

Foreword By Dave Ulrich

# Beyond EMPLOYEE

Building workplace cultures that drive legendary employee experiences and phenomenal customer experiences!



KRISTINA G. VANEVA



## **PRAISE FOR “BEYOND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT”**

*“This book is a great overview of the entire employee journey designed to make every person in your organization feel seen, heard and loved. It has practical “try this” ideas in each and every chapter and you’re likely to learn something new from the perspective of all of your stakeholders, especially the HR function, from whom we don’t often hear. Make this your book to read this year.”*

**Dr. Louise Lambert**

**Editor of the Middle East Journal of Positive Psychology**

*“Kristina’s candid narrative about her personal workplace anecdotes makes her book an engaging and relatable read, especially resonating with HR professionals seeking insights into enhancing the workplace experience.”*

**Florencio, Jr. ‘Rhency’ Padilla**

**Founder/Managing Director, Perky People**

*“Packed with real-life, actionable examples and innovative ideas, “Beyond Employee Engagement” is every Leader’s handbook when it comes to bolstering the employee experience from*

*beginning to end. Whether you are just starting out as a Manager, or you're a CEO, "Beyond Employee Engagement" will give you the tools to empower your people, while directly impacting your customer experience and ultimately, your business profitability."*

**Rachael Knowles**

**Internal Communication Manager, Hospitality Industry**

*"Beyond Employee Engagement: Building workplace cultures that drive legendary employee experiences and phenomenal customer experiences", by Kristina Vaneva, is a must-read for leaders at any level in the business who would like to transform their organization and release the power of all employees to truly delight their customers. Kristina draws on her extensive experience working for and consulting with world-class organizations along with a robust academic pedigree to provide the reader with practical and proven strategies for building a culture where employees are not only engaged but also empowered, motivated, and committed to delivering results. She demonstrates how to foster a sense of purpose, trust, and ownership among employees and how to align their goals with the vision and values of the organization. She also shares real-life examples and case studies of successful companies that have implemented her approach and achieved remarkable outcomes. There are also great examples of what not to do or what to avoid. This book is full of valuable insights and actionable advice that will help you take your leadership and your organization to the next level. I highly recommend it to anyone who wants to create a high-performance culture that drives business success."*

**Gerard Moss**

**Senior HR Leader, Hospitality Industry**

*"One hundred and twenty years ago, George Bernard Shaw wrote that those who can, do; and those who cannot do, teach. 120 years ago, they had no Kristina Vaneva. Kristina can, she does, and she teaches others how to do it. A veritable antithesis to GBS's dictum.*

*We have all become somewhat familiar with the concept of Ikigai in our personal lives. Over the years, Kristina has mastered its equivalent for corporations and organizations—Employee Engagement. You could call it the secret sauce of success and, in this book, she shares her recipe."*

**Ambrose Muscat**

**MLRO & Compliance Manager, E-Sports Entertainment Group**

*"This book is a captivating journey through toxic workplaces to discovering a passion for employee experience. Kristina's emphasis on wellness and the powerful line, 'I learned then that if I didn't make time for my wellness, I'd be forced to make time for my illness,' struck a deep chord.*

*The unique perspective on career building, not solely based on experience but on attitude and cultural fit, challenges conventional narratives. The introduction promises a definitive blueprint for legendary workplace cultures, making it a valuable read for those navigating early career complexities and seeking inspiration and authenticity!"*

**Taniya Khadri**  
**Paralegal**

*"In this transformative book, Kristina illuminates how every touch-point shapes not just employee satisfaction but the very experience our customers receive. Reading it taught me how to unlock the key to inspiring our workforce and providing unparalleled customer service.*

*This isn't just dry theory; "Beyond Employee Engagement" is forged from the author's passionate heart, drawing on her personal journey, invaluable experiences, and years of meticulous research. It's an arsenal of actionable insights and practical strategies that can be readily implemented in any organization of any size or industry.*

*Imagine a workplace where your employees are motivated, engaged, and constantly striving to deliver exceptional customer experiences. That's the power you unlock with "Beyond Employee Engagement". This book is more than valuable; it's essential for anyone wanting to build a thriving organization where employees and customers sing its praises.*

*Don't settle for mediocrity. Seize the opportunity to transform your workplace and unleash its full potential."*

**Mounaim Lamouni**  
**Assistant Vice President—Culture and Engagement,**  
**Aldar Properties**

# BEYOND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

KRISTINA G. VANEVA







# BEYOND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

The definitive blueprint for  
building legendary workplace  
cultures that drive outstanding  
employee experiences and  
phenomenal customer  
experiences!

KRISTINA G. VANEVA



Beyond Employee Engagement  
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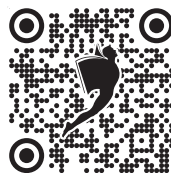
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To my wonderful family.  
I am eternally grateful for your endless love and support.



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## FOREWORD

**By Dave Ulrich, Rensis Likert Professor,  
Ross School of Business, University of Michigan**

*Twenty-four hours in a day, 168 hours in a week. What percentage of that time do you spend at work, going to/from work, and thinking about work? For many of us, work-related activities form a large portion of our waking hours (and sometimes impact sleep time!). In today's work world, employee experiences become a lead indicator of customer and investor experiences. As customers, we have all experienced both positive and negative employee experiences that shaped our attitude not only about the employee, but also the organization. Employee experiences drive customer experiences leading to investor experiences that make up the overall experience economy.*

*Even more, what happens at work very likely does not just stay at work. Our work experiences influence our personal lives with family and friends. A good or bad day at work will often determine how we feel about non-work activities. In a hybrid, more fluid work world, boundaries between work and non-work activities increasingly blur.*

*Kristina takes us on her journey of learning about and creating employee experiences for herself and others. She weaves together insights from others and her personal stories to offer specific guidance and actions on how any individual can create a more positive personal work experience and how HR and business leaders can drive organization-wide employee experience.*

*Integrating others' research and her experiences, she offers specific tips for how to improve the employee experience in both the physical/technological environment and the social/cultural environment. She demonstrates how the systems and processes (culture, staffing, communication, rewards and recognition, celebration, job and work design, learning and development, exiting a company, and analytics) can be designed to institutionalize engagement. Each chapter integrates relevant ideas, offers tools, and then suggests actions for making engagement happen.*

*In our book "Why of Work", we identified seven factors that created an "abundant" organization where people are engaged. Since then, we have distilled these factors into four themes:*

### **Be Safe**

1. *I have a job because my organization will succeed*
2. *Strengthen safety and healthy living*
3. *Promote a healthy work environment*

### **Believe**

1. *Clarify beliefs, values, desires*
2. *Connect work to my values, causes, people*
3. *Connect work to organizational outcomes I believe in*

### **Become**

1. *Develop and promote a growth mindset*
2. *Remember, “I’m not failing. I’m learning.”*
3. *Take risks to grow*

### **Belong**

1. *Connect with others by engaging*
2. *Connect by being authentic*
3. *Connect by supporting*

*Kristina’s work moves “beyond” and enhances these ideas. What stands out for me is that her thoughtful ideas about employee engagement at work have an impact across boundaries. Thus, the title “beyond” employee engagement leads to engagement in personal, family, community, and non-work-related activities. We have all experienced moments of delight where we feel purposeful, passionate, and connected. And, we have experienced the opposite, where we feel drained, demoralized, and isolated. The insights, tips, and tools Kristina offers can be used for personal engagement at work and not at work, but also for creating a more engaged organization.*



# PART 1 A Legendary Experience

## PART 1

Chapter 3: The Customer Experience in the Experience Economy

Chapter 4: The Employee Experience Journey

Chapter 5: A Company Culture - Inception, Living It, and Transformations

## PART 3

Chapter 7: Engage

Chapter 8: Positive Psychology in Organizations

Chapter 9: Internal Communication

## PART 4

Chapter 12: Learning and Performance

## PART 5

Chapter 15: Conclusion: When People Feel Better, They Do Better

## PART 1

A Legendary Experience

Chapter 1: The Journey of Transformation

Chapter 2: Vision Unveiled - The Grand Perspective

## PART 2

Chapter 6: Attract, Identify, Hire, Onboard

## PART 3

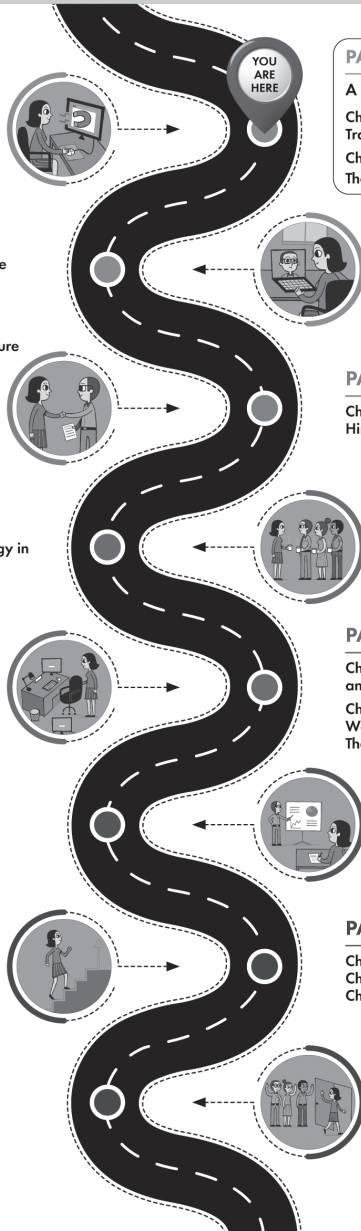
Chapter 10: Motivation, Pride, and Rewards and Recognition

Chapter 11: Employees Want Wellbeing From Their Jobs, and They May Resign To Find It

## PART 5

Chapter 13: The Exit

Chapter 14: The Metrics Chapter





CHAPTER 1

# THE JOURNEY OF TRANSFORMATION

In the summer of 2003, my grandfather passed away. I was not allowed to attend his funeral.

From that pivotal moment, I embarked on a journey that would shape how I view the world of work and, ultimately, the world itself. As I stood at that crossroads between duty and ambition, I made a choice that would set the course for a career dedicated to transforming workplaces into havens of inspiration and profound connection.

This journey began while I was living in Malta, a tiny group of islands in the Mediterranean Sea, working as a hostess in a popular nightclub. Meanwhile, my beloved grandfather was hospitalized in my native Bulgaria. Summer in Malta was the zenith of a pulsating and unforgettable clubbing scene, and my role required me to navigate this world independently, serving an exclusive clientele.

When my grandfather passed away, my boss presented me with an unfair dilemma. Attending his funeral would mean sacrificing my job—a job I had held for six years, where I was regarded as a loyal and invaluable team member. He warned me that if I traveled, I would not have a job when I came back. In essence, he strongly discouraged me from leaving the country.

This decision tore at my heartstrings. My grandparents had been my pillars since childhood, raising me alongside my parents in Libya and meaning the world to me. Still, my job also provided me with the financial independence I yearned for in my early twenties. The thought of getting fired was frightening, so I made the difficult choice not to attend the funeral. I should never have been asked to make that choice.

My journey through the world of work led to enriching experiences, from companies that disregarded work-life balance



to roles that left me perpetually bored. In some companies, I worked eleven to thirteen hours daily for weeks without even a word of recognition. Elsewhere, I lacked a sense of direction, guidance, and motivation, spending most of my time surfing the internet. I had toxic bosses who created unbearable work conditions, so much so that I developed a dangerously overactive thyroid gland at one highly stressful workplace. During these trials, I learned a critical lesson: If I didn't make time for my wellness, I'd be forced to make time for my illness.

The harsh reality is that such workplaces exist across the globe, in every industry. In 2008, when I embarked on a new chapter in the United Arab Emirates, I made a solemn vow. I committed to creating workplaces that radiated happiness, engagement, and opportunities to flourish. Organizations where employees felt psychologically safe, inspired, and deeply connected to their work, leaders, and colleagues. Places where every individual knew they mattered and, as a result, delivered extraordinary customer experiences.

Throughout this journey, spanning over sixteen years of combined work experience at some of the largest organizations in the U.A.E., and as an independent workplace consultant, I've had the privilege of collaborating with approximately twelve thousand extraordinary individuals from over ninety diverse nationalities. When I first began my HR career at one of the largest resorts in the Middle East, I was hired based on my qualifications and work experience. I was also offered the opportunity because of my positive attitude, creative and resourceful mindset, and essentially because I was a culture fit and a culture build. I came to understand this later and learned the importance of hiring individuals who fit the culture in addition to people who can be instrumental in building a

culture of brilliantly exceptional mindsets. These people are talents who can be encouraged to thrive, create, and show their true colors—not only for the benefit and growth of an inclusive and diverse organization, but also for the benefit of their customers, the UAE community, their home countries, and the world at large.

Starting anew in a foreign country, within an unfamiliar industry, and in a role I knew little about was initially daunting, but the strong leadership team and my intuition paved the way to a massively successful career. I achieved remarkable results, knowing that my endeavors genuinely improved the lives of thousands of employees and their families and left an indelible mark on the millions of customers we served. Together with my immediate team of committed superstars, and with the involvement of thousands of passionate volunteers and champions from other departments, we achieved transformational results. I pioneered the development and execution of the employee experience strategy and the employer branding plan, culminating in numerous prestigious local and international awards.

However, things were not very impressive to start with. We experienced a high employee turnover rate, which resulted in many of the newly recruited individuals departing the organization during the first year alone, and it didn't stop there. For the first few years, employee turnover rates remained high. We incurred substantial costs to identify, hire, develop, engage, and retain employees. This included additional related costs, such as overtime payments to replacement employees while suitable candidates were being recruited and onboarded. In general, millions of dollars are spent annually on recruitment in medium to large organizations, even more so in organizations plagued by high employee turnover.

We understood that the financial cost of high employee turnover wasn't the only loss we incurred. Employee disengagement negatively affects the overall customer experience, costing money and impacting the company's reputation.

Over the course of a decade, I dedicated my life to reducing employee attrition and employee turnover costs. Our journey also yielded a 26% increase in employee engagement, measured regularly through surveys. Favorable scores in areas such as internal communication, employee wellbeing, work-life balance, organizational development, and leadership perception soared to new heights.

The fruits of our labor did not go unnoticed. I was personally honored with numerous industry accolades, including "HR Person of the Year" from *Hotelier Middle East* magazine and "Manager of the Year," bestowed by my workplace. Our team and company also received several prestigious industry awards, such as "Best Employer" from Kincentric, "Best Employer Brand" from GCC Best Employer Brand Awards, "Best CSR Employee Engagement of the Year" and "Corporate Wellness Team of the Year" from Daman Corporate Health Awards, and "Best Employee Reward and Recognition Program" from the Brass Ring Human Resources Excellence IAAPA.

Education has always played a pivotal role in my journey to success. I hold a Bachelor of Communication with honors and an MBA, providing me with a solid foundation to understand business needs. Armed with this knowledge, I confidently partnered with and advised business units on how a great employee experience seamlessly translates into an exceptional customer experience and, in turn, drives outstanding business results. In 2019, I furthered my education, completing a Master of Science

in Applied Positive Psychology. This additional expertise armed me with the tools to enhance employee engagement and happiness in various workplace settings.

My tenure at Aldar Properties, one of the largest real estate development, education, and investment companies in the UAE, allowed me to craft the blueprint, lay the foundations, and shape the culture and strategy for the employee experience. This journey involved collaborating with every facet of HR and engaging with employees and the leadership team.

I am committed to helping organizations create an exceptional employee experience through an innovative signature framework. I've witnessed firsthand the stark contrast between uninspiring workplaces and those that ignite passion and purpose. The results are both impressive and transformative. A highly engaged workforce reflects on and positively impacts the employee experience. This contributes to an increase in employee productivity, a reduction in the total cost of employee turnover, and an unforgettable guest experience that fosters unwavering customer loyalty.

As I embark on this journey with you, dear reader, I am filled with excitement and humility. I look forward to sharing this signature framework with you in the chapters that follow.

This book is a product of passion and dedication, with zero help from ChatGPT, born from over two decades of personal and professional experiences. It represents the culmination of hundreds and thousands of hours of academic and workplace research and practice, encapsulating the essence of my Master of Science in Applied Positive Psychology and drawing from a wealth of textbooks, books, journal articles, and white papers.

I've distilled these insights into a concise and engaging narrative, with a reference list at the end for your convenience.

May your experience reading this book be outstanding!



CHAPTER 2

**VISION UNVEILED—  
THE GRAND PERSPECTIVE**

Sometimes, in our professional lives, we fail to see how every action and every decision is interconnected. The ripples of one choice can extend far into the future, shaping our experiences and those of our colleagues and customers. In this chapter, I unveil the big picture within workplaces, illustrating how every facet of work exerts a ripple effect on the experiences of all involved.

*Beyond Employee Engagement* is a journey for anyone seeking to make a profound difference in the world. Many of us spend almost an entire lifetime working, and our experiences at work deeply influence our lives and those around us. Workplaces can contribute positively to their employees, customers, and entire communities. They can do this through growing, training, and educating their workforce. They can motivate and reward exemplary behavior, which may in turn change how employees raise their children. They may also use effective, honest, transparent, and frequent communication, which creates meaningful connections and changes how they interact with those around them.

In this book's initial section, I will provide a high-level overview of the employee experience framework. The touchpoints in the framework will be broken down into detailed sections and chapters throughout this book. The last section will take you through some metrics of success that are crucial for building a robust business case for prioritizing the employee experience.

To be more specific and to set your expectations about the style of this book, in the chapters that follow, I share a blend of personal insights, research-based facts, and practical guidance on what can influence an employee's experience and, subsequently, a customer's experience. Together with you, I



will unravel the enigma of employee engagement and its influences, which are often hidden in plain sight. Recruiters may think that all they are doing is selecting, interviewing, and hiring candidates when they are actually influencing people's perception of the employer brand before they even join the organization. HR may think that all they need to do to onboard a new employee is show them where the bathrooms and the coffee machine are; in reality, they are impacting and influencing the very first minutes, hours, and days of the employee experience—and arguably the part most employees will remember the most. The hiring manager is integral and potentially one of the biggest influencers of the employee experience. Training, development, growth, communication, problem-solving, and engagement are all, to a certain degree, in the hands of the hiring manager when it comes to the long-term employee journey and, contrary to popular belief, not in the hands of programs that are championed by HR.

In the last decade, wellbeing has become a non-negotiable part of many corporate cultures. We'll explore the various dimensions of wellbeing, delving beyond physical and mental health to understand how a holistic approach transforms the employee journey and, consequently, the customer experience.

Our exploration extends to the realm of the customer experience. We'll examine the evolving landscape of the experience economy and emphasize that businesses must think beyond offering a mere service. Customers often seek unforgettable experiences; they want an emotional event they can relish and discuss with their loved ones. Beyond the experience, they want a transformation that will touch them emotionally and mentally, a service they will want to use repeatedly, and a service they will tell their

friends about. The customer experience chapter talks about how businesses can create experiences and how to stage them imaginatively, and about creating economic value for customers. The key to delivering these experiences lies in the employees. However, for them to be emotionally invested, their own journey at work must be inspiring and fulfilling.

Subsequent chapters will define the touchpoints along an employee's journey, from initial contact to retirement and beyond. These major touchpoints along the road begin as early as the first time you hear about a company. You could hear the name of a company in a conversation with your neighbor whose son was poorly treated by his manager and fired unjustly, or it could be because the cashier in your local supermarket has been so well-trained and mentored that she is now the store manager. Employer branding, or the company's reputation as an employer, plays a significant role in the beginning stage of the employee experience. This is followed by factors such as recruitment and how interviews are conducted, the involvement of your future manager, and how the team makes you feel during your first month at work. The employee experience is influenced by factors such as the physical and technological environment, but mainly by the organization's culture.

Our journey takes us on a cultural tour, where I provide ample food for thought that will help you understand the foundations of company culture and how to build it. I go on to discuss who is responsible for spreading it, delineating the role of leaders and culture champions. Toxic cultures have far-reaching consequences, affecting not only the workplace but also homes, neighborhoods, and entire communities. That is why colleagues at all levels, including senior leaders and HR teams, must constantly strive to create

and transform workplaces into positive and inspirational experiences where people are encouraged to do their best and be the best version of themselves.

As you read on, we will delve into the crucial task of attracting suitable candidates who resonate with a company's vision and mission. Talented and committed individuals who are motivated to go above and beyond, and who receive the necessary recognition and growth opportunities, will undoubtedly create an outstanding customer experience. But, for that to happen, potential candidates must feel that initial sense of connection to the company. This could be because they have similar core values or because people feel a calling to a particular profession and the industry itself is a big motivator for them, but that's not enough. We'll explore the importance of alignment in the interviewing and hiring process and how a welcoming, engaging, informative, and tailor-made onboarding experience sets the stage for employee success.

At the heart of the employee experience, I emphasize creating high-performing cultures that focus on engagement and empowerment through growth, learning, development, and wellbeing programs. There is a dedicated section on how workplaces can use positive psychology and well-executed internal communication strategies to engage individuals and teams and help them feel a deep sense of meaning and belonging.

The journey of employee engagement, learning, and development is ongoing and woven into the fabric of the employee experience. It spans beyond singular touchpoints such as hiring, onboarding, or exiting and is a continuous path toward growth and excellence. With the help of empowering growth policies, well-thought-out engagement strategies, and company-wide

rewards and recognition programs, individuals can reach their full potential and establish meaningful connections. These kinds of experiences can be transformative for employees, customers, and the wider community.

The book's last section centers around an employee's exit, be it voluntary or involuntary. Great workplaces prioritize professionalism, transparency, and empathy equally for all individuals, whether they are entering or leaving the company. Treating someone who has been terminated with dignity and respect shows a level of maturity that all companies should aspire to reach. Employee advocacy is gaining recognition as a significant and influential force in the workplace. Let's remember that a person leaving the organization is someone who can also return. If this individual is a talented employee who has contributed to a positive and supportive work environment, then companies should want them to want to return one day and should be doing something about it.

Lastly, the discussion on metrics provides a comprehensive understanding of how various measurements and research methodologies can illustrate the impact of employer branding, engagement, internal communication, wellbeing, rewards, recognition, and development strategies on the entire employee experience.

This complete blueprint will help you understand how to create legendary workplace cultures that lead to outstanding employee experiences and phenomenal customer experiences. Imagine the transformation in profitability when employee engagement elevates customer satisfaction, reduces attrition rates, and amplifies employee pride.

Our actions at work can profoundly impact those around us—from our colleagues to our customers to our communities.

Let's embark on a journey through the pages of this book, where we can work together to make a difference and create a better world through the everyday actions we take in our workplaces. Understanding this grand perspective will help us achieve our goal. Together, we can inspire positive change and leave a lasting impact on the world.



**EVER WONDERED WHAT SETS  
EXTRAORDINARY WORKPLACES APART?  
EAGER TO DISCOVER YOUR ROLE IN  
FOSTERING EXCELLENCE?  
LOOK NO FURTHER — THIS BOOK'S AN  
ESSENTIAL READ FOR YOU!**



Embark on a journey into the heart of workplace culture, where every step, from attraction to offboarding and potential reboarding, plays a pivotal role in shaping an outstanding employee experience and driving a phenomenal customer experience. In this definitive blueprint, discover the art of purposeful cultural crafting through practical, well-researched, and proven methods. Understand how your direct actions can transform ordinary workplaces into extraordinary award-winning organizations that drive exceptional business results.

**What if organizations could contribute to creating better humans?**

With *Beyond Employee Engagement*, you'll discover how investing in employees' holistic experiences creates advocates who go above and beyond the call of duty. Learn about the symbiotic relationship between engaged employees, customer loyalty, heightened profitability, and vibrant communities and societies.

**Who holds the key to transformation? You do!**

This book's your compass if you're a student, a practitioner, or a true believer in the pivotal role of Human Resources. It's a guide for leaders, managers, and aspiring team leaders who wish to positively impact people and contribute to a better world. Whether you're aiming to build an organizational culture, create a company that is top of mind for impressive talents, or assemble an authentic employee engagement strategy, this book provides everything you need on your journey.

**Your Blueprint to Success:**

Create inspiring workplaces that transcend the ordinary! Grab your copy of *Beyond Employee Engagement* today, and let this blueprint empower you to make a lasting difference. Take part in a united movement to shape a future where work's not just a place, but also a purposeful journey of fulfillment and a transformative experience for employees, customers, and beyond.

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