Employee Engagement & Recognition

Shut Up and Listen – Driving Employee Engagement in the Age of AI



Interview with Kalifa Oliver, Ph.D.

Kalifa Oliver is an experience coach and executive advisor, the author of the book, I Think I Love My Job, which explores modern workplaces and how to design a people-centered approach and she currently serves as the Global Director employee experience analytics strategy at Ford.

Employee engagement has really been front and center in all the roles you held. You have a Ph.D. in industrial organizational psychology, and you are a proud self-confessed data nerd. Your expertise is in building brilliant human experiences, using people-centered design and data analytics. Tell us about your journey and career path and how you have seen the importance of employee engagement evolve over time.

I've always been somebody who's really into the idea of what it is that makes people tick at work. My parents were teachers and principals and as we know, don't get paid a whole lot. And so the question has always been, what keeps them there? I'd see my parents show all this pride in being able to teach these lessons to these kids and really stick with it. Well, it has to be this thing that keeps them engaged. I've always been about that. And they've always instilled that curiosity in me. And so, as I got to college, one of the things I had kind of heard was industrial organizational psychology. It just happened to happen. And I said, I think that's what I want to do because it helps me really understand the psychology of work and why people work.

In my academic career I've been focused on the elements of work. So, if you think about sentiments, you think about commitment, loyalty, satisfaction, commitment, all these things before they had this name, this pretty box, engagement was one of those things. And so, I would study that too, what it is about this thing "engagement" that motivates people to work or demotivates people to work. In my career I've worked for large companies, I have worked for big brands, I've worked for smaller companies, tech companies, start-up companies and you realize the issue is always the same. How do you keep people engaged in this work and how do you create this experience? When I first started employee experience wasn't a thing. So we were really focused on these elements of work: Loyalty, commitment, satisfaction, stress, these little elements of work. And one of the big things I would do is try to put data to it. How do we measure these things? How do we take these things that feel very intangible and make them tangible? So, I would borrow a lot from consumer analytics and customer analytics to try to get those pictures. What I've started to see is that we realize that people are a lot more multifaceted than engagement alone allows us to be. So, what I think we have done, is we have slowly started to decenter engagement from being the core of an experience and recognize that engagement itself is very inner driven and it's a part of an employee's experience. An employee's experience is more than just how engaged they are with the work, it helps them. But what else is around them, right? I've seen that evolution, well-being, inclusion, diversity, the environment, flexibility, these are the elements that are now being considered when people think about engagement. They just don't think about it by itself anymore. So there's a shift away from "let me just know my engagement score" to "how does that fit into the experience that we're trying to create"? So, your EVP is more than just your engagement score. It's what companies have to offer, and I'm seeing that growing. I'm very happy

to see it grow, and I'm also very biased because I can measure it better. I can measure it better, and so my data spider sense helps me to do more, but you can really solve more problems. It becomes more actionable because now you have more context. And so I've seen that evolution happen, and I hope that evolution continues. And the more I see technology being added into the mix, that's a new element of the employee experience as well, that helps us really understand, okay, well, "how does this tie to how people engage with work"?

What data driven strategies and technologies have proven most effective from your experience to improve employee engagement, but also to retain top talent and really help to foster a positive organizational culture?

I'm biased here. But the first thing is to find tools in which you can take the employee voice, the employee sentiment, and tune it into something that is real. And the evolution of technology. So, I have watched a long time ago, and I'm hoping I'm not dating myself, when we had open text data, which is unstructured data, which is my favorite type of data, it took sometimes months to get any quality thing out of that. You would have three people in a room, two had to agree, somebody had to type it, we had to pull it out, it was very subjective. I've watched it change from text analysis, natural language processing, now AI with data training. I've watched these models evolve through technology that has sped up the way we can understand massive amounts of data, and it's gotten a lot more natural language, multi-language, which is really good. And now you can take that and tie that back to more structured data pieces. So that's a big thing. The other thing where I'm biased in terms of listening is: The best data strategy you have is to shut up! It is the best data strategy. Because data is a tool, data is not the be-all and end-all. Data is a tool and data can be your friend. You don't drive data, You let the data tell you what it is saying and then you interpret it and help let it drive you and tell the story, if you will. And I think too many of us, we try to talk with the data when the data is trying to talk to us and we just need to start listening to that data. That data is telling us everything we need to know and we're getting more and more tools that allow us to hear in multiple different ways. You listen to not just what your employees are saying to you in some more obvious methods, like surveys, but you also listen to what they're not telling you in attrition, in retention, in talent mobility. What they're telling you when they go on Glassdoor, LinkedIn, they tell you in multiple different ways, you go and you see what sites they're clicking on, that tells you. They're telling you a story and I think a lot of data scientists, when you're really good at it, the best data scientists know to listen, listen, and then act. And so it's sometimes very hard because we love to talk in HR, but You learn to listen more. If you're ever responsible to understand the employee voice, the number one rule I tell everybody is "you have to learn to shut up". If you're not prepared to shut up, it's not the place that you need to be in.

What do you think is the most successful engagement initiative that you have introduced at a company you've worked for or have worked with?

I think one of the hardest things to solve is employee relations escalations. One of the things that anybody who has ever worked in the employee listening space knows is that no matter how much you tell people to not put their business on a survey, they're going to put their business on a survey. In many cases, people will see a survey and think: "this is the one time and the one place, no matter how they redirect me to go to employee relations, this is the one time, I know this is my chance, this is my moment, I'm going to tell it all." Right? One of the issues with that is, as long as you have open text and you allow people to say things, right, you can't control what happens in that moment.

But once that data comes to you, you have a responsibility with that data and what to do with it. Right? And so if you think about a U. S. context, any data that comes into the organization has the ability to be discovered in any legal case. That is just the truth. They are discovery, right? So that's why you have to be really careful when you craft your policies, when you have open text, to understand how you're going to use that data once it comes in. Because you have an obligation to the employee, but you also have to balance that with the confidentiality that the employee expects. So, a lot of that is the disclosure elements and balancing those things that people don't think about - the risk. But one of the things I did a long time ago was that the time to get something from a survey comment to employee relations was long, it was subjective, it was just multiple people reading hundreds and hundreds of comments, and I mean thousands of comments, and saying, oh, this looks

like an allegation, this might be an allegation, and so it took very long. It could take about six months before it could be escalated up. Right? And then by the time it got there, the situation could have gotten worse, the person could have left. There's nothing really you can do, right? So you can't do it. Meanwhile, if you're in a regulatory group, and in this case I was in a regulatory industry, they're like "we could find these things, why can't y'all?" Right. So, one of the things I did with the help of a dear friend, who's a data scientist, is we built an NLP model. One of the elements of it was:

Theme, Priority and Should it be escalated? Yes/No.

And then we trained the model based on what was actually considered an allegation by the employee relations function and that employee relations function had to give us examples of what they were. Then we would build a model and say:

Are these allegations? Do you think these are allegations? Yes/No.

Would you act on these? Yes/No.

Would these close out? Yes/No.

And then what ended up happening is that what would take about six months, once we started running a model, we had about a 90 percent level of accuracy and could get it over in a month. And it was slowly starting to get to shorter times. But of course, now the list is getting longer. And I joke, because ER wasn't happy with us at the time. They ended up having to hire more people, because now the time to get things there for investigations and the accuracy that we had created with this model meant that we were listening in a very different way. And now that means that any investigation or allegation or any experience thing that could be addressed could get faster to action. And so the company themselves recognized that and they ended up having to make provisions to hire more employee relations folks in order to do it. So, that was a big one for us, they probably didn't love us at that time, but I was proud of it.

What are the do's and don'ts of creating a continuous listening program? There is this notion of balancing transparency and trust, is that even possible?

So the one thing I tell people is, no matter ,when it comes to employee surveys, because of the imbalance of power between an organization and employee, there is nothing I can tell people that will lead them to believe that we're not sitting down reading every last one of their responses and in general, we cannot do that, especially in larger companies. You just cannot do that. The influx of it, I'll be reading for months. So again, you can understand why there was a problem in the highly regulated one where somebody actually had to read it to get it out. But there's no way to do that, it's not sustainable practice. There will be more mistakes, right? But there's no way I could convince people that I am not that pressed to read thousands of comments. So that's the first thing. Generally it's not one person reading all of your comments and learning all of your business. But the first thing I do is, if you're ever starting up, or revamp an employee listening program, I call them my three best friends, my three best friends in every organization.: Comms, Risk & Compliance, Legal. And when you think of a civic program, these are not the first people that you think of, but these are your best friends. These are the people you get in your corner. These are the people who help you understand how to write your privacy policies, understand GDPR changes, because they change very often, right? That is how you start balancing that trust and transparency. One of the biggest things with transparency, although it might make people uncomfortable, is telling them "this is how I'm going to use your data. This is how I'm going to disclose it and I'm going to tell you this upfront because I want to know that when you leave your answers, you fully understand and are aware of how this data will be used." I think a lot of times we don't want to say that, because we're afraid of response rates, but I tell people you want people to give you the responses and you want them to feel good about the responses they are giving you. If they don't trust you, they're going to give you BS. I would prefer less robust data, than higher response rates with a bunch of garbage in it that I can't do anything with. So that's the first thing. You build trust over time. So maybe you start a program out and you get a 20 percent response rate, but you act on that and you show responsibility with the data. It grows. It is on the organization to do that, not on the people to just trust you with the data. That is just the reality of where we are. And that balance is always recalibrating, because laws keep changing, relationships keep changing, things keep changing, items might change that have some sensitivity. And so, you constantly have to keep your eye on what is most relevant to the employees right now.

What do we need to know?

What are the decisions we're trying to make?

Make sure your survey doesn't feel like a test.

If you want to know how somebody's feeling, if you want to know their satisfaction, just ask them. It's not a test, it's not an experiment, just ask. I think we try to be too clever. No, just be black and white:

This is what I want to know.

This is what I want to measure.

This is what I want to report.

I think that's how you balance it. The other way to balance that whole transparency piece is that action. What did you find out and what did you do with it? Because I'm asking you to give cognitively of your time and to be honest and vulnerable with me on this paper, on this page, on this survey, on this tool. And then I turn around and I tell you nothing. I turn around and I see nothing. Then you're not listening to me and you're just doing this as a "check-the-box" and I am not required to help you check your box. So if you treat me like garbage, I'm going to give you back garbage. That's generally how the human condition is and that's how people feel.

And so I think that's the dance that you have to do, but you always constantly recalibrate, recalibrate, recalibrate, make sure that what you're doing stays relevant, that you're not trying to compete. I can't compete with Google, I'm not in tech, right? Like, I can't take their survey and drop it in my organization. I shouldn't take their benchmarks and drop it in mine. And so it's really just building that muscle. And I think that's how you really really start to listen and you really get it. And the other thing I will tell you one secret, if you are ever tasked to design an employee listening program, don't assume you know everything about a business or what employees are experiencing. You have your own biases of your experience. And so when you see things that come into the survey, it might be that you now need to convert something into a new question because that's something that may not have been something that crossed your mind, but it's clearly something that is important in the organization. So again, it comes back down to shutting up and listening and letting the data tell you things as well.

One thing intrigued me when you mentioned earlier your three best friends, isn't there one best friend missing and that's the senior leadership?

They're not my best friends. They're the bosses. My best friends have to have my back so that I can go to them with confidence. I got to be locked in arms with my three best friends to go to senior leadership. IT is another group, You want IT to be a friend as well. Cause you got to rely on them for the ACM data and all that. So senior leadership, they're the bosses. We don't get them mad. They're the godparents.

How do you get senior leadership to back employee engagement strategies? Do your three best friends come into play?

Well, they do in different ways. But one of your best, best friends in these things is Risk. If we do this, what is the business risk? This is Legal too, but if they look at business risk, business risk is more tied to operations and outcomes and I think often when we go in to talk about employee listening, we speak HR, but we need to be speaking Risk. What is the risk to the company if we don't know this thing? What is the risk to the company from a business standpoint? If this goes out to the media, if this is on LinkedIn, how does this impact our EVP? How does it impact our money? So, they are our best friends, but we have to learn to speak that language in terms of investment. The truth is just speaking the language of HR is part of not the necessarily problem, but it's part of the issue. HR is very wide and multifaceted, right?

And HR traditionally has been very transactional. The idea of analytics and People Analytics in HR is still not as popular as people who like me are practitioners believe they are, right? It's still a fairly new concept in that sense. But what do people, what do all business people understand? Money. And they understand risk, and they understand business outcomes, and that's what they want to talk about. So, if you talk about it in terms of feelings. Well, we really just want to know how the employees feel. We just want to know how they feel today. That's a nice to have. But if I say, we really want to understand what the impact of this sentiment is on our customers, on our products. Does having all of this turnover mean that we cannot best service our customers, is it decreasing the quality of the products that we're providing or the services that we're providing now that's a business and operations

issue. And that's how you get the buy-in. You speak the language of the business. It's HR, but we don't just have to speak the language of feelings. So I think that's what helps.

Do you think that technology and especially AI and Machine Learning has transformed how you can speak the business language, but also how employers approach employee engagement as a whole?

I think it has, in good and bad ways. I'll start with the good. In good ways, it allows us to get more information faster, which allows us to tell the story faster. That also allows us to close the gaps faster. In any meeting where somebody brings up a random question on people you could in real-time quickly use technology to get something. So, that's the good of it. We love it. There's more reach faster. It sounds more natural in the language, it doesn't sound as academic, it sounds relatable, right? A leader would say, "Oh, I've been through that, I get it." It's much easier to speak that language. And it also means that it's more accessible to multiple people across the business, and it's more relatable and democratized, as data is.

The downside is, what it does sometimes, because you can't see the work it takes behind the technology, that there is this feeling that you can replace people with that technology. You could replace the need to carry out all these because this is the most efficient way. The problem is that does not work in HR. In HR, when you deal with people, people are extremely complicated and complex and they change daily. So, every time you think that you have taught the machine, you have taught your tool or trained your AI tool to solve your people, they're going to do a crisscross for you. And I tell people that the most poignant example of this is 2020. Every single forecast was wrong. Imagine if you had replaced a bunch of people because of that forecast. Every single data forecast was wrong. Nobody could have accounted for what COVID was going to do, and still people are having problems accounting for what COVID has done. Nobody put pandemic in their bingo card, right? AI is not new, Machine Learning is not new, we were using it. Banks have been using that stuff to forecast for a long time, but nobody puts that in their bingo card. But there are people who could be like, okay, we're on the ground and we can see the change. So all of these things that we need to retrain and redo are important. We need to learn the technology and the technology needs to be the extension of us. It's a tool, right? It's just like if I'm a carpenter and I have a hammer, that's what that is. That is a tool for me, right? I don't expect the hammer to hammer itself. I don't. So why if AI and technology are tools, are we expecting it to hammer itself? And I think that's, that's where we are. Again, I think when it comes to work, when you take work and put it in any other situation - it's so absurd- we say this is a new tool that I brought in and it's going to work by itself. Is it though? Who's training it? Who's checking to see if there are errors? Who's checking it to see if it needs to be recalibrated? You won't do that with anything else. You will never leave AI just to build your products and ship them out. You will never ever do that because you know better. Right?! Don't do that with your people. I think that's the key. Don't do that with your people. I love technology. Listen, give me some technology all day. it makes my life easier, it allows me to go swim in my data and backstroke in my data in peace. Right?! But I recognize that I need to be there because HR data requires context. People data requires context and if you don't, then you're not telling a story. You're just as bad as those AI stories coming out where everybody's like, "this doesn't make any sense", you know?!

As we're thinking about the future of work, what culture changes do companies actually need to make now to stay ahead of the curve?

I think technology needs to be a part of our forecasting now. That is the truth. We need to understand what these skill gaps are. Forecasting, workforce forecasting and planning was typically: Well, what humans do we need? What skills do we need? Where do we source people from? What are we looking for? I think we need to add technology to that. What jobs can technology do to create more efficiencies? And then, once we have those efficiencies, what people and skills do we need in order to maintain and improve those efficiencies over time? I think those are the conversations we need to have. The constant fear of technology is absurd. I'm still old enough to remember when laptops were a thing. Computers were just coming out, right? Everybody was like "oh, computers are going to do all our jobs." No! Now we're all just sitting in front of computers. We all just learn new skills. We're just not in front of a typewriter anymore. We all had to learn how to use a computer. It became a part of how we learn, it became a part of our schooling, it became a

part of what we do. We now hand out assignments. That's the same thing that's happening with AI right now, right? Now people are using it for assignments. It just means that our skillset has to change. We have to learn more prompt engineering now. So we don't always have to be in competition with the technology. And the other thing is, listen, organizations like money, okay? That is why they're in business and that's okay. So, there is absolutely no way you can tell me that if I introduce AI, I introduce some sort of technology that now allows me, who used to make 10 things, to make 100 things an hour. You know what they do now? They're not going to replace me, but I will just make 100 things. What it's going to do now is bring in 10 pieces of technology and one of me, it's another 10 of me, and it's making a thousand things an hour. That is how business thinks, right? So we do not have to worry about the fact, we just have to worry about what skill looks like and what work looks like and not try to always hold on to the things of the past. Or else we'd still be using fax machines only and typewriters, which we're not. Work changes, work location changes, how people work changes, and that's okay. We'll change with generations and we'll change with skills. So, for example, we talk about workplace flexibility, and we're worried about it. But GenZ basically grew up on a computer. We have an entire generation of people who went through a pandemic, so they know how to work remotely. That is what they know. They grew up in front of computers. They've built whole communities of people that they play with and share with online. They know better how to do it than all the other people. That is just the world. That is just how technology is being used. And I think we're more afraid of what we don't know, but we have to remember, these younger generations, this is what they know. So we're afraid of something that has nothing to do with us. You know what I mean?



Thinking about technology as a partner and extension of ourselves and not this thing, this doomsday thing that's going to take over, because I'm like, if they're going to turn into Skynet, it's going to turn into Skynet. There's nothing we can do about it. So we might as well just chill out and enjoy the advantages of technology now. And if they take over, they take over. What are we going to do?

The things I'm picking up on is a culture of innovation that embraces technology that is data-driven, but still has human oversight. So, people who differentiate between data-driven and data-informed would say it's dat- informed, but really there shouldn't be any difference between those two because, because that's what data driven should mean in any case. We need a culture of continuous learning, and we need a flexible culture that is more personalized for individuals than in the past.

Absolutely. I think if organizations learned a little bit more from the customer experience functions and the way we look at our customers as humans and individuals, and people who are intersectional and multifaceted in their personalities. I think we'll find better ways to understand and drive data to help us make decisions about our people. The example I would use is, it's the same reason, if I'm searching for an orange dress and my friend who's sitting right next to me has been searching for a purple dress and we both go on Instagram I see orange dress suggestions and she sees purple dress suggestions, right? And we're looking at the same thing. That's because you recognize that I am different from her and that's what we've trained our tools to do when it comes to customer experience, to recognize that we are both people, we're both individuals, right? And you see that, and we don't do that enough with our employees for some reason and we should. And we also need to recognize nine out of 10 times in some way, our employees are often also our customers.

You wrote a book that is called "I think I love my job". It's a practical guide that challenges common assumptions about how people can and should experience work. A must read for all leaders who are tasked with culture change and transformation. In this book, you have a number of real-world examples looking back on everything we discussed, what is your favorite real-world example featured in the book?

My favorite real-world example comes from when I worked at Walmart. That's my favorite, favorite example. Walmart at the time when I worked there, they were doing up plans for a new building and they were getting ready to close up those plans and make announcements. And at the time I was working there, doing survey analysis and measurement, a message came in, before we do this, before we make this announcement, before we close this up, let's do one more check, one more time, to make sure that we have covered everything that everybody wants in terms of building features and all this type of stuff. Because this was a big investment that they were making at the time. And I remembered, because I was running multiple different surveys, different tools, different experimental surveys as well, and we were testing items, I had noticed that in the open text, which again unstructured data is one of my favorites because you learn so much, I kept seeing stuff about light. Just light. And so at the time, if you've ever been to a Sam's Club, a Costco, those kind of buildings, a warehouse, that's how the buildings looked down there at the time. And I know they're making changes, but those were what the buildings looked at that time. Like You were working in a warehouse, that's how it looked down in the headquarters. And so, when I designed that survey about all these features that they gave us, I threw in light. And I got fancy, because I didn't just throw in light, I said natural light or artificial light? So, if you selected it, it asked which one you were talking about specifically. And so, I sent that survey out, it came back: Light - number one. And not just light, natural light. So, I started laughing because I'm like, man, what people want are windows, they don't care about the rest of these features. They don't care about your trees, they don't care about your cafeteria, they don't care about none of that. They want light and they want windows. They are sick of no windows, right? It was so funny when I was writing up the report, but I had to because it was so prominent.

So I wrote it up and I sent it out and I didn't think anything of it. It was just funny to me. And I also felt very validated that I wasn't crazy, I was seeing light come up a lot. And then when the announcement came out by the CEO at the time, at the very, very end of that email, and to this day, I wish I had a copy of it, at the very end of the email, it said: "And yes, we hear you. we will have a lot of light." And I was cracking up, because it was so funny, the amount of features and things that they thought about, the amount of things that crossed their mind, that something as simple as "the folks just want some windows, they want to see, they want some light, that's all they want", it wasn't something that crosses your mind. And that's one of those things that you go, oh, duh! And that's not going to take a whole lot out of us to add some windows to these buildings, that we're going to create. And so, it's always been my lesson, ever so often, leaders expect that people are looking for a grand gesture, when they say they want to be seen, heard, and valued. But sometimes, all they want is something as simple as windows. And I think that has been my biggest lesson in employee listening, my biggest lesson in communicating with leaders and my biggest lesson in "follow where the data is taking you". Because that could have easily been missed, right? Windows was never on anybody's list. But it's still to this day, I'll tell that story until I can tell it no more. It's my favorite example of just really listening and seeing it happen in action. I should go back down there one day and see which one of these are Kalifa's windows.

The full video recording of the interview is available here.

