). Finley was already close to burnout when the pandemic struck. Despite the fact that Finley was incredibly engaged in their work, they were suffering. The pandemic amplified all of Finley's worst challenges. They felt overworked, tired, detached, disconnected, isolated, and lonely. And there was still no support to be found. When the economy improved and the Great Resignation began (don't get us started on that phrase), Finley did what millions of other people have done. They had a life-is-too-short moment and took a job with a promising startup that seemed to really care about employee success.





Finley's manager was shocked when Finley submitted their resignation letter. Finley was a top performer and seemed very engaged in their work. What the manager didn't understand is that a person can be engaged in their work, perform at a high level, and still want to scream into their pillow every night. Not only was there a break in continuity between subdomains of the employee experience — everything was awesome except the employee success experience — but Finley's overall perception of the employee experience remains intensely negative more than a year after they left. The employee experience started great. But the most intense moments in the experience were intensely negative. (They were actually harmful to Finley's health.) And the experience didn't end well. It was a rough transition from Google to the new startup, as Google tried hard to keep Finley by throwing more money and status at them, but had no plan for acknowledging the key issues that caused Finley to leave. As a result, Finley exited Google in deep conflict with their manager — and the manager, who felt betrayed, beleaguered, and surprised, refused to act as a mentor or even a reference as Finley continued their career journey with a different company.

Employee engagement is important. It's incredibly relevant to the work experience. But employee engagement is not a good measure of the overall employee experience. An alternative to this scenario is an employee who feels incredibly supported and loves their company, but is not engaged in the actual work for a variety of reasons. So focusing exclusively on employee success is not sufficient either. **Work leaders must develop a broader understanding of what employee experience actually means, and all of the subdomains that comprise it. But that doesn't mean that every moment in each of the subdomains must be great! It simply means that the most impactful, memorable moments must be as awesome as possible, that intensely negative moments are eliminated, and that important transitions (beginnings and endings) are invested with intent.**



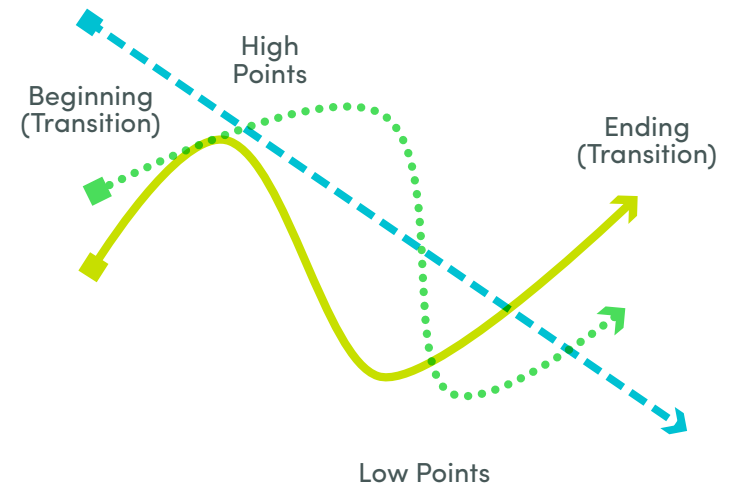
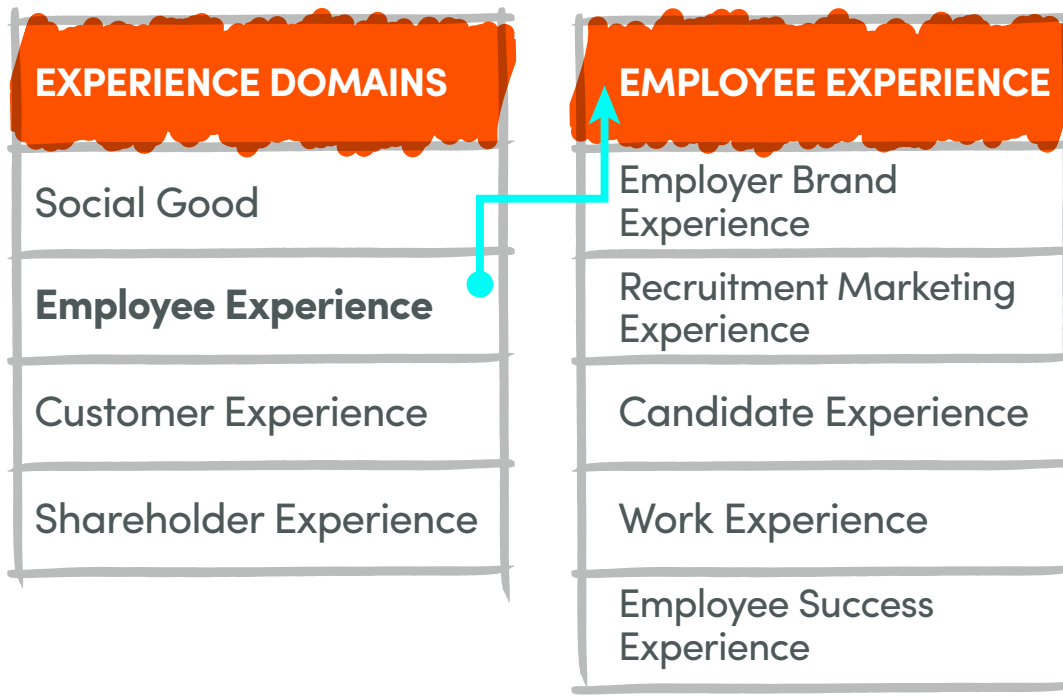


A Strategic Framework for Employee Experience

Employee Experience (EX) is one of many interrelated experience domains.

EX has several subdomains.

Every subdomain of EX has several defining moments. (And an infinite number of possible variations on quality of those moments.)





3 Steps to Your Own EX Framework

If you're ready to get serious about employee experience, here's a road map for how to do it.

1. Take an inventory of your overall employee experience by gaining insight into the defining moments in each of the subdomains. This is easy to do with research. You can use surveys, interviews, focus groups, or existing data sources like eNPS comments and engagement surveys to determine the state of defining moments in each subdomain. *How did your candidate experience begin? What was the best moment in the process? What was the worst? How did it end?* You may also want to begin with the primary initiative in mind. For example, you may already know that your candidate experience stinks, or that your company is terrible at creating a great employee success experience. So use research to drill down into the most impactful subdomain.

- 2. Consider each subdomain in the context of the overall EX and the multiple other subdomains.** For instance, does your work experience alienate people because it is so out of sync with what is promised in the candidate experience? No subdomain of EX exists in a vacuum. What ties all these subdomains together and delivers continuity across the entire domain of EX? Purpose. Every defining moment should flow from the company's purpose. And purpose should be firmly rooted in the social good.
- 3. Focus on heightening the peak moments.** Eliminate the low moments and invest in transition moments with intent and purpose.





5 Criteria for *Defining* Defining Moments

There is an important paradox in this strategic framework for employee experience. One must acknowledge that work leaders cannot control all the moments that an individual experiences. However, we can control the nature and quality of defining moments. In other words, we can *define* the defining moments.

It starts by identifying transition, high, and low moments. But knowing what they are is only the beginning. Now we must work to truly define the nature and quality of these moments. But how do we define defining moments?

Once again, Dan and Chip Heath in their book [*The Power of Moments*](#) offer the beginning of a solid framework for defining moments. We have expanded on that framework here to offer additional insight into moment creation.

Defining moments must:

- 1. Flow from the company's purpose:** Our purpose at The Starr Conspiracy (deeply rooted in Social Good) is to create abundance. We work hard to create abundant employee, customer, and shareholder experiences that contribute to the Social Good. So when we create moments in a subdomain of EX, we ask ourselves a simple question: *How can we invest this moment with abundance? Abundance means many things to us, but we can draw from all of them to help create defining moments. Are we thinking big instead of small? Are we demonstrating plenty instead of scarcity? Are we promoting happiness instead of resentment? Are we signaling our ability to embrace change instead of fearing it? Are we demonstrating a learning mindset? Are we focused on what is working instead of what is broken?*



5 Criteria for *Defining* Defining Moments (Cont.)

- 2. Be elevated from the everyday:** Defining moments are elevated beyond everyday moments. Beginnings, endings, and peak moments should all be elevated beyond the mundane. In other words, make a big deal out of the moment. Throw in some production, pomp, and circumstance.
- 3. Deliver insight:** Defining moments offer authentic insight into the true nature of the company and the true nature of the individuals sharing the moment. These moments should cause people to stop and take inventory of their experience with the company. This can often be achieved by focusing on those things that people have achieved that are most in line with the company's purpose and values. By recognizing the achievements that are critical to maintaining the unique, healthy culture of the company, people develop more trust that the company is who it says it is and more insight into themselves in relation to others and to the purpose and values of the company.
- 4. Promote pride:** Every defining moment should make a person feel seen, recognized, and proud. It should come with a standing ovation and a trophy — metaphorically speaking, or not!
- 5. Deepen connections:** Bringing people closer together into healthy, productive relationships is what defining moments are all about. Each defining moment — whether a transition or peak moment — should increase a person's feeling of belonging and strengthen their ties to the team and the company. Defining moments are not handled through text or email. They are invested with intent and purpose. And they certainly don't happen in private.

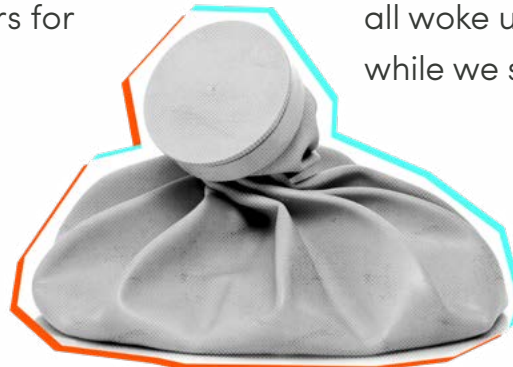


Back to the Beginning: Remember That Trip of a Lifetime?

Let's return to where we started. That trip sounded like a pretty amazing experience, right? It was. But upon closer inspection, there were many moments during the trip that were not so great. I actually kept a journal during the trip. While writing this article, I went back through that journal and was surprised by some of the terrible moments I had forgotten:



- **July 24 — Arrived at our first stop, Hot Springs. Noticed a huge crack forming in the windshield.**
It's the only part of the RV rental not covered by insurance! Spent the entire next day trying to find someone who could repair it.
- **July 29 — Broke down on the Blue Ridge Parkway.**
Was riding the brakes too hard. Started to smell smoke, then the RV caught on fire. Pulled off on the side of the road and waited 4 hours for roadside assistance.
- **Aug. 8 — The heat and mosquitoes drove us out of the Everglades.** We've never felt oppressive heat like that. And there was no escaping the mosquitoes. We all had hundreds of mosquito bites and the kids cried all night. So we packed up and left the next morning, two days earlier than expected.
- **Aug. 12 — Bonnie rolled off the top bunk last night and scraped her back on the bunk bed ladder.** We all woke up to her shrieks and she cried for two hours while we soothed her back with an ice pack.





Moments That Matter Most

These days, we all look back on those traumatic moments and laugh. Even though they were real low points on the trip, we don't dwell on them. In fact, we only think about them when someone brings them up. But why are we able to laugh about them now? We certainly weren't laughing then.

Heath and Heath provide an extensive answer to this question in their book *The Power of Moments*. In short, social science has proved that the human brain is incapable of remembering every moment over the course of a life. So the brain groups moments into experiences and tags the experiences with the most significant moments to reduce the processing power required to make future decisions based on the experiences.

Would I go on an RV trip again? (That's a question I get a lot.) *Absolutely! Why? Because of the way the trip made me feel based on the moments I remember most.* And, like most people, the moments I remember most are the beginning, the end, and the peak moments in between.

"What's indisputable," write Heath and Heath, "is that when we assess our experiences, we don't average our minute-by-minute sensations. Rather, we tend to remember **flagship moments**." (Emphasis mine.)

At The Starr Conspiracy, we call them **defining moments**. Because they end up defining the quality of the entire experience.





Getting Employee Experience Right

We hope this helps you on your journey toward defining employee experience, adopting a strategic framework for EX within your company, and creating defining moments that bring people together instead of push them apart. Remember that employee experience is much bigger than most companies currently contemplate — it's **not** just about making people feel good and like their company. That EX is a domain with multiple subdomains and that employee engagement is **not** one of those subdomains — engagement is an outcome. That the nature and quality of all domains and subdomains of experience are

defined by a few significant moments (transitions, high points, and low points). That we don't need to make every moment great — only the ones that matter most and we have to nail those. That any individual's perception of the quality of an experience is not an average of all moments — it's the big ones that count the most. And finally, that companies and work leaders can significantly and rapidly improve their overall employee experience by taking an inventory of defining moments and working to invest those moments with intent and purpose.





There Is an Art and Science to the Creation of Defining Moments

That's something The Starr Conspiracy is very good at. So if you would like help understanding the nature and quality of your current employee experience, and creating defining moments that enhance people's multifaceted experience with your company, don't hesitate to give us a ring.

We'll be happy to spend time with you on a (virtual) whiteboard talking specifically about your EX opportunities and issues and offering a few ideas and insights.



Let's Talk

The Starr Conspiracy has been at the vanguard of employee experience for more than 20 years (since before there was even the phrase *employee experience*). We deliver agency-quality defining moments for every dimension of the employee experience. We'd be more than happy to spend some time talking about what's working and what's not in your company's employee experience. We love this stuff.

LET'S TALK



About The Starr Conspiracy

You're busy navigating the suddenly present future of work. You don't have time to teach an agency what to do. At The Starr Conspiracy, your employee experience is our purpose. Employer brand or recruitment marketing. Candidate experience or employee success. We accelerate results. If you are creating an innovative workplace, there's no better experience agency to bring your employer experience to life.

The Starr Conspiracy is co-located in Fort Worth, Texas and San Francisco. Learn more at thestarrconspiracy.com.

