



Episode 21 – Emotion at Work in Employee Experience Chatting with Lara Plaxton (@_Lara_HR)

Phil: Hello and welcome to the Emotion at Work podcast where we take a deep dive into the human condition. I love the diversity of guests that we get on this podcast, partly and it's quite selfish, in that I get to talk to some really incredible and interesting, and different people. It shows the massive diversity that the role emotion has or the role that emotion plays in the workplace. Now today's topic is...there's a term that kicks around HR a lot which is employee engagement and it's always made me shudder, it's always given me that shiver down your spine. Partly because it means so many different things to so many different people, but also it often just gets reduced down to a survey and an action plan that invariably never happens or never gets done anyway. I guess more recently I've noticed that there's a new term entering the lexicon that replaces or maybe for some people sits alongside employee engagement and that term is employee experience. As happened before with Episode 11 where I wanted to get someone on to talk about clean language because I saw the term clean language and I thought that sounds like a load of rubbish. But rather than me make a biased assumption as to what it means I'll get someone on the air that knows a lot more about it than me. That's what I wanted to do with employee experience really, just because I'm seeing this phrase entering the language patterns that I see in conferences or around HR folk. Actually you know what I'd like to get someone on who knows a lot more about that topic than me. Our guest today is Lara Plaxton and Lara is a practitioner and if I may be so bold as to say an early days researcher particularly into employee experience. So before we carry on and get into it more, let's get her on the air. I'd like to welcome to this podcast our guest Lara Plaxton, hello Lara.

Lara: Hi Phil, thank you for having me.

Phil: Thank you. How are you doing today?

Lara: Yeah, not too bad thank you.

Phil: Good. Thank you for joining us and we'll find out a little bit more about what you do and why you do it shortly, but before we get into that I have my standard opening to this podcast which is an unexpected but innocuous question. If it's all right I'll ask you that next, is that okay?

Lara: Of course.

Phil: So my question for you then is, what has got away from you recently?

Lara: That's an interesting question. What has got away from me? I think probably time always gets away from me. I'm forever chasing it, so, yeah, I think being able to be as efficient as I can do and try and make the best use of my time is something that I'm always chasing.

Phil: Are there any particular examples recently of where either you've managed to not let it get away from you quite so much or where actually it's really got away from you?



Lara: Yeah, I think even this week has been a really busy week and I think it's just about really trying to take the time within a busy period to really just have the space to think about priorities and what needs to get done and juggling all of that. Not just inside of work but life in general, but I think sometimes just taking that time to breathe and reflect is important during busy times.

Phil: Indeed, yeah, I couldn't agree with you more. So the thing that's got away from me recently is money. For our listeners I completely forgot that I was recording this podcast this morning, Lara rang me about half an hour ago and said are we recording today and I was like yes we are and I'd completely forgotten. The reason for that is about half past five last night I got a succession of texts from my bank to say, have you made this transaction, have you made this transaction, have you made this transaction? That's hijacked all of my attention really since then. I've managed to achieve other things but my mind keeps wondering back to how did they get my card, how did that happen? Because I like to think I'm quite sensible and stuff when it comes to online security and yet that seems to have happened, so that's hijacked a lot of my attention over the last 12 hours or so. So apologies again, Lara, I feel like I want to do an on the air apology for the fact that I completely forgot that we were recording the podcast this morning.

Lara: Well thank you, but, yeah, it sounds like you definitely have a lot of stressful things on your mind, so it's not a problem at all.

Phil: Thinking about what you said around time, and I guess maybe this is a bit of a tenuous link but I'm not sure actually, in terms of employee experience I guess time is something that must get away from a lot of organisations and the employees that work within them as well, and does that effect the employee experience do you think?

Lara: Yeah, definitely. I think that's the interesting thing about employee experience. It encompasses everything really and trying to understand all of the aspects that impact that experience is really important. Being able to measure that so that we can make informed decisions when we're designing it because essentially employee experience comes down to the emotional connection that individuals have with an organisation and how you interact with each other. So time is a key factor in that.

Phil: Where did your interest or your fascination with employee experience come from?

Lara: I think in essence it's always been there although I probably didn't really understand what employee experience was. So from a practical perspective the way I'd always approached HR was really trying to immerse myself in the culture and really understand how people interact with each other, how that informs their emotional responses and how they behave. That's what really interests me in a HR context and how we can make the best use of it for our employees and our organisation. I think combined with that I also got involved about three years ago in implementing a big HR system. So we had a big technological change so that also led me more into the technology world and trying to understand that in the organisational context, and again how we make best use of technology. So it got me more involved in understanding user experience which is really where employee experience is derived from. I suppose what fascinates me is that from a non technical background I'd always seen IT as a bit more separate to that human experience. I couldn't have



been more wrong because actually technology and the human experience are one and the same, and actually getting the best user experience is really about having a human centred approach. I think HR and IT as we go into the future will become more and more intertwined and working very collaboratively to achieve really the same end goals.

Phil: There's a number of things in my head, in a minute I think we might benefit from taking a step back and trying to define some of the stuff that we've just talked about. So what is usual experience and how does employee experience link in with that or how do those two things link together? But that last thing you mentioned in particular really got me thinking, if I was to ask 100 HR people which function in the business do you think HR either needs to or will be working more collaboratively with in the future, I don't think many would say IT?

Lara: No, and I think that's the really interesting thing because when I speak with our CIO he very much sees HR as the key department as we go forward to work with. I think we need more of that the senior HR and IT professionals within organisations understanding how much their roles impact each other. But I think in general that's something that I find within organisations anyway is perhaps a misunderstanding as to how important working collaboratively will be as we go forward in the future. Quite often you'll have everyone sitting in their little siloed departments coming up with ideas and solutions for their areas, but without really considering the impact for the other departments. I think that's in some way how our approach to HR at FDM developed probably four/five years ago and working quite differently, in that we really took a step back to understand how we could create core value for the business from an HR perspective. Without really knowing what systems thinking was about what we were actually doing was taking a systems thinking approach, which is to look at the organisation as a whole system and really try and understand all the components that make up that system and how they all interrelate with each other and impact each other. I think the more we just see departments in isolation in terms of what they do the more challenges and barriers we create for a company. A lot of my work was going around to other departments saying well have you spoken to this department because actually what you're going to implement could impact their area. It's really important we create workshops where we're collaboratively working together to really understand how we get the best results. What we actually planned to do at FDM because of who we are as an organisation, so just to explain to you.

Phil: Yeah, go on.

Lara: So we take on graduates but also we have an ex forces and a returners programme. We recruit over 1000 candidates per year, bring them into our offices and train them in our academies in various IT disciplines for around about 14-16 weeks. Then we deploy them out to our clients to go and work as consultants for our clients delivering digital services for them. So what's interesting for me is about 85-90% of our workforce isn't in our offices they're outwith our clients immersed in our client environments and working remotely to us. As a HR function we are a people organisation and what was really important to me was rather than going down the route of looking at initiatives around reengagement that perhaps can seem a little abstract to the C-Suite sometimes when HR are coming up with these things. Was actually to look at commercially what do we do as a business and how can HR add value? What we did was to really align ourselves with our sales function who are working with our clients on a day to day basis. Who are ensuring that our consultant's wellbeing is



doing well out on site, ensuring that they've got the skills and the knowledge that they need to deliver for the clients and seeing how that piece works. Really now the way that we work here is our HR team are out on site at our client environments, understanding that culture and environment, and the challenges that they face on site and being a support for those consultants, so that we can deliver the best service for our customers. In doing that it's allowed us to take a real systems thinking approach in that we understand a lot more of all the nuances around the business and how that functions. We're very much core in delivering the best that we can to not just our employees that are out on site but also our customers. Again that comes back to some of the core thinking from even the Harvard Business Review. They put together a service profit chain which I don't know if you're familiar with?

Phil: No.

Lara: That very much has its core employee satisfaction and employee retention and productivity, and how that then equates through to the external service value and onto the customer satisfaction, and obviously the revenue growth and profitability of the company. Very much this service profit change sees the employees as a core component which impacts the customer and then obviously impacts the organisation's growth overall. I think that's where HR have become critical within that. I think that was an interesting component for us to come back to your question in terms of what departments we have to work with collaboratively. For me as a HR function it was all of them. I think very much certainly understanding the business functions and how we can help them and not necessarily with add on initiatives, but actually core functionality through our people insight and knowledge. Again with that I think IT is also critical within that because digital informs that employee and customer experience and how we interact with them and how we innovate and remain competitive in today's market. If people and technology are the core of who we are for our future businesses then IT and HR are critical within that.

Phil: There's so much in that that I want to go back and revisit. The first thing I'm going to do though is to say to anybody listening I want you to challenge or agree with me please. I made a very blasé generalisation that I thought if I ask 100 HR people not many would say that the function we're going to collaborate most with is IT. On Twitter or wherever you get your podcast from please feel free to leave comments or mention myself or Lara. Lara, what's your Twitter handle?

Lara: It's @_Lara_HR.

Phil: So @philwilcox or @_Lara_HR and tell me if I'm talking absolute rubbish, tell if I'm spouting a load of...call bullshit on me if you need to and tell me.

Lara: I think in this day and age from what I see there's an awful lot more collaboration between HR and IT going on within companies which is fantastic to see. We're certainly not an isolated case, there's an awful lot of it going on and actually more predominately in the public sector as well there's a lot of IT thinking and the way they approach things, infiltrating the way people approach HR. I'm sure there will be some Twitter people coming back to you on that.



Phil: We've had a few different terms that we've talked through so far. We've had employee experience, we've had user experience, also sometimes known as UX. We've also had systems thinking as well and you saw with the Five Systems Thinking for us as you were working your way through that, the idea or the notion that you don't look at something in isolation you have to look at it how it sits and how it interfaces in with everything else that happens and everything else that goes on. That links in with a lot of the work that I do around how I go on all the time about how context is everything, that you can't look at something in isolation you have to look at it in context with what's happening, what else is happening elsewhere, what else has happened in the past and what could happen in the future. Then that gives you an idea of the way you can go to analyse something. You said that the employee experience has come as a result of user experience, would it be useful to come up with a working definition by what we mean by user experience or UX?

Lara: I think user experience is really a look at how you emotionally connect with the user to enhance their satisfaction of a product or a service. I think traditionally it comes from the technology world. User experience experts would for example look at a website, see where users were clicking on a website, understand that journey through the website and how they make it the most accessible, the easiest to use, the most engaging so that people want to go there. It incorporates an awful lot of stuff, it's not just a technology approach it's psychology, it's about that human experience, it integrates an awful lot of aspects into it. But I think what's core to user experience which I think is sometimes a missing link is that design process. Design theory goes back a lot of years before technology was really core to what we do. So I think the user experience design theory is what is really critical to employee experience and understanding how to make it as effective as you can. That's what's really core is that design process that you go through and then understanding the emotional connection that you can gain and the behaviours that derive from that to get the outcome that an organisation would hope for.

Phil: Could you give me an example of that from either your experience or from a HR point of view then? So how would that design theory/systems thinking approach, how have you or would you or do you apply that to an aspect of your work?

Lara: I suppose if we go to design thinking because certainly it's something that a lot of organisations are starting to incorporate in terms of the way that they approach how they implement something. So really that's looking at how you define what the problems are initially, you look at the challenges that you might have. You then co-create, get a lot of people in a room with lots of Post-its, maybe have a hackathon and really come up with ideas which could be from the crazy to the more practical, to really brainstorm and try and create a lot of ideas around the problems that you might be looking at. Then it's defining that further and deploying that but then testing it. I think this is a core part of what experience is about, is that it's not about spending a lot of time designing something and then coming up with something in the end that then stays there, doesn't get measured necessarily and perhaps a few years later gets relooked at. The whole point of the experience process is that it's continual change, so you don't just sit still on it. So it is about implementing something then measuring it, seeing what the impact of it is and then being able to go back in and iterate and replug some changes into it to try and tweak it and define it a bit better. The whole design and thinking process is a continuum, it's not a linear process. I think for me what's interesting about experience in general is it's about changing the way you do things and the way that you think. I think a lot of



people look at employee experience and think right we've got to go out and buy lots of fancy technology because that's how you create a great experience. That's not the way to do it. The way to do it is to start looking and thinking at it differently, part of that, you've probably heard some of the exercises that people go through which come from user experience, which is looking at personas. So coming up with the type of employees that you might have within an organisation to understand that persona, looking at the journeys that they go through and the touch points. Real experiences, interested in the interactions that you have with individuals and understanding those interactions or those touch points, and understanding which ones are more meaningful in terms of changing that emotional connection and behaviour, so that we can understand them better. They're the elements that we might focus on as a problem that you then create further ideas from and tweak that element within the journey to then measure and see how that changes an individual's overall behaviour.

I think when you think of experience it's about looking at the whole thing but it's also about breaking it down and understanding how each interaction impacts the next one, and how that flows through. I think a useful exercise to begin with is to map out that journey, map out the core interactions that you have with your employees. You need to think about it from before someone even applies to your company, because you're creating an emotional connection with an individual before they've even decided to apply for the job. I suppose that comes into a bit of that employer branding concept. Then right through to the end as well, the end for me of employee experience isn't when someone resigns or leaves the company it's way beyond that. Because I think maintaining that emotional connection with people that have worked for you, it's really important so that they're continuing to advocate the company, hopefully recommending people to come work for you. I think if you look at companies out there that do great experiences you can see the difference that it makes. I suppose in the customer experience side of things Apple has been one that's out there in terms of how they get customers to emotionally connect with their products through fantastic design. But also that it is very much an emotional connection often that customers have with Apple. If you go into an Apple store it's a different customer experience to a lot of other stores that you go to and lot of people just go in there to hang out because they enjoy being in that environment. That breeds a different kind of emotional connection which is a loyalty that you don't see necessarily with other brands.

I suppose on the employee experience side although it is a bit of a classic one but certainly Google and certainly in the earlier days was one that we all know what the employee experience is like at Google because everyone talks about it, from the fun environment to...I know they've implemented some changes recently, but from when they first started out 20% of their time needs to be focused on learning about things that just interest themselves not necessarily related to the role. There was a lot of aspects in their day to day employee experience that was very much focused on the employee and making that experience the best it could be for them. I think probably above all else when I look at employees that used to work for Google they're always the ones on Twitter or LinkedIn that always put ex-Google employee on their profile. Always something they're proud of, it's always something that they promote. That has really helped Google be able to get some of the best talent because they're continual advocates. I think the power of experience is really critical. I think I've gone way off from your question.



Phil: No, it's fine, it's useful and interesting. If I think about then you mentioned earlier on that FDM recruit IT graduates, go to the academy for a period of time, then they go off to a client site where they're consulting for IT projects of some description. Is that right so far?

Lara: Yeah.

Phil: I guess then if I look at a segment of that employee experience, and this is something that you alluded to earlier on, I'm a graduate, I've completed my 14-16 weeks. I then go to a client or a customer site and I've got two cultures that I have to consider. So one is the FDM one and where I've come from and the interactions that I have with you as my employer. But also I need to fit in, I need to fit in, in the office, in the teams, in the function, in the business unit that I've now been placed in. My experience with you as my employer might be amazing but my experience with the team or the client might be awful. Likewise my experience with the team or the client might be amazing but actually my experience with you guys isn't great at all. But both of which could cause me to look around for other jobs, to leave, to bitch and moan about you, to do all those sorts of things. How do you track that, how do you monitor that then?

Lara: I think it's a really valid point and it's definitely a challenge I think for any organisation where your employees aren't necessarily working at a desk in your office and you can have a direct impact on them. There's a lot more indirect aspects to their experience that might be harder to control. But I think it doesn't mean that we can't understand them as best as we can. I think there's probably a couple of important things that come out of what you talk about, one is the kind of cultural aspect. I think one of the things that got me into HR in the first place was when I was younger doing a lot of travelling, I had a real interest in anthropology and immersing myself in other cultures and trying to understand them from their perspective. I think as HR practitioners that's a really important approach to take, because I think we often talk about culture in quite an odd way I think sometimes within HR, in that...

Phil: In an odd way?

Lara: Just in terms of we feel that we can make cultural change quite easily, I think in some ways, the way that it's discussed. I think it's very challenging, culture's such an engrained part of who people are and I think you can nudge elements of it, but I think it takes a long time to actually change culture. I think if you're working for a company automatically you become immersed in that culture but it's really important to still try and take an outsider's view of that culture. Because I think there's obviously all the cultural norms and things that when you're within that culture they resonate with you and mean something to you in a different way to an outsider. But it does have a big impact in the way that you act as an individual, the one way that you feel, the way that you behave. So understanding all of those cultural nuances is really important. For us where we're potentially dealing with two cultures and how that's impacting an individual it's really important for me that we have that outside in approach of really trying to understand it. Because I think that has a big impact to their experience and obviously we're less in control of a client's culture and what that looks like. But what we can do is understand it and understand how it impacts individuals so that we can manage things appropriately or prepare people or just understand at least why they might say or feel how they do. I think in terms of being able to manage that, it just really is about asking people



as much as you can do. I think it really comes back again to that experience design process of looking at the important touch points within someone's career. So understanding that emotional journey that individuals go through. I think you can track that, you can assess it and understand where the important aspects are.

For example at FDM we don't do annual employee engagement surveys as a lot of companies don't anymore, and engagement for me a little like yourself, is a bit hard sometimes to understand. Interestingly I went on the Engage for Success website the other day and they've slightly amended what engagement means. I think what's interesting for me is if you talk about user engagement in the context of user experience it's not trying to define what behaviours that you're looking for, it just talks about trying to improve the interaction to increase the satisfaction for individuals. But that could be different for every single experience. I think trying to define engagement as one size fits all is not necessarily appropriate. But I think when we look at that whole journey and understanding it for our employees that are out on a client site, for me what's interesting is trying to define those important moments within their employee experience or their career journey. And understand those data points that we want to get an understanding of how they're feeling and how they're behaving, because we know that they're critical moments when perhaps their behaviours might change, they're slightly longer away from our office environment. Perhaps the connection becomes less strong, so it's an important moment to check in and understand how they're doing. I think that's what's important with experience is that, okay we've done away with the annual surveys, for a lot of moment what they are doing is implementing pulse surveys which could be monthly, could be quarterly. Again they're looking at a moment in time when they're measuring how people are feeling and how they're behaving. Rather than actually looking at a moment in a journey which I think is far more critical if you want to understand how people feel and how they behave is really focusing on those important moments. So for us for example we'll look at when they've been out with our clients for a three month period, a month period and we'll look at the critical times. Because we've got so many employees going out on a day to day basis we have data coming in then every day, because as people hit six months out with our clients we've got their data coming in from that point. So what we can actually track is at six months into their employee experience out on site this is how people are feeling and behaving. Rather than saying on the last day of the month this is how everyone feels which they're all at different points in their experience and their journey on the last day of the month or the last day of the quarter. So I think we just need to start thinking differently because if we want to try and assess data we need to make sure it's the most useful data to get an understanding from.

Phil: So those critical points that you mentioned then for you or for FDM in particular they're chronological points then for you are they? I think I heard one month, three month, six months?

Lara: So we'll take chronological moments within their employee journey as they go through their time with us. Because we know from experience that there are critical times when we can influence how they're feeling and how they're behaving, as opposed to just random points.

Phil: Are there any other critical moments then? You mentioned if you can be clear about or you know what those critical moments in someone's career are, then you can use that knowledge then



to establish how people are feeling or the extent to which they feel emotionally connected at those points. You've got the chronological ones, have you got any other ones?

Lara: Yeah, I think if we just think of it more generally rather than in the FDM context. Anything where there's decision making moments that could potentially be career changing are really important. So whether it's any performance management process, whether it's any decisions around progression opportunities. Obviously certainly around the initial stages of recruitment selection, onboarding, they're really critical moments to understand. Throughout that whole employee experience there's going to be numerous elements and components that are going to be really important for you to try and understand as much as you can do. I think that's where it comes back to that design thinking process, because if you can assess the data at those points and try and understand it. Then you can then go back, look at the problems from when you were assessing that data and go back into that design thinking process, to come up with different ideas and try and then measure how those changes impact that experience. But I think the whole time what you're trying to look for and understand is that emotional connection and how it drives the kind of behaviours that you want as an organisation.

Phil: How do you measure that then at the moment, Lara?

Lara: We don't have any fancy AI tools, robots that go round on a day to day basis.

Phil: You're not using facial recognition, you're not hacking into people's webcams and seeing how many times a day they smile or anything like that then?

Lara: Unfortunately not, no. I think obviously surveys are a tool that people use but I recognise that there's elements within surveys that aren't necessarily always helpful, but they do allow us to understand some aspects of the experience and the journey. Through technology it's quite helpful because you can assess things like health and people log into systems, what kind of activities they're doing in these systems. That gives you a real indication of how people might be feeling and behaving, whether they're constantly in their emails and working all hours or whether they're not working at all. I think there's ways through technology that you don't have to ask people how they're feeling and behaving, but you can actually see that for yourselves through the digital tools. So they do allow us to understand a bit more around what people are doing to try and understand people a bit better. But I think for me what's important is, like I say, we don't have loads of fancy tools and there's certainly some elements around implementing AI that I think you really do need to understand what information you are getting. What are the limitations of that technology because however great it might look technology is always going to have limitations and you have to account for that, you are trying to assess data and understand it. I think there's also a huge element of ethics around that as well which I think will be big for companies as we go forward, where people are putting Fitbits on employees and monitoring where they're going throughout the day. I think that has the potential to create a bit of a disconnect between the organisation and the employees, elements around trust. I think trust is a big part of that emotional connection which if organisations don't get right and don't build that trust, then they're not going to be able to deliver great employee experiences. You've only got to look at the Edelman TRUST BAROMETER, the report this year, again employees are seen as much more trustworthy than CEOs and the board of directors and stuff,



which they were last year. So there's definitely a bit of a disconnect I think between organisations and the employees. I think being able to put employees in charge of their experiences is also really key.

Phil: I guess one of the challenges with looking at things like system access or system utilisation or time online or time on whatever, is it gives you a really clear idea as to what the behaviour is, it doesn't necessarily tell you what the emotion or the feeling or the connection is that sits behind that. You can see what somebody's doing but you can't necessarily see how they feel. I'm guessing then there will be a need to support that with other data sources to say, okay well I can't conclude that because Phil is on his emails everyday and he's spending however long or Phil's on this system and he's doing these things everyday and that doesn't necessarily preclude that he is engaged or he's having a great experience. It could just be that he's got a manager watching over him every minute of every day and if he's not being closely monitored he gets in trouble so therefore he's omnipresent if that makes sense?

Lara: Yeah, I 100% agree with you. I quite often see around data is that people will see a result come through from the data and it seems to fit what they hoped it would and they're quick to make an assumption and say yes this is the result. I think it's not entirely accurate and you have to take everything into consideration. For example we do do a lot of correlation analysis around our consultants out on site with our clients and the interactions with our clients to understand how that relationship manifests itself and how it interacts, so we can better understand it and hopefully deliver a better service for our employees and our clients. I understand as well with correlation it could just be a coincidence that you see patterns within that data. A big part of what we do is to actually take the insight that we get from the data analysis that we're able to do at the moment, and take that around the business to then get people to interrogate that data and put their own observations to that data to really try and make a more informed decision. I suppose it comes back a bit to that cultural aspect, someone within a culture will see things differently to someone who's outside of that culture. If you're looking at the data someone in one department will view it very differently to someone in a different department. So having that insight from all around the business on the data analysis that you have without trying to make assumptions from it is really critical.

In an ideal world I'd love to have a huge function where we can do causation analysis and do a lot better analysis so that we're in a better scenario to be able to understand things from the data. But obviously as with any company you do what you can with what you have. Interestingly I think it's important as well when you're looking at research is to understand the quality of the assumptions that they're putting out there as well. I see an awful lot around how employee engagement equals customer satisfaction. So the more engaged your employees are the better satisfied they are. It always relates back to correlation which always fascinates me, because there's no definitive answer to say with anything that correlates to each other that they're causing the other one to happen. I think especially given the fact that none of us can really define engagement in a helpful way I'm not quite sure even what they mean. But interestingly there was a great study by Moira Clarke who works at Henley Business School in customer management. She with some fellow colleagues had done a project where they'd done some analysis over ten years and were looking at causation roles in correlation, so it's a lot more interesting to me. The results that were coming back on that was around the fact that employee engagement as they'd viewed it they found causation between



employee engagement and how it impacts retention on wellbeing. But actually nothing to do with the customer experience or organisational performance as a whole. Actually what they did find caused a change or an impact in a positive way to the customer experience and organisational performance, was much more around your frontline staff, those that are dealing with the customers. And actually allowing them to be a bit more empowered, rewarded and recognised for what they do but being able to make decisions in the moment for that customer. Being able to have great team cohesion and a structure within that team, so that they feel that they can do the job that they need to do, they're not tied up to lots of other things. Just where they're able to exude that kind of warmth and support, and customer care element. I think that comes back to that emotional connection, so the customers to those employees within the organisation. Which I think for me as well reaffirms the way that we work at FDM, having HR really involved in our frontline employees of our sales staff. As well as our consultants out on site that are working directly with our clients, is the really critical area for us to be looking at because that's what's really going to drive a change to organisational performance. If we can understand how those interactions happen then hopefully we can make both better employee and customer experiences.

Phil: I agree with a lot of what you're saying and I'm saying a lot of because I guess I'm going to put a couple of challenges in with it as well. I think sometimes correlation is all we've got, so sometimes that's the best we can get. Ideally would we love to do some causational analysis? Absolutely. But either we haven't got the infrastructure or we haven't got the method. When I say the infrastructure we haven't got the opportunity to say right I am going to work hard to isolate other variables from this equation to establish the extent to which x causes y. So we're starting with a hypothesis that if we have more engaged or we have a better employee experience then that will equate to better customer experience, which would equate to improved organisational performance. If that's the case then we need to work out what are all of the variables that could affect customer experience. What are all of the variables that can then affect organisational performance and try and isolate out all those other different aspects to monitor and track all those different other aspects, so that we can justifiably link or put a causation between $x + y = z$. I think in the world of work that's really hard to do a) because that the skill set, to be able to do that is really rare. I think the opportunity within an organisation for the board of directors or whoever that would be to say yes let's do that, let's put all of our effort and energy into doing all of those things to actually find out if that's the case or not is rare. When I say the infrastructure I guess I mean the...because what that needs is a very particular view and mindset into we really need to interrogate this data, and to a certain degree that might mean that we pay less attention to other things for the short term, because we want to build this rich picture of data in the long term. But that can be a really tough decision to sell or make and then the skill set that sits behind it can be really tricky. I agree ideally you'd want causation studies but if you can get decent effect sizes and so on or impact results then great. But sometimes the correlation bits are all we have to go with. If I then think back to something you mentioned earlier on, which I think if I've understood it correctly, is that, yes we may review what our employees are telling us or what the data that our employees submit to us is saying about their experience at a client site, but we may also ask the client what is their experiences of our employee. As well as asking the employee how's it going for you, we can ask the customer or the client well how's it going for you? To then see if we can establish some patterns between the two. If the FDM employee is saying it's amazing, it's brilliant, it's the best place I've ever worked, I can't believe I'm so lucky to be here thank you so, so much. And the client's going, yeah they're all right, yeah, they're



okay, they're doing enough, they're doing all right. Because you've got potentially a mismatch of data there which you then go and interrogate and investigate some more.

Lara: I agree with all of what you've said. I think it's very true, when I'm talking about certain aspects I suppose it's ideals that are nice to work towards. Certainly when we're talking about humans in an organisational context there are so many elements that can impact it that organisations just don't have the resources to be able to understand it in every kind of context and understand how it impacts each other. But I think having that systems thinking approach and just applying it to the data is really important, so that I think it's the assumptions that we make sometimes that we need to be more careful with. Even if it is correlation data that we're looking at or even if it is more basic than that, to just understand okay what parts of data don't we have and what other things could be influencing it? Could it be that customer satisfaction is what's driving employee engagement and not the other way around. Just actually really questioning all the data and I think sometimes we're quick to jump to something that might suit us rather than questioning it all. But certainly, yeah, for us at FDM it's really important for us to understand both sides, both the employee and the customer experiences and how that relates to each other. Because then we can hopefully understand both sides of it better but deliver better for them as well. I think if we just look at things in isolation potentially we have a danger of making assumptions that might not be accurate. We can only do what we can do. Every organisation is going to be restricted by the resources that they have but I think as long as organisations are taking the time to try and understand things and try and make improvements, and try and understand things in a bigger picture, rather than just jumping on a solution because they think it will work. I think taking a step back and seeing things now that they are on a change continuum, it is a cyclical process, it's not a linear process. It is something that we need to keep measuring and understanding what evidence we have to back up what problems we actually face as an organisation, and then try and create new ideas around that. But, yeah, we're limited in terms of what we can do. I think my approach to it is just to question everything which is probably really annoying for everyone.

Phil: No, never annoying, always good. I think I hear them called lots of different things, sometimes I hear them called moments of truth which is certainly very much a P&G, or I've heard from a lot of people that have worked at P&G approach, where they say, what are the moments of truth for insert blank. What are the moments of truth for an employee? What are the moments of truth for a customer? What are the moments of truth for whoever? And then designing things that sit around that. That for me, I am linking that in with what you talked about earlier which is the idea of those crucial points in somebody's journey, whether they be from an HR point of view, you might say right the moments of truth are application, offer, annual, whether it be an annual appraisal or whatever the approach to performance management is, those performance management interactions. It could be life milestones, so how do we deal with different life milestones that people have, whether that be becoming a carer of an infant or elderly. Whether that be geographically moving for a job. So what are those really important moments in somebody's career? You can gather that data, you can even gather that data context specific to your organisation. You can run some focus groups, go and investigate what are the moments in somebody's career that they say to you matter the most? What are the moments that have mattered to you the most when you've been here working at this organisation? Then you can use that to inform when you find out how people are feeling. Because actually if the responses are, these five times are the most important things for me. When I've got a



problem at home that's a really important career decision for me, because when an organisation doesn't support me, when I've got stuff going on at home then I think you know why I can't be bothered and I'm going to leave. Or when you've been supportive you've engendered my loyalty for a decade to follow. If you can define what those moments are and then if you gear up your investigation into how people are feeling around those moments as opposed to, like you said, it's the last working day of the month, it's the 15th of June which is when we do our annual employee survey every year. If you gear up your data collection to those moments that matter as opposed to an arbitrary date that you choose, then the data that you're going to collect is going to be much more helpful and beneficial for you as an organisation to think about your employee experience, than just some arbitrary data that you get at some different times of the year.

Lara: I completely agree with a couple of elements with that. I have seen some parts of employee experience going down the route of employee engagement where they're trying to sum up a percentage or a point scoring system, and create a numerical value to the experiences we did with the employee engagement. I think most people if you ask them, okay we managed to increase employee engagement from 80% to 85% of whatever, I think most people would agree that it's fairly abstract and no one really understands what that means. I can see that we've tended to do the same with employee experience as well, there's a few agencies out there that are starting to put organisations in a ratings war on employee experience and what percentage or how many out of ten are you on some employee experience rating scale. I think there's a real danger in that because I think exactly what you've said, it comes back to those moments of truth, which is a marketing term and apply to customers. I think very much works in that whole approach when you're looking at experience and applies to the employee as well. I think that's something for HR professionals to consider is, what are the lessons that we need to learn from employee engagement? Because employee experience is not just a new term for employee engagement, it's also not just a rebrand of the way HR does stuff. But actually it comes from a whole range of other disciplines where we need to learn and understand what they've already learnt and understood, so that we can apply it to our HR context when we're looking at employee experience. Obviously that goes back to design theory and into user experience, design and the way IT and technology approaches things, but then also marketing.

So customer experience was the first area to come out of the technology world as it were into defining something slightly different. Obviously the technology world is interested in humans in an organisational context and through technology, so they will always see that it encompasses everything, but certainly marketing to find it specifically with customers. I think moments of truth is a really useful way to look at things and apply into the employee experience. I think one element that I would say is obviously marketing of really...there's a lot of studies out there around customer experience and what organisations have done to really develop their brand and build that emotional connection from their customers to their brand and how that helps. I do see a lot of marketing language infiltrating HR which I think is a good thing and a bad thing at the same time. Because I think the customer experience is different to the employee experience. Whilst there's elements of it that definitely resonate and it's useful for us to learn from that, certainly around people looking at the personalisation of experiences and how you can try and not just create one size fits all for all your employees, because everyone's going to want a different kind of experience depending on who they are as an individual. Having those choices to be able to define your experience is really



important if you're able to do that. Also not defining experiences based on stereotypes, so the whole millennial thing. Not all millennials are the same strangely enough and some people...

Phil: Stop the press, shock horror story, not all millennials are the same.

Lara: Headline. That personalisation is really important. I suppose something that doesn't quite resonate with me as much is where the whole concept of treating employees as consumers feels a little bit strange to me when we're looking at experiences. Because I think that's something that's different. Whilst obviously in customer experience it can be a bit more transactional although I appreciate that the end goal is customer retention and creating customer loyalty, and people loyal to those brands. I do think as employees we have a different expectation than as a consumer and I think it could be a danger if we start bringing everything over from customer experience into employee experience. I think we need to think slightly different because I think it is a different relationship. Employees have a lot more involvement with an organisation as an employee than a customer does usually.

Phil: Also the contract is completely different, as a consumer I am buying a product from you. As an employee I'm being paid a salary to do work. As an employee I don't buy my employees as a commodity.

Lara: I completely agree it's there. I suppose it's that psychological contract as a consumer or customer compared to an employee and it's my expectations as an employee are totally different to my expectations as a customer. I think there is a danger if we start going down that road of trying to apply consumer behaviour. There's an awful lot of research and study out there about consumer behaviour, but if we map that straight across to employees we're not doing our employees justice I don't think because my expectation as an employee is entirely different. I think we need to be coming up with our own concepts around what employee expectation is and how we create the best emotional connection with our employees, which is derived through who are you as a brand, what you stand for, what your values are, what your culture is and what that impact is. Because all of those elements have a real impact to the engagement of an individual. I don't mean engagement as defined behaviours I just mean how they interact with the organisation.

Phil: I want to ask a question actually, so it's a question that I don't want to ask because I don't like it but it's a question that I can imagine are in a lot of my listener's heads, which is, if what we're trying to establish is that emotional connection, how do you or are you measuring or quantifying that emotional connection?

Lara: I think there's different ways that you can do it. Certainly from my own personal experience like I say we don't have advanced technology, there's certainly a lot out there that will look at...if you look at user experience a lot of organisations will use, like you say, facial recognition to look at people's expressions, eye monitoring. They'll assess your heart rate, your temperature, all those kind of things to assess people's emotional responses. Well most organisations aren't going to have the ability to do that. Often sometimes it comes down to that the standard survey, although taking into consideration the limitations of that. But I think also there's some exciting things out there, so for example in recruitment part of our selection process, we work with a company called Arctic Shores



that implement gamification as part of psychometric testing. So through that you're able to assess people's emotional responses and behaviours as to how they're using the games within that process. It's testing knowledge but some of it's skills based, some of it will look at their tendency for risk for example through those games. It will really be able to understand a lot more of the psychology of that individual through the way that they're playing a game. Gamification you do see that coming into play a lot more and I think it's a fun way of doing things, but it's also another way of assessing emotion and behaviour without asking someone to cognitively respond in something that's given to them by the organisation. So already they're probably thinking about how I need to respond, it's a fast paced way of being able to take a check on people and get a bit more insight into them.

There's a whole host of tools out there and ways of looking at things differently to try and understand people's emotional responses. I think it's going to be trial and error, it's going to be sharing stories and hearing what other people are doing. I think it comes back to what I said at the beginning is it's not about racing out there to get the best tools out in the market to suddenly start being able to monitor everyone and how they're behaving and feeling without them even realising it. Because most companies don't have the resources to do that. But I think it actually just comes back to taking it back to the basics which is HR just need to start thinking differently. We're not going to have all the answers, we're not going to have all the data to be able to tell us how to make the best employee experience for our own organisational context according to what our needs are. When I say our needs I mean the employees and the organisations. But I think we need to just start thinking a bit differently and taking a slightly different approach and not just thinking about annual impulse surveys. But actually when are those key moments to actually ask employees how they're feeling, even if it is just a quick SurveyMonkey to get an understanding. Really break down that whole employee journey and understand it much better than we do currently. Like you say use other things like focus groups and other ways of testing that out and finding out how people experience certain aspects of their employee journey. At the moment our HR room is full of Post-its all over the wall, which is great because it's hopefully generating ideas. And it means if other people from other departments come into our room they can help contribute as well in their ideas and we can explain some of the thinking around it. I think it's just around getting people in the organisation to collaborate more so we're understanding the challenges that all the different departments are facing, co-creating and coming up with new ideas that hopefully help some of the challenges within an organisation. But actually asking people as well with those kind of changes that we might make how they're feeling at those critical moments, so we can just understand everything better. For me employee experience is about thinking in a different way and not having all the tools to necessarily give us some amazing experience beyond our wildest dreams.

Phil: We can never read somebody's mind, so we never truly know how somebody's feeling and even more we never truly know why somebody is feeling that way. Even in my role as a behavioural analyst it's like I can look at somebody's language pattern, I can listen to their voice, I can look at their facial expressions, I can analyse their body, I can look at a big set of data doing a corpus linguistics type approach and see how language used differs by population and so on, all of which I do. But all that ever does is give me an indication or it suggests how people may be feeling, it's never as conclusive as say I see 'x' that means 'y'. It's never that simple, there's always other aspects to it that you don't know. Whichever approach you go for whether it be surveys, focus groups, technology, analysing language, whatever approach you do it's only ever giving you part of the



picture, you're never going to get the full picture. I guess my counter to that is if it gives you more of a picture than you've got at the moment then likely is that's a good thing. So the more you can do to understand how people are feeling, what that emotional connection is like, what are those factors or those variables or those occasions or those times when that emotional connection gets stronger or weaker, to gather more data around that and the better informed you will be as an organisation and likely you can make better decisions off the back of that. But whatever method you choose you can never read somebody's mind, even stick them in an FMRI scanner isn't going to allow you to read their mind, it will tell you what part of their brain is firing but it won't allow you to read their mind.

Lara: Yeah, completely agree. If I think of myself I don't know why I think the way I do sometimes I can't see how someone else will understand that with whatever technology they have.

Phil: I mentioned in my introduction that you were starting out as a researcher. Could you tell me a bit more about that, where are you going with that, what are you wanting to do or where you're going with that?

Lara: I think you probably made it sound grander than it actually is. I think it's more a case of I've just wanted to understand some of the academic research behind some of the areas that are of interest to me. I think with social media out there these days there's a lot more available to people. I think academics as well make things much more accessible to people as well so we can understand, I think you inferenced it earlier, organisations don't have the resources to do these huge studies where they're analysing certain aspects to understand exactly what's going on. Whereas if academics are able to get some funding to work on a project that might give us some insight, then professionals need to be tapping into that to try and understand it and make sure they're making more informed decisions. I think it's more of a conscious effort that part of what I do is to try and understand and learn as much as I can do and actually learn new areas. I think having a CIPD qualification as an HR practitioner doesn't mean that your learning journey is over, and I'm sure everyone else would agree with that as well. But I think actually exploring other disciplines outside of HR is really important to HR, we're moving into a world where job roles are going to change and hopefully job crafting is becoming something that organisations will take on more. Because certainly as my career journey has gone on I've wanted to incorporate other elements that are outside of the traditional HR context. Actually the areas really interest me are technology and user experience and elements of marketing and trying to understand that, because actually it helps me in my role as a HR practitioner. So I think through that research journey who knows where it will take me eventually but it certainly opened up a lot more interesting conversations. A friend of mine that I know down in Brighton she's a professor of digital transformation design and so she's being critical in my learning journey, and pointing me in the direction of things to go and look at and research, and understand better which has really helped as well. I think the more interaction we get between academics and practitioners the better it will be for everyone.

Phil: Who's the professor down in Brighton?

Lara: So Karen Cham works at the University of Brighton.



Phil: I'll put a link to her bio or her profile in the show notes as well so that if anybody wants to explore what she's up to and see what she's doing then they can go and find that as well.

Lara: Great.

Phil: If I was listening to this podcast and I was thinking right I really want to do something around employee experience, and I've done a thing that hosts should never do, I've started to ask a question and I'm going to do a bit of talking and then I'm going to ask the question again. I should have just done the talking first and asked the question after but anyway. I know as we've gone through we've given some hints, tips or starting places of where people can focus their attention. If I was a listener to the podcast and I was thinking right I want to start thinking more about this whole employee experience thing, what would you recommend as my starting steps?

Lara: Something that's been really helpful to us is hackathons and we've had Perry Timms that's come into our workplace and run a few hackathons with us which has been great. Hackathons are a great way to get lots of people in a room, not necessarily just within HR but from all different departments. In our case we had other people come in from other organisations as well to run hackathons just really around that design thinking process within a short space of a time actually. Getting to the end of a morning session where you've come to the end of it with almost an idea for a product or a service or a different way of doing something, it's a really energised environment to work in. I think they're quite easy to put together. But I think as a first step more than anything is probably just mapping out what your journeys look like. I think for any HR practitioner that should be something that's easy to do, it shouldn't be one person sitting in a room mapping that out. It needs to be an energised co-created environment where you get a few people in a room, maybe not even from HR, get some employees in there as well, to look at what that journey looks like from beginning to end and those key touch points. I think straight away that automatically starts you thinking slightly different. And then breaking down those key areas to really consider each of the transactional steps that people go through, but how you can make those more transformative by enhancing that emotional connection, whether it's just making something easier to access, not as difficult or whether it's just making that a more enjoyable process. I think you can through mapping out that employee journey you can already start to look at areas that you think actually we know from feedback that we've had that these are potential areas that people face challenges with when they get to that point. So focusing on those areas first you can hopefully start to see some results. But the main aim of it is if you're coming up with ideas to change something is just implement a few changes around it and then measure how people are experiencing the changes that you've made and has it worked. It doesn't matter if it hasn't, you go back and you start creating ideas around that again. If it has worked then great but revisit it later as well and just continually measure how those redesigning of the experiences and the steps people go through make people feel.

Phil: My addition to that is going to be the temptation as a HR practitioner is to, or can be, to link that to the key parts of what you expect the employee lifecycle to be like recruitment, performance management that sort of stuff. When you go about if you frame it in that way then that's the data you'll get back. So when you go to collect your data think carefully about the questions you ask or the methodology that you ask because the challenges you could just be checking your own homework. And actually what you learn is how good your HR process or what the experience is like



of your HR process is. That doesn't necessarily mean that your HR processes are the key important points of somebody's career progression or career journey. Just because you think they might be doesn't mean that they're actually are. So make sure you keep your data collection approaches broad, don't ask questions about your own processes, don't just ask questions about those particular times. The more you can do to gather data about what the times or the occasions that mean the most to the people, the employees themselves, then that's going to be much more helpful for you to get a well informed view of customer experience not just how well did people experience your processes.

Lara: Yeah, it's very true. I think what's important as part of this journey mapping is to not just have HR people in a room, you have to bring people from around the business into the room, have the actual users themselves contributing to what that journey looks like. And then hopefully that should deviate away from what you suggested can often happen.

Phil: Sorry, I got on a soapbox then, I've stepped off my soapbox now.

Lara: Good.

Phil: Any recommendations then, Lara, about either videos to watch, websites to read, articles to view? I've picked up a few as we've worked our way through. I've picked up the HBR article. I've picked up links to the Moira Clarke study. To Arctic Shores, to Karen Cham. Any other places that people should go and look for more information if they wanted to go and find more?

Lara: Yeah, I'll send across a few links so you can attach them when you're doing the podcast. But I think certainly around design thinking there's an organisation called IDEO who do an awful lot of work around that and what that design thinking process is. But I think in this day and age you've only got to go onto the internet and type a few words in there and you'll see. I think certainly whatever you delve into you will then find other people that are pulling it apart and putting their ideas in. I think at the end of the day that's the whole thing about research and learning is you find what speaks to you and what you feel will work for your organisation. It's not about right this is the definitive answer of how it works. It could be that you need to adapt things for how you do things. But I'll ping some links across around some of the core aspects around user experience, design and systems thinking. But, yeah, go out and have a look on the internet because there's an awful lot of stuff on YouTube and blogs, and articles around all of this stuff. But I think my main thing is steer away from employee engagement and that more traditional sense and go outside of the HR spectrum and see what's out there.

Phil: Wonderful, thank you, Lara. So my final question then, is there anything else that you're thinking, feeling or want to say?

Lara: I don't think so other than thank you so much for your time it's been a pleasure, it's Friday and the sun's shining so it's all good.

Phil: Thank you so much, Lara, thanks very much for coming on the podcast. For our listeners if you want to find Lara, if you want to keep the conversation going then on Twitter you can find her at?



Lara: It's @_Lara_HR.

Phil: Wonderful, thank you very much. Thanks very much, Lara, I appreciate you coming on the podcast, thank you for your time.