

Designing Employee Experience Through Culture: A Framework for Culture Shift in Organization

Kazuhiko Yamazaki

Musashino Art University/ X Design Laboratory, Inc., Hiratsuka, Japan

ABSTRACT

In recent years, Employee Experience (EX) has become a critical focus in organizational management, shifting from traditional human resource administration to maximizing employee engagement. Driven by diversifying work styles and the correlation between EX and Customer Experience (CX) under Service-Dominant Logic, organizations are increasingly leveraging “EX Design” to enhance employee satisfaction, motivation, and productivity. This paper explores EX Design and conceptualizes it through three relational dimensions: brand contracts (addressed via brand experience design), transactional contracts (addressed via service design), and psychological contracts (addressed via culture design). Because psychological contracts involve implicit expectations and shared assumptions, culture design plays a paramount role in shaping a positive EX. The paper defines culture design as the intentional and strategic shaping of shared values and mindsets, making implicit norms visible and embedding them into organizational practices. To operationalize this transformation, the study proposes a comprehensive four-step framework for “Culture Shift”: (1) redefining organizational vision and mission, (2) assessing the current organizational culture, (3) co-creating the desired culture, and (4) implementing design-driven interventions. Furthermore, we present practical strategies for executing these interventions across four key domains: communication, community, events and rituals, and services and systems. By integrating EX Design with strategic culture shift methodologies, this paper provides a holistic framework for organizational transformation. The findings suggest that culture-driven EX Design goes beyond formal systems, designing shared meanings and relationships that serve as vital drivers for sustainable innovation, talent retention, and competitive advantage in dynamic business environments.

Keywords: Employee experience, Culture, Design, Culture shift, Service-dominant logic, Organizational transformation

INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly evolving landscape of contemporary corporate management, the prioritization of the Employee Experience (EX) has emerged as a critical imperative. Historically, human resources (HR) departments have operated under a paradigm focused primarily on the administration and management of “Human Resources”—treating human capital as a quantifiable asset to be optimized for operational efficiency. However, a profound shift is currently

underway. The central focus of modern HR strategy is transitioning from mere administrative management to the maximization of “Employee Engagement” through the deliberate design of the workplace experience.

Employee Experience (EX) is defined as the sum of all interactions and experiences an individual has through their working relationship with an organization. Crucially, this definition extends beyond traditional full-time employees to encompass freelancers, independent contractors, business partners, and all stakeholders contributing to the organizational ecosystem. Leading innovative companies exemplify this structural transition. For instance, Airbnb has notably restructured its human resources operations, renaming the department “Employee Experience” to reflect a fundamental commitment to valuing the experiences of its workforce as highly as the experiences of its guests and customers.

To systematically enhance this experience, the application of design methodologies—termed “EX Design”—has gained significant traction. The growing importance of EX Design is driven by several macro-environmental factors: the diversification of work styles (including the rise of remote and hybrid work models), a fundamental shift in the sources of corporate competitive advantage from tangible capital to human creativity, the evolving core values and expectations of the workforce, and the empirically proven positive correlation between EX and Customer Experience (CX).

This paper explores the theoretical underpinnings of EX Design, the critical role of organizational culture, and proposes a comprehensive, four-step framework for executing a “Culture Shift.”

THE PARADIGM OF EX DESIGN

EX Design refers to the deliberate strategies, activities, and architectural implementations aimed at elevating the holistic experience of employees. The ultimate objective is to enhance organizational productivity and competitive advantage by fostering higher levels of job satisfaction, intrinsic motivation, and profound engagement. The necessity for EX Design can be understood through the lenses of service logic, motivational theory, and human-centered design principles.

A primary catalyst for the prioritization of EX is the transition towards a Service-Dominant Logic (S-D Logic) in modern business models. Under S-D Logic, business activities are inherently viewed as services where value is co-created with the customer. Consequently, to deliver an exceptional Customer Experience (CX) or User Experience (UX), it is an essential prerequisite that the employees delivering these services possess a correspondingly high EX. Tracy Maylett and Matthew Wride emphasize this dependency, arguing that “you cannot create a breakthrough Customer Experience without first creating a breakthrough Employee Experience” (Maylett, 2017). The internal satisfaction and psychological safety of the employee directly translate into the quality of service provided to the end-user.

The necessity for EX Design is intimately linked to the evolution of human motivation. We are currently operating in the era of “Motivation 3.0,” a concept popularized by Daniel Pink, which emphasizes intrinsic drivers such as autonomy, mastery, and purpose. This contrasts sharply

with the “Motivation 2.0” era, which relied on extrinsic reward-and-punishment models. Employees today seek meaning and personal growth in their work. Traditional HR policies often fail to address these intrinsic needs, making the design of an engaging, purpose-driven experience an organizational necessity.

From a methodological standpoint, EX Design leverages the core tenets of design thinking. This involves a cyclical, iterative process: deeply empathizing with and understanding the target audience (employees), analyzing their core values, identifying friction points and situational challenges, brainstorming innovative solutions that generate genuine joy and satisfaction, and rapidly prototyping and evaluating these ideas. Crucially, this design process must align not only with the employees’ desires but also with the organization’s overarching brand identity, ensuring a coherent “brand experience” for the workforce.

THE THREE DIMENSIONS OF THE EMPLOYMENT CONTRACT

To effectively operationalize EX Design, Schein proposes leveraging the concept of “Contracts.” In this context, a contract is not merely a legal document but represents the totality of explicit and implicit expectations defining the relationship between the organization and the individual (Schein, 2016). These can be categorized into three distinct domains, each requiring a specific design approach (see Table 1).

Table 1: The three dimensions of the employment contract and design approach (Yamazaki, 2024).

Contract Type	Definition and Scope	Design Approach
Brand contract	All implicit promises that individuals interacting with the organization interpret from the corporate brand. It represents the corporate brand as experienced internally by the employee. This aligns closely with the concept of “Inner Branding,” ensuring that external brand promises match internal realities.	Brand design
Transactional contract	Mutually understood, bilateral, and explicit agreements. Examples include formalized employment regulations, compensation structures, benefits, and explicit employee services. These are the tangible components of the employment relationship.	Service design
Psychological contract	Implicit expectations and responsibilities that define the unwritten terms of exchange between the organization and the employee. This contract is deeply intertwined with the unarticulated, lived organizational culture. Breaches here cause the most significant damage to EX.	Culture design

While Brand and Transactional contracts are vital, the Psychological Contract is often the most elusive and impactful. Addressing it effectively requires a deep dive into the design and intentional shaping of organizational culture.

ORGANIZATION CULTURE AND ITS DESIGN

To master the Psychological Contract, organizations must understand the anatomy of culture. Edgar H. Schein, a foundational figure in organizational studies, defines culture as a pattern of shared tacit assumptions learned by a group as it solves its problems of external adaptation and internal integration. These assumptions, having worked well enough to be considered valid, are taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. In practice, culture often functions as the unspoken consensus on “what should be done” and “how things work around here.”

“Culture Design” is the intentional and strategic formation and modification of these shared values, behavioral norms, and cognitive patterns within an organization. It begins with defining a target state—“what kind of culture should be built”—in strict alignment with the corporate vision and mission. Subsequently, the organization designs environments, systems, and interventions to influence human behavior toward that ideal state.

A critical initial step in Culture Design is rendering tacit knowledge explicit. Organizations must visualize and formalize the core values they wish to champion. This can manifest in the creation of a “Culture Book” or a formalized code of conduct. However, to ensure deep resonance and psychological ownership, this process cannot be strictly top-down. It requires co-creation and bottom-up engagement, giving employees a voice in defining the cultural norms they will inhabit. Furthermore, integrating “Rituals” into the daily workflow serves as a powerful mechanism for cultural permeation. Kursat Ozenc notes that rituals are repetitive actions performed by individuals or groups following a specific script, imbued with profound symbolic meaning and intention, helping to anchor abstract cultural values into concrete daily behaviors (Ozenc, 2024).

CULTURE SHIFT

A “Culture Shift” denotes a fundamental, systemic transformation in the cultural fabric—values, beliefs, behaviors, and habits—of a society, organization, or community. In a corporate context, a Culture Shift is often triggered by external pressures (technological innovation, economic paradigm shifts, global crises like the COVID-19 pandemic) or internal catalysts (leadership transitions, strategic pivots).

Driving a Culture Shift within a corporate entity is a complex endeavor that requires specific, sustained strategies and continuous action. It is not a one-off campaign but a longitudinal organizational development process. To facilitate this, organizations must establish dedicated roles and accountability for culture management. In Western corporate contexts, the role of Chief

Culture Officer (CCO) has become increasingly prevalent, signaling a formal commitment at the C-suite level. This trend is also gaining traction globally; in Japan, forward-thinking technology companies like Money Forward have begun establishing dedicated culture divisions and equivalent executive roles to steward this transformation.

A FOUR-STEP FRAMEWORK FOR CULTURE SHIFT

To systematically architect a Culture Shift, we propose a rigorous, four-step design framework. This sequence ensures that cultural interventions are grounded in an accurate understanding of the present and deeply aligned with the organization's strategic future.

Step 1: Re-evaluation of Vision and Mission. The foundation of any cultural transformation is organizational purpose. Leadership must critically assess and redefine the vision and mission to ensure they are resonant, inspiring, and suitable for the contemporary socio-economic era. A culture shift cannot occur if the underlying organizational purpose is obsolete.

Step 2: Assessment of the Current Culture. Before navigating to a new destination, an organization must accurately map its starting point. This involves conducting deep qualitative and quantitative research—surveys, ethnographic observations, and sentiment analysis—to grasp the actual (often tacit) perceptions, sentiments, and assumptions held by both leadership and the broader workforce. Discrepancies between espoused values and in-use values must be identified.

Step 3: Definition of the Desired Culture. Based on the renewed vision (Step 1) and the reality of the present state (Step 2), the organization must formulate the ideal future culture. This culture must be explicitly designed to support new business paradigms. Crucially, this target culture should be established through collaborative co-creation sessions involving executives, middle management, and front-line employees to guarantee broad buy-in.

Step 4: Implementation of Design-Driven Interventions. The theoretical target culture must be translated into actionable reality. This requires designing, prototyping, and executing specific interventions across various organizational touchpoints, continuously evaluating their impact, and iterating based on feedback.

STRATEGIES FOR IMPLEMENTING CULTURE SHIFT

To operationalize Step 4 of the framework, we categorize the necessary strategic interventions into four distinct, interconnected domains: Communication, Community, Events and Rituals, and Services and Systems. Each of these areas requires the application of the iterative design cycle: Research → Concept Generation → Prototyping → Evaluation. This research proposes a Strategies for implementing culture shift (Table 2).

Table 2: Strategies for implementing culture shift.

Strategic Domain	Design Focus & Interventions	Examples & Case Applications
1. Communication	This involves architecting the flow of information and sentiment. It includes facilitating authentic, bidirectional dialogue between the C-suite and employees, structuring transparent internal communication systems, and ensuring external PR/branding accurately reflects internal cultural truths.	Interactive “Culture Dock” platforms. Transparent Intranets and internal social networks. Structured, regular “Ask Me Anything” (AMA) sessions with executives.
2. Community	Culture is sustained by the communities that practice it. Organizations must intentionally design structures that allow cross-functional, purpose-driven groups to form. This includes both formal task forces and informal grassroots networks that bridge the gap between the organization and the outside world.	Establishing cross-departmental study groups or R&D circles. Funding autonomous, employee-led innovation clusters. Creating joint research ecosystems with universities and partner firms.
3. Events & rituals	Rituals serve to anchor abstract cultural values into the physical and temporal reality of the employee. They range from grand, organization-wide celebrations to the micro-interactions that dictate how a daily stand-up meeting is conducted or how a new employee is welcomed.	Weekly “Town Hall” wrap-up events to celebrate failures and successes. Standardized, culturally-aligned greeting and onboarding rituals. Customer co-creation events that break internal silos.
4. Services & systems	A culture shift will fail if the underlying organizational mechanics do not support it. This involves aligning hard HR systems (hiring criteria, promotion pathways, compensation) with the target cultural values, as well as designing physical workspaces and IT infrastructure that implicitly encourage desired behaviors.	Revising performance evaluations to weight “cultural contribution” alongside KPIs. Providing autonomous educational stipends (e.g., book purchasing funds). Designing office layouts that force serendipitous collisions among staff.

CONCLUSION

By integrating EX design with culture design and culture shift, this study provides a comprehensive framework for organizational transformation. It highlights the paramount importance of designing not only transactional services and rigid systems but also the shared meanings, tacit expectations, and interpersonal relationships within organizations. As demonstrated, culture-driven EX design operates at the core of the psychological contract.

The frameworks and strategies proposed herein suggest that deliberate, design-led interventions in organizational culture can serve as a key driver of sustainable innovation. In increasingly complex, dynamic, and competitive global environments, companies that successfully operationalize EX and Culture Design will be uniquely positioned to attract top talent, foster enduring engagement, and co-create profound value across their entire ecosystem of stakeholders.

REFERENCES

- Maylett, T., Wride, M. (2017). *The Employee Experience: How to Attract Talent, Retain Top Performers, and Drive Results*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Ozenc, K.(2024). *Rituals for Work*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Schein, E.H. (2016). *Organizational Culture and Leadership*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Yamazaki, K.(2024). *Design Approaches for Organizational Culture and Vision Implementation*. HCD Conference Proceedings 2024.