



Aligning Experience and Perception: A Predictive Framework for Improving Workforce Engagement, Wellness, and Career Optimism

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Executive Summary

Organizations continue to invest heavily in employee experience initiatives to improve engagement, wellness, and career optimism. However, these investments often fail to produce consistent outcomes. This white paper introduces the Employee Experience Perception Alignment Model as a predictive and actionable leadership framework that explains this gap. The model proposes that employee perception serves as the mechanism through which organizational experiences influence outcomes. When organizational intent aligns with employee interpretation, engagement, trust, wellness, and belonging improve. When misalignment occurs, organizations experience disengagement, reduced trust, and weakened workforce confidence. Recent workforce data reinforces the urgency of this issue. The Career Optimism Index® 2025 reveals that 51% of employees report burnout, 21% report a decline in career control, and 43% lack access to development opportunities, despite 86% actively seeking growth (University of Phoenix, 2025). The 2026 findings extend this narrative, revealing that employees are gaining confidence, autonomy, and career mobility at an accelerated pace, driven in part by artificial intelligence and emerging technologies (University of Phoenix, 2026). This shift introduces a new form of misalignment. Organizational experiences are increasingly interpreted through an evolving lens of capability and technological empowerment. This paper positions perception alignment, expanded to include employee capability, as both a leading indicator and a strategic lever for improving organizational effectiveness.

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Introduction

The modern workforce is evolving in response to technological disruption, shifting expectations, and increasing demand for meaningful work. As employees' capabilities increase, their expectations rise, and their tolerance for misalignment decreases. Organizations have responded by investing in employee experience through leadership development, wellness initiatives, and engagement strategies. Despite these efforts, workforce outcomes remain inconsistent (Gallup, 2023). The Career Optimism Index® 2025 identified a widening gap between organizational intent and employee experience, marked by high levels of burnout and declining perceptions of career control (University of Phoenix, 2025). The 2026 study builds on this insight, revealing a more complex dynamic. Employees are not only interpreting organizational experiences differently but are increasingly shaping those interpretations through their growing capabilities and access to tools such as artificial intelligence (University of Phoenix, 2026). Artificial intelligence represents a turning point in workforce dynamics. It is no longer limited to productivity enhancement. It is expanding employee capability, increasing confidence, and reshaping expectations for growth and career mobility. As employees gain access to tools that enhance their autonomy, their interpretation of organizational experiences evolves accordingly. Organizations do not directly produce engagement, trust, or career optimism. Employees interpret organizational actions, and those interpretations determine outcomes. Increasingly, those interpretations are influenced not only by experience but also by an employee's perceived capability and control (Rhymes, 2023; Saks, 2006).

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The Employee Experience Perception Alignment Model integrates concepts from social exchange theory, employee engagement research, and organizational behavior. Social exchange theory suggests that employees respond to their perceptions of organizational treatment (Blau, 1964). Engagement theory emphasizes that psychological conditions influence employee involvement and performance (Kahn, 1990). Organizational justice research further supports the idea that perceptions of fairness shape employee attitudes and behaviors (Colquitt et al., 2001). Within this framework:

- Organizational experience represents intended actions (Dutton et al., 2010)
- Employee perception reflects how organizational actions are interpreted through processes of sensemaking shaped by context, communication, and prior experience (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Men, 2014; Weick, 1995)
- Employee capability reflects perceived control, skill development, and adaptability, including the ability to leverage emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (Bandura, 1997; Kolb, 1984; University of Phoenix, 2026; World Economic Forum, 2023)
- Employee outcomes represent engagement, trust, wellness, belonging, and career optimism (Seligman, 2011)

These outcomes extend beyond engagement and trust to include employees' sense of psychological safety and belonging within the organization. Together, these elements provide a structured lens for understanding how organizational actions translate into workforce outcomes. Within this framework, artificial intelligence functions as a catalyst, accelerating capability development and reshaping how employees interpret and respond to organizational experiences.

Employee Experience and Perception as Leading Indicators

Employee experience represents the organization's intended design, while employee perception reflects the lived reality. When these elements align, employees are more likely to experience trust, engagement, and a strong sense of belonging (Saks, 2006). When they diverge, the result is disengagement, reduced confidence, and diminished workplace wellness. Perception is shaped through sensemaking processes influenced by leadership behavior, communication clarity, prior experiences, and social context (Men, 2014). However, emerging workforce data indicate that employee capabilities increasingly shape perceptions. The Career Optimism Index® 2026 highlights that employees are gaining confidence and control over their careers, driven in part by AI adoption (University of Phoenix, 2026). This shift suggests that employees are no longer passive recipients of organizational design. They are active interpreters, equipped with tools that expand their expectations and redefine their career trajectories.

Artificial Intelligence as a Driver of Perception and Capability

Artificial intelligence has emerged as a defining force in workforce transformation. Employees are increasingly leveraging AI to enhance productivity, build skills, and navigate career decisions more independently. The Career Optimism Index® 2026 indicates that many employees report increased confidence and greater control over their professional futures, driven by AI-enabled capabilities (University of Phoenix, 2026). This evolution fundamentally reshapes how employees interpret organizational experiences. As capability increases, employees evaluate organizational systems differently. They compare what is available internally with what is possible externally. This creates a new dynamic in which expectations rise faster than organizational adaptation can keep pace. According to the Career Optimism Index® 2026, 75% of employees reported increased confidence and 66% reported greater control over their careers because of AI adoption (University of Phoenix, 2026). At the same time, organizations are struggling to keep pace. Employers report that workforce skill development, particularly in AI, is advancing faster than organizational systems can support. This widens the gap between employees' capabilities and the organization's readiness.

Evidence of Systemic Misalignment

The Career Optimism Index® 2025 identified structural misalignment in workforce design, including limited access to development and inconsistent investment in employee growth (University of Phoenix, 2025). The 2026 findings extend this misalignment by introducing a gap in pace. Employees are evolving faster than the systems designed to support them. While organizations

continue to invest in experience, employees are interpreting those experiences through an expanded lens of capability, autonomy, and opportunity (University of Phoenix, 2026). This results in a critical disconnect. Employees may remain in roles for stability while simultaneously preparing for mobility. Engagement becomes conditional rather than committed.

Predicting Workforce Outcomes Through Perception

The model introduces alignment between experience, perception, and capability as a predictive variable. Research across organizational behavior, employee engagement, and social exchange theory suggests that employee attitudes and behaviors are shaped by how individuals interpret organizational experiences. When employees perceive fairness, support, growth opportunities, and meaningful engagement, positive workforce outcomes are more likely to emerge (Blau, 1964; Colquitt et al., 2001; Kahn, 1990; Saks, 2006). Consistent with this body of literature, the Employee Experience Perception Alignment Model proposes that alignment between experience, perception, and capability serves as a leading indicator of workforce outcomes. Higher alignment predicts:

- Increased engagement
- Stronger organizational trust
- Improved workplace wellness
- Greater belonging
- Higher career optimism

Lower alignment predicts:

- Disengagement
- Reduced trust
- Cultural friction
- Increased turnover intent

Workforce data supports this predictive relationship. Employees who perceive greater control and access to development opportunities are less likely to experience burnout and more likely to demonstrate optimism and engagement (University of Phoenix, 2025; University of Phoenix, 2026). As capability increases, tolerance for misalignment decreases. Employees who feel empowered but unsupported are more likely to disengage or seek opportunities elsewhere.

Improving Organizational Outcomes Systemically

Misalignment reflects system-level breakdowns rather than individual failure. Because misalignment originates within organizational systems rather than individual employees, sustainable improvement requires interventions that address communication, leadership behavior, development pathways, and workforce design. Research suggests that consistency between organizational intent and employee interpretation strengthens engagement, trust, and organizational commitment (Men, 2014; Saks, 2006; Colquitt et al., 2001). Organizations must:

- Align intended and perceived experience
- Integrate capability into workforce design
- Use continuous feedback systems to monitor perception
- Ensure leadership consistency
- Align talent acquisition, talent management, and talent development systems

A mixed methods approach provides an effective way to assess these dynamics and identify alignment gaps (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Leadership Implications

Leadership must evolve from delivering experiences to managing interpretation within a workforce shaped by increasing capability. Research suggests that leadership behavior significantly influences how employees interpret organizational experiences, perceive organizational support, and develop trust in organizational systems (Men, 2014; Edmondson, 2018). As employee capabilities expand with technological advancement, leaders must become increasingly intentional in aligning organizational intent with employee perceptions and development. Leaders must:

- Prioritize perception as a strategic variable
- Align communication and behavior (Men, 2014)
- Enable continuous feedback systems
- Foster psychological safety (Edmondson, 2018)
- Invest in internal talent development
- Integrate AI into workforce strategy

Artificial intelligence is reshaping the psychological contract between employees and organizations. Employees are building capability independently, increasing their expectations for alignment. Organizations that fail to adapt risk losing high-potential talent as soon as they become most valuable to them.

Call to Action

The literature and workforce evidence reviewed throughout this paper suggest that improving organizational outcomes requires more than implementing programs or policies. Organizations must intentionally address how workplace experiences are interpreted and how employee capability influences those interpretations. The following actions are supported by both organizational research and emerging workforce trends and offer practical strategies to strengthen alignment between organizational intent and employee experience. To improve workforce outcomes, leaders must take deliberate action:

- Conduct perception and capability audits. Regular assessment of employee perceptions enables organizations to identify emerging alignment gaps before they negatively affect

engagement, trust, wellness, or retention outcomes (Men, 2014; Edmondson, 2018).

- Implement real-time feedback mechanisms. Organizations should implement real-time feedback mechanisms to understand better how employees interpret workplace experiences and organizational decisions. Research suggests that ongoing communication, employee voice, and psychological safety contribute to stronger engagement, trust, and organizational commitment by enabling employees to share concerns and perspectives promptly (Edmondson, 2018; Men, 2014). Gallup (2023) further emphasized the importance of continuous employee feedback as a critical component of workplace engagement and performance improvement.
- Prioritize internal mobility and development pathways. Organizations should prioritize internal mobility and development pathways to support employee growth and strengthen career optimism. Research has consistently demonstrated that opportunities for learning, advancement, and professional development contribute positively to employee engagement and organizational commitment (Saks, 2006). The Career Optimism Index® findings further indicate that employees place significant value on skill development and career growth opportunities, while many organizations continue to struggle with providing clear pathways for advancement (University of Phoenix, 2025; University of Phoenix, 2026). The World Economic Forum (2023) similarly identified continuous reskilling and upskilling as essential organizational priorities in an evolving workforce.
- Align leadership behavior with organizational messaging. Leadership behavior should align with organizational messaging to reinforce trust, credibility, and perceptions of fairness. Employees evaluate organizational actions not only through formal communication but also through the consistency between what leaders say and what leaders do (Men, 2014). Research on organizational justice suggests that perceived fairness and consistency significantly influence employee attitudes and workplace behavior (Colquitt et al., 2001). Additionally, psychologically safe work environments are strengthened when leadership actions consistently reflect organizational values and commitments (Edmondson, 2018).
- Treat perception and capability as leading indicators of organizational health. Organizations should treat employee perceptions and capabilities as leading indicators of organizational health because both influences how employees interpret workplace experiences and respond to organizational initiatives. Social exchange theory suggests that employees reciprocate based on their perceptions of organizational treatment (Blau, 1964), while engagement research demonstrates that employees' psychological experiences influence involvement, commitment, and performance (Kahn, 1990; Saks, 2006). More recent research further indicates that employee perceptions of organizational actions can significantly shape engagement outcomes (Rhymes, 2023). The Career Optimism Index® 2026 extends this understanding by demonstrating that growing employee capability, particularly through AI adoption, is increasingly influencing perceptions of control, confidence, and career mobility (University of Phoenix, 2026).

Conclusion

The Career Optimism Index® 2026 makes one reality clear. The workforce is evolving faster than the systems designed to support it. Artificial intelligence is expanding employee capability, increasing autonomy, and redefining expectations. Organizations that fail to align with this evolution will continue to experience inconsistent outcomes. The Employee Experience Perception Alignment Model provides a predictive framework for understanding and responding to this transformation. By aligning experience, perception, and capability, organizations can move beyond implementation and toward measurable impact, creating workplaces where employees are not only engaged but also empowered, resilient, and optimistic about their future. As workforce expectations continue to evolve, leaders who intentionally monitor and manage alignment will be better positioned to strengthen organizational wellness, belonging, and long-term organizational performance. Further research should examine the predictive relationship between alignment, capability development, and workforce outcomes across diverse organizational contexts.

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