



Trauma-Informed Leadership Case Study: The Transformative Power of the Employee Experiences Questionnaire in the Public and Non-Profit Workplace.

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Introduction

In today's evolving work environment, organizational success is deeply intertwined with employee well-being. Both the City of Hayward, California, and Episcopal Children's Services (ECS) recognized the urgency of addressing workplace wellness, burnout, and the broader impacts of trauma. A key instrument in their transformation was the Employee Experiences Questionnaire, which provided critical insights into change readiness, trust, capacity, and trauma-informed leadership principles. This case study highlights the profound impact of deploying this assessment tool and how its findings shaped sustainable workplace improvements.

The Employee Experiences Questionnaire is for organizations interested in assessing their organization's readiness for change, trust within/among leadership and peers, and trauma-informed leadership characteristics. The Employee Experiences Questionnaire has four subscales:

1. Readiness for Change
2. Trust
3. Capacity
4. Trauma informed leadership

Why Valid Instruments Are Critical for Today's Workforce

Now more than ever, the quality of measurement is not only critical, but also a question of personal and professional ethics. Unfortunately, trauma informed leadership and workplace assessment questionnaires/surveys are not given the necessary attention needed before rolling out small or large strategic planning or change projects. It's not unusual for organizations to skip robust assessments all together. This is problematic given the increases of mental health challenges, burnout and trauma in the workplace and if not conducted appropriately, there is a strong likelihood of causing secondary and vicarious trauma within today's workforce. That begs the question. How can leaders guide an organization and its workforce through change if they don't know their team's readiness for change, their levels of trust, their capacity to take on more work, or their

social and emotional needs? That's like asking staff to walk on a high wire, across the Everglades while juggling watermelons and chainsaws, during a hurricane, blindfolded.

You can't. Staff will fail not because of the blindfold and the wind. They will fail because of the lack of leadership navigation and safety net. They failed because leaders failed to set them [and yourself] up for success.

Understanding the theoretical and statistical underpinnings of survey administration and survey validity is fundamental for implementing trauma-informed assessments, training, and transformational change efforts in an already exhausted workplace. I developed the Employee Experiences Questionnaire to appropriately measure the degree to which change readiness, trust, capacity, and a trauma informed work environment (factors) – over time -- influence an employee's work experience (construct). Instead of asking staff one question, once a year like the Net Promoter Score, the Employee Experiences Questionnaire collects benchmark data on change readiness, trust, capacity, and trauma informed characteristics and is readministered quarterly to measure change progress or setbacks.

Is the Employee Experiences Questionnaire Valid? Yes!

In early 2022, the Analysis Factor, located in Ithaca New York, conducted a factor analysis on the Employee Experiences Questionnaire to determine its construct validity. In other words, Analysis Factor tested whether there is a relationship between change readiness, trust, capacity, a trauma informed work environment (factors) and an employee's work experience (construct).

Let's dig a little deeper. Some variables in leadership or organizational design studies are directly observable such as the percent of people of color in leadership positions or the amount of time staff spend on a specific task. Other variables, such as staff's fear, safety, trust, or capacity levels are not directly observable. The Employee Experiences Questionnaire collects several [related] unobservable variables quarterly for and uses responses to make inferences about the observable variables. Make sense? The statistician found strong correlations between the Employee Experiences Questionnaire items and construct, thus deeming the questionnaire valid. It measures what it's supposed to measure.

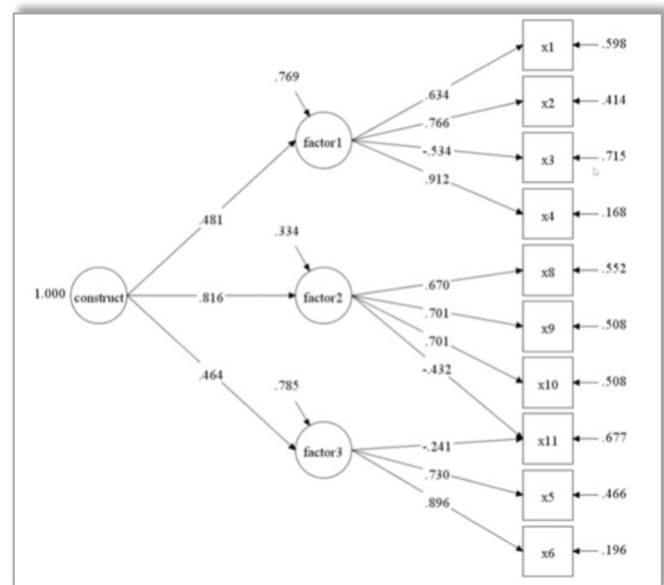


Diagram 1 shows how the correlations between the Employee Experiences questionnaire items (x1-x11) can be explained by correlations between each questionnaire item and an underlying factor (Factor 1,2 and 3). These correlations are known as factor loadings and are represented by arrows between the factors and the questionnaire items.

City of Hayward, California: Using Employee Feedback to Drive Cultural Change

Background

Recognizing the growing importance of workplace mental health and engagement, the City of Hayward took a proactive approach by deploying the Employee Experiences Questionnaire to assess the organization's ability to navigate change, establish trust, and foster a trauma-informed culture.

Data Cleaning

- 97 responses (65% response rate)
- Removed all cases that didn't pass the attention check item (n=12)
- Removed all cases where no demographic information was provided (n=4)
- Removed incomplete cases (n=4)
- Final sample size: 77 people (51.6% response rate)
- Gender analyses did not include the one nonbinary person, but their responses were included in all other analyses

Survey Findings and Key Insights

The survey, with a 51.6% response rate, uncovered significant insights:

- **Change Readiness:** While most employees understood the need for change, responses indicated varying levels of motivation and excitement about new organizational shifts.
- **Trust and Morale:** Employees with flexible work arrangements reported higher trust in supervisors and colleagues, while concerns persisted among in-person staff.
- **Workload Capacity:** A large proportion of respondents expressed difficulty managing both current and additional workload expectations.
- **Trauma-Informed Leadership:** BIPOC and non-Hispanic White employees significantly differed in their perceptions of leadership transparency and inclusiveness, highlighting the need for improvements.
- **Other Statistically Significant Findings:**
 - *The was a statistically significant association between staff tenured for more than 5 years and trusting their co-workers*
 - *The is a statistically significant association between staff working from home or hybrid and capacity to manage their current workload.*
 - *The is a statistically significant association between staff working from home or hybrid and their excitement about the new change*
 - *The is a statistically significant association between staff working at the COH for more than 5 years and their motivation to adopt new change*
 - *The is a statistically significant association between race and fear of change*

Outcomes

By leveraging these findings, Hayward implemented key interventions:

- Leadership training focused on trauma-informed principles to enhance trust and engagement.
- Revised workplace policies to address stress management and mental health accommodations.
- Enhanced communication strategies that prioritize transparency and inclusive decision-making.

The City of Hayward's commitment to evidence-based decision-making through the Employee Experiences Questionnaire has led to meaningful and measurable improvements in workplace culture.

Episcopal Children's Services: A Data-Driven Path to Trauma-Informed Leadership and Workplace

Background

Episcopal Children Services (ECS) in Northeast Florida embarked on a mission to strengthen employee trust, engagement, and retention through a structured trauma-informed leadership approach. The Employee Experiences Questionnaire served as the foundation for understanding organizational strengths and areas for improvement.

Data Cleaning

- 403 responses out of 703 (57% response rate)
- Removed all cases that didn't pass the attention check item (n=13 didn't answer at all; 66 answered incorrectly)
- Removed all cases where no demographic information was provided (n=10)
- Removed incomplete cases (n=12)
- Final sample size: 302 /703 people (43%)

Survey Findings and Key Insights

The survey, conducted with a 43% response rate, provided clear data-driven priorities:

- Change Readiness: Employees showed hesitancy toward new organizational changes, with management more enthusiastic than non-management staff.
- Trust and Morale: A statistically significant correlation was found between BIPOC employees and their trust in supervisors, revealing disparities in leadership perceptions.

- Trauma-Informed Practices: Employees highlighted gaps in mental health accommodations, employee voice in decision-making, and transparent leadership communication.
- Workload Stress: More than half of employees reported increased work-related and personal stress over the past 12 months.
- Other Statistically Significant Findings:
 - *The is a statistically significant association between flexible work and in person as it relates to excitement of new change*
 - *The is a statistically significant association between management and non-management as it relates to excitement of new state of change*
 - *The is a statistically significant association between staff with flexible workplace and in-person and trusting their supervisors*
 - *The is a statistically significant association between staff with flexible workplace and in-person and trusting their co-workers*
 - *The is a statistically significant association between staff tenured for more than 5 years and less than 5 years and as it relates to creating policies and procedures to mitigate racial trauma or discrimination*
 - *The is a statistically significant association between staff with a flexible workplace and in person as it relates to giving space to mental health challenges*
 - *The is a statistically significant association between staff with a flexible workplace and in person as it relates to personal stress over the last 12 months*
 - *The is a statistically significant association between management staff and non-management staff as it relates to new levels of work stress over the last year*
 - *The is a statistically significant association between staff who supervisors and non-supervisors as it relates to new levels of work stress over the last year*

Outcomes

ECS responded with concrete actions:

- Power of 3 leadership training to address gaps in trust, transparency, and psychological safety.
- Creation of Cultural Ambassadors, responsible for bridging communication between leadership and employees.
- Quarterly tracking of trust, capacity, and engagement to measure progress and refine strategies over time.

By deploying the Employee Experiences Questionnaire, ECS gained real-time, actionable insights that allowed leadership to make data-informed changes, fostering a more inclusive, supportive, and resilient workplace.

Why is the Employee Experiences Questionnaire important?

People-centered leaders keep their fingers on the pulse of their organizations. Why? Because culture is the soul of a company. Assessing how new or tenured employees

"feel" through the Employee Experiences Questionnaire helps leaders better understand whether employees trust each other, do they feel valued and safe with their supervisor, are their social and emotional wellness needs being acknowledged, and do they have capacity to do their work well and on time, regardless of the location of their office? Knowing this, leaders can meet their teams where they are during small or large transformational change efforts, set them [and your KPIs] up for change success, and build change resiliency both vertically and horizontally.

Ask yourself this question. Are you expecting your staff to walk across the Everglades on a high wire or are they already there without a safety net (See Table 1 and Table 2)?

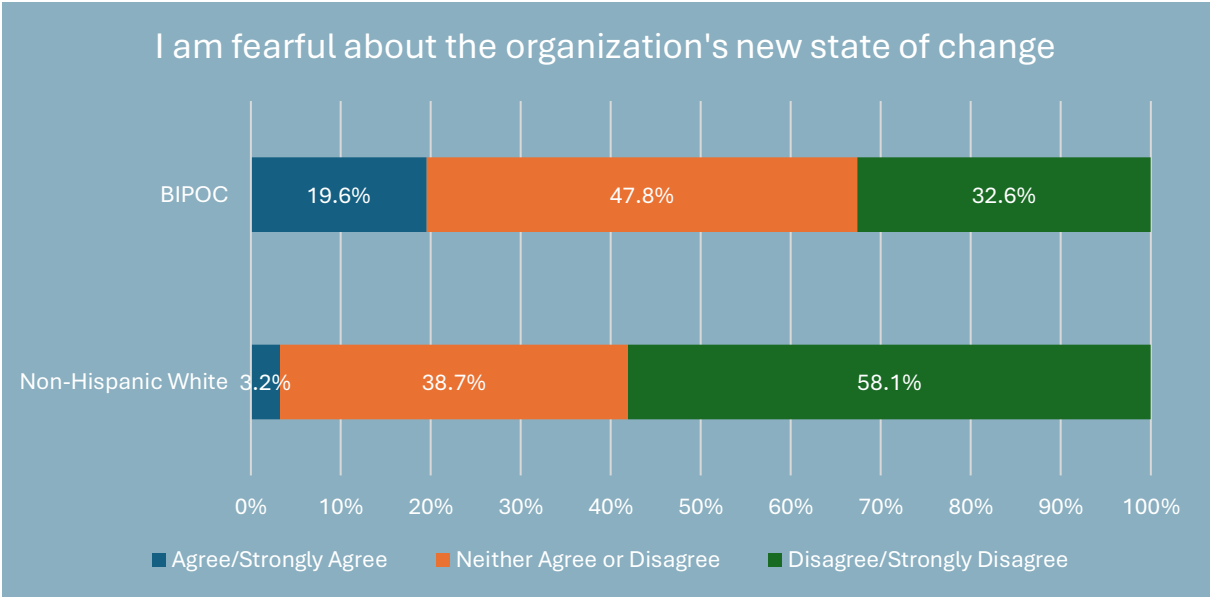


Table 1

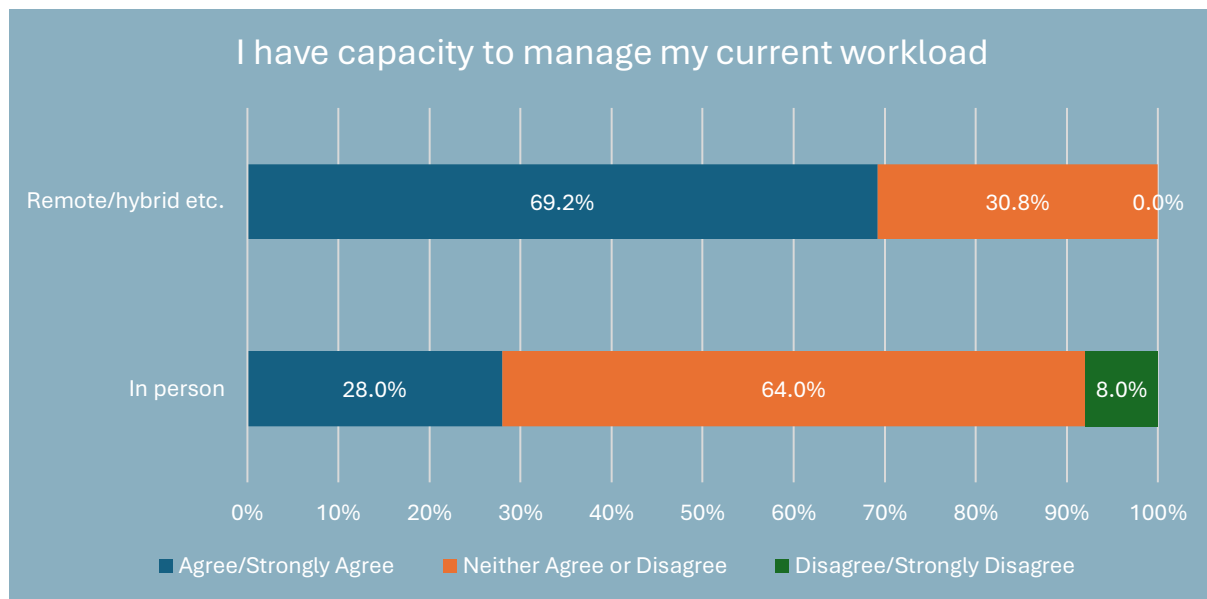


Table 2

Conclusion

The Employee Experiences Questionnaire proved to be a critical tool for both the City of Hayward and Episcopal Children's Services in their journeys toward trauma-informed leadership. By prioritizing employee feedback and data-driven decision-making, these organizations successfully enhanced trust, engagement, and workplace well-being. This case study underscores the necessity of continuous assessment and targeted interventions to create truly sustainable and trauma-informed workplaces.

My Why

As one of the pioneers of the trauma informed workplace movement, I am motivated as hell to start a new leadership paradigm today, right now. A paradigm that starts with creating 1M Trauma-Informed Leaders in America by 2031.

For more information on how you can get started with your personal development or creating a trauma-informed workplace, visit www.dawnemerickconsulting.com or contact Dawn Emerick at dawnemerickconsulting@gmail.com.

