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What happened when Airbnb blew up its HR department to focus on "employee experience"

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When the overarching purpose of your company is "to help create a world where you can belong anywhere," your employees ought to feel they belong in your organization. At least that's what the leaders of Airbnb, the lodging rental and hospitality company, believe. And this belief explains why they place so much importance on employee experience (EX).

In fact, EX is the critical strategy that Airbnb — which has reached a \$31 billion valuation in less than ten years — relies on to build its brand and pursue its purpose. In 2016, the company adopted the slogan "Belong Anywhere" to express its brand identity and launched the "#belonganywhere" brand campaign. But its leaders believed these efforts needed to represent more than an external idea — the concept of belonging needed to apply inside the company as well. Mark Levy, who was Airbnb's global head of employee experience, explained to me, "We need to create a place where our employees feel they belong," he says. "Belonging starts here. We have to figure out internal belonging first, then we can break down the walls [with customers]."

The fact that Levy's role even existed at the company is a testament to its commitment to aligning employees' everyday experiences with i

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purpose and values. Before Levy's arrival, the talent department was a small team doing traditional HR work, and the recruiting department was a larger team tasked with growing the employee base to meet the needs of the business, while a group called "Ground Control," which was responsible for bringing the company's culture to life through its workspace environment, internal communications, employee events, celebrations, and recognition programs, reported into a different unit. Realizing that these functions and others in the company could address the end-to-end employee experience if they were combined, Levy and the company's founders asked themselves how they could bring together all the different ways they help employees be successful and feel that they belong.

- Taking a cue from their customer experience (CX) department, they created an "Employee Experience" group by: Combining the previously disjointed HR and company culture efforts
- Adding or joining facilities, safety, security, food, global citizenship/social impact, diversity, and belonging functions
- Developing the specialist areas of total rewards, learning, talent design, and talent systems — "everything in the whole journey of an employee's experience," as Levy describes it

The EX team works across functional silos to "create a seamless service delivery model or support for employees," he explains. "Running across everything is a focus on mission, values, and culture- that's the glue that holds everything together."

EX at Airbnb starts well before an employee officially joins the company. Since Airbnb has far more interested applicants than positions to fill (in 2016, it received 180,000 resumes for 900 positions), its hiring process primarily involves weeding people out, not attracting them, as is the case for some companies. To do that, Airbnb interviews candidates to make sure they are a good fit not only with the position they are interviewing for but also with the company's culture. Candidates are asked to participate in two interviews reserved exclusively to assess their fit with Airbnb's core values. The founders select the employees who conduct these "core values" interviews — and although they work outside of the function for which a candidate is interviewing, they have final say in whether or not a candidate gets offered the job.

This rigorous interview process serves another function as well: It offers candidates their first experience with Airbnb's unique culture, Levy explained. By taking the time to learn about the candidate as a person and their values, the interviewers live out and model one of Airbnb's core value: "Be a Host: Care for others and make them feel like they belong."

The company's overarching purpose and core values are also at the heart of its week-long on-boarding experience, which introduces new hires to Airbnb's purpose and core values, its business strategies and functions, and ways of working. Part of the experience includes shadowing a support specialist to give new employees firsthand exposure to the challenges guests and hosts face and how Airbnb supports them. By going through the on-boarding process with other new hires, Levy told me, Airbnb also inspires a sense of belonging among them, enabling them to form cohorts that hopefully stay together throughout their careers.

Once employees begin their jobs, their daily experiences — where and how they work — continue to be directly informed by the company's brand identity, purpose, and values. The food served in their café, for example, is inspired by a different travel destination every day. Hosts are celebrated everywhere: Each conference room is designed to match an actual host property, and giant portraits of hosts line the hallways.

Airbnb also designs its offices to help employees feel at home, a place where they belong. Included are a kitchen, a library, and places to meditate, practice yoga, or write on the walls. A green atrium that stretches up to three floors high evokes the feelings of being in a home garden. The company provides "landing stations" where employees can charge their devices and store their stuff, but it doesn't confine them to assigned desks, so they can work wherever they feel most comfortable.

The "Ground Control" team continuously shapes the employees' experiences in ways that reinforce belonging. By staging pop-up celebrations and themed events based on holidays in the communities around the globe where Airbnb does business, the team creates an environment that not only supports employees' sense of belonging to a worldwide community but also encourages them to create belonging experiences for customers. Airbnb sees employees as brand ambassadors who can increase the brand's awareness and reduce one of the company's biggest brand challenges, which is confusion about what it does and how it works. If employees personally experience the company's purpose and feel they belong, Levy explained, they can help clarify Airbnb's brand proposition to others.

These are some of the many ways that Airbnb infuses its EX with its unique core values. It's no coincidence that the company is producing sustained growth (with profits projected to increase by 3,400 percent in four short years), enjoys the strongest advocates of any brand (according to YouGov BrandIndex), and is one of the best companies to work for, according to LinkedIn's annual Top Companies list.

Powers the World's Greatest Companies," from which this article is excerpted.

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