

The Survey is Dead, Long Live the Survey

Transforming Customer and Employee Experience in the Age of AI

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The Paradox We're Living Through

There's an uncomfortable truth lurking in most organisations right now: traditional surveys are struggling. Response rates are dropping. Survey fatigue is real. People are tired of rating their experience on a scale of 1-5 or 0-10, only to see nothing change.

Yet organisations still desperately need to understand what their customers and employees are experiencing. The need for insight hasn't diminished—if anything, it's more critical than ever.

So, surveys aren't really dead. They're just being forced to evolve dramatically. And if you're still relying only on quarterly pulse surveys and annual engagement assessments as your primary listening strategy, I have news for you: while you were perfecting your survey methodology, your competitors stopped asking questions altogether.

They're listening differently. Acting faster. And leaving you behind.

The Three-Part Threat You're Facing

Let's be direct about what's at stake:

1. The Speed Advantage

Organisations using AI-powered feedback, text and speech analysis aren't just getting better insights—they're acting on problems weeks or even months faster than you are. By the time you've run your quarterly survey, compiled results, scheduled the leadership review meeting, formed a task force, and begun planning improvements, they've already identified, fixed, and validated solutions to the same problems.

In a world where agility is competitive advantage, your 6-month improvement cycle is a liability.

2. The Expectation Shift

Your customers and employees increasingly expect personalised, immediate responses. When they take time to give you feedback and see nothing change—or worse, receive a generic "thank you for your feedback" email three months later—they learn a powerful lesson: their input doesn't matter.

Your response rate isn't dropping because of survey fatigue. It's dropping because you've trained people that speaking up is pointless.

3. The Talent War Reality

For employee experience specifically, top performers increasingly choose organisations based on whether they feel heard and whether leadership acts on what they hear. Your 18-month improvement cycle isn't just slow—it's an exit interview waiting to happen. The best people have options, and they're choosing organisations that move at the speed trust enables.

The Uncomfortable Truth

Here's what I've learned working with organisations across industries: most CX and EX leaders already know what's broken. Pull out your last three survey reports and you'll probably see the same issues surfacing again and again.

The question isn't *what* to fix. The question is *why you haven't fixed it yet*.

This isn't an insight problem. It's an action problem. It's what I call the Elvis Condition: **a little less conversation, a little more action please.**

And this is where AI changes everything—not because it gives you better surveys, but because it helps you bridge the gap between insight and action.

What AI Actually Changes

Let's be clear: AI doesn't make surveys obsolete. But it fundamentally transforms what's possible in how we listen to and act on feedback – explicit and implied, direct and indirect.

The traditional model was built on scarcity. We needed structured data because human analysis doesn't scale. So, we forced complex human experiences into Likert scales and multiple-choice questions. But that compression loses nuance—the *why* behind the score, the emotional context, the unexpected insights that don't fit our predetermined categories.

Now we can process unstructured, implied, inferred feedback at scale. Not just categorise it, but understand sentiment and human emotion, identify emerging themes across thousands of interactions, connect pain points across different touchpoints, detect emotional intensity and urgency, and spot patterns that would take humans months to find.

The constraint that shaped 50 years of CX methodology is suddenly gone.

But actions driven solely from survey data insights may mean that the squeaky wheels are the sole drivers of the bus—and that can make for an uncomfortable ride in the wrong direction. The value garnered from AI and more integrated technology enabling (finally) a single view of the customer can fill in the gaps surveys invariably leave.

Surveys Still Have a Place—But Context is King

Here's the nuanced truth: surveys aren't dead, they're just not enough anymore.

You still need surveys when you need benchmarking, trend data over time, or specific KPIs measured consistently across populations. Surveys are still useful, especially after specific interactions, and scores can drive focus on the right things. And yes, the occasional end-to-end 'engagement' survey—especially for employees whose interest compels them to give the time and consideration to complete one—still has its place. Metrics can serve as a compass to indicate you're on the right path or need to pivot.

But here's what changed: **context is king**. A score without the story is just a number. A complaint without understanding the customer's journey is just noise.

The new model is **layered listening**:

- **Structured surveys** for what you need to track consistently over time
- **Unstructured feedback** (reviews, support tickets, social media, chat transcripts, call recordings) for what you need to understand deeply
- **Behavioral signals** for what people do versus what they say
- **Real-time triggers** for when immediate action is needed—especially to understand if your customer is vulnerable, because any business is still fundamentally human

This isn't either/or. It's both/and. But it requires thinking about feedback holistically rather than treating each survey as an isolated event or capturing how your customers or people feel at a single point in time.

Context Through Journey Mapping: Your Strategic Compass

Context without structure is just noise. You can collect thousands of comments, but if you don't understand *where* in the customer or employee journey those pain points occur, you're treating symptoms instead of diagnosing root causes.

This is where **journey mapping for understanding** becomes essential—not as a one-time workshop exercise that produces a pretty poster that boiled the ocean, but as a simple living framework for understanding context.

Understanding the customer (and employee) journey answers the critical questions:

What are people actually trying to achieve? Not what you *think* they should want, but what outcome they're pursuing at each stage. An employee isn't "completing onboarding"—they're trying to feel confident and equipped to contribute. A customer isn't "making a purchase"—they're solving a specific problem or pursuing a specific goal.

How are they going about it? What channels are they using, and what channels do they want to use that you may not be offering currently? What workarounds have they created? Where are they getting stuck or confused? Are they calling

support because your self-service is inadequate, or emailing because they don't trust the automated system?

How long is it taking them? Time is often the hidden cost. A process that takes five touchpoints over three weeks might "work" technically, but it's creating friction, frustration, and opportunities for abandonment.

How much effort are they expending? How many times do they need to repeat information? How many people do they need to talk to? How many systems do they need to navigate? High effort drives low satisfaction, even when outcomes are eventually achieved.

Did they actually achieve what they wanted? This is the question organisations often don't ask. Just because someone completed your process doesn't mean they got the outcome they needed. The student who graduated might not have gained employable skills. The customer who made a purchase might not have solved their underlying problem.

From Current State to Ideal State

Here's where journey mapping for understanding becomes strategic rather than just descriptive:

Map the current reality—warts and all. Don't map the process as it's *supposed* to work according to your documentation. Map how it *actually* works, including all the unofficial workarounds, the times a customer was passed back and forth between teams, the phone calls from them or to them that shouldn't be necessary, the confusion points where people abandon or give up.

This is where AI-powered feedback analysis becomes powerful—you can surface patterns across thousands of interactions that reveal the hidden journey. The one where customers say, "I couldn't find it on the website, so I called" or employees say, "the system rejected my request, so I just asked my manager to override it."

Envision the ideal journey—what would frictionless look like and how long should it take? If you could redesign the experience from scratch, knowing what you now know about what people are trying to achieve, what would you create?

Critical point: don't let current constraints limit your ideal state thinking. Yes, you'll need to be pragmatic about implementation, but first imagine the experience

without assuming "we can't change that system" or "that's just how we've always done it." The gap between current and ideal is where innovation lives.

Journey Mapping + AI: A Powerful Combination

This is where technology creates real leverage:

- **AI can identify journey breakdowns at scale**—analysing unstructured feedback, transcripts, call recordings, emails... whatever interaction records you have—to pinpoint exactly where in the journey frustration occurs, even when customers don't explicitly say "step 3 is broken"
- **AI can track whether improvements worked**—monitoring feedback over time to see if changes to specific journey stages actually reduced effort, improved satisfaction, or increased completion rates
- **AI can personalise the journey**—understanding where individual customers or employees are and proactively offering help before they get stuck
- **AI can predict abandonments**—identifying signals that someone is likely to disengage and creating opportunities for intervention
- **AI can do things that your structured feedback data can't do quickly or at scale**

But here's the crucial point: **AI helps you understand and optimise the journey, but humans have to design and deliver the experience.**

The Journey Map as Living Intelligence

Finally, journey maps can't be static. As you gather continuous feedback, as you implement changes, as customer needs evolve—your understanding of both current and ideal states must evolve too.

This is the shift from journey mapping as a project to journey intelligence as a capability. You're always learning, always refining, always closing the gap between where you are and where you need to be.

Bridge the Gap—Together: Closing the Outer Loop

This is the key insight that separates transformational work from incremental improvement:

You can't bridge that gap alone in a conference room. You need to co-create solutions with the people who live the journey:

- **Involve employees** in redesigning processes they execute daily. They know where the workarounds are, where the bottlenecks hide, what would actually make things better. When employees help design the solution, they become champions for change rather than resisters.
- **Involve customers and stakeholders** in understanding their needs and testing solutions. This isn't about focus groups validating your predetermined approach—it's about genuine co-creation. What would make this easier for you? What are we missing? What matters most?
- **Create cross-functional ownership** of journey stages. The customer's journey doesn't stop at departmental boundaries. Sales hands off to implementation, implementation hands off to support, support hands off to account management. Each handoff is a potential failure point. Who owns the *whole* journey? If that means your CEO, include them in the process.

Traditional CX closed what we call the "outer loop"—aggregate insights lead to organisational changes. Update the product roadmap. Improve training. Fix the process. This matters, but it's slow and requires organisational will and coordination.

The Inner Loop Revolution: Real-Time, Personal Response

The **inner loop**—responding to the individual who gave feedback—has been possible but could be far more effective at scale which we can now do.

When someone takes the time to tell you about their experience, the clock starts ticking. Wait three months to "circle back" and you've communicated that their input doesn't matter. But respond in real-time with genuine acknowledgment and—crucially—*action* or explanation, and you've created a moment of connection that strengthens the relationship.

Closing the inner loop is effective and manageable when you realise that typically only 3% of customers who interact actually provide feedback. If you're only following up with detractors who agreed to be contacted, the volumes are small but the rewards are large.

For example: A Managing Director followed up with a very unhappy customer. This resulted in the customer not only staying but ordering an additional \$1M in products. It really happened. It depended on a key person triaging the triggered cases knowing that the customer was strategic and that it was best for the MD to follow up personally.

Technology makes this easier and possible at scale—based not just on a survey response but on a record of any interaction. The challenge will be ensuring your people understand this isn't something new they have to do, but an easier way to prioritise which customer relationships they need to actively manage right now, and providing lots of things to talk about to lots of customers – reasons to engage and build trust which enables purchase.

AI enables the inner loop by:

Identifying which feedback requires immediate human intervention. We've traditionally been good at identifying 'detractors' based on a score, but what about the advocates we could leverage for recommendations? Or the customer or employee who is vulnerable because of what they said and how they said it? What about someone experiencing a life event—births, deaths, marriages, home purchase, retirement—that should at least be acknowledged, celebrated, or commiserated with? What about potential threats to a person, the organisation's reputation, or the customer themselves? (The machines can make us better humans) What about potential formal complaints that could be lodged with third parties, with all the work and potential fines associated with that?

The limit is our imagination. Once the context is understood and the outcome identified, the rules people create for the technology to implement become straightforward.

Drafting personalised responses that acknowledge specific context, include your organisation's knowledge and next steps or recommendations (when appropriate and allowed).

Routing urgent issues to the right person instantly—not just by category, but by understanding context, customer value, and organisational priorities.

Tracking whether the loop actually got closed—and if it didn't, reminding the person they need to act. If still nothing happens, escalate up the chain. The hierarchy still has power and influence to drive the right behaviour and action.

Learning from which responses strengthen relationships versus feel robotic—continuously improving the quality and effectiveness of engagement.

This is the shift from feedback as data collection to feedback as relationship building. Because of the technology, it is now even more about the human-to-human interactions when it matters that... well, matters.

What Has Always Mattered and Still Does

It should never have been just about the surveys and the metrics elicited from them. Knowing your NPS is 1.2 points higher than the industry average is great, and many an executive has achieved comfort from that. Knowing that a promoter is 2.6 times more valuable to an organisation than a detractor creates an inspiring impetus to create more promoters.

But how do we as an organisation go about doing that—that's what really matters. Most companies have struggled with the challenges of change: what to change, by whom, when, and how much will it cost? Do I have enough of the right people or the right systems to make it happen? And we all have our day jobs to do which aren't easy, plus the 6 other 'transformational' projects the CEO has endorsed that we're working on as well. Do something new as well? I don't think so!

What has been true and will remain true is how organisations respond to the feedback they collect and whether the organisation has the cultural foundations, shared vision, and organisational will to change—inspired by their customers' and employees' experiences.

It is now possible at scale to capture not just the direct and explicit feedback, but the indirect, the inferred, the implied feedback. It is now possible to respond not just to the squeaky wheel (though we're very good at that) or the 3% of customers who responded to the survey, but to understand with confidence the entirety of customers who have interacted with an organisation: what works, what doesn't,

what is hard and what is easy, what is enjoyable and what is hated. And we can now answer why.

We can know where we need to improve and where we need to maintain already great experiences based on all interactions. We can even 'generate' recommendations leveraging the right LLMs on how we need to change.

But Here's What Really Matters: Culture Eats Strategy for Breakfast

You can implement every tool that promises to solve all your challenges, save you money, and make your people happier. You can have AI analysing interaction records and feedback in real-time, create beautiful dashboards, automate routing, perfect journey maps. And it can still fail spectacularly.

Because here's the uncomfortable truth: customers and employees don't want to be "surveyed" or "analysed"—they want to be *heard, valued, and responded to*.

The organisations winning right now aren't the ones with the best measurement systems. They're the ones who've created **human-centric cultures** where:

Everyone owns the experience. CX isn't a department, it's a mindset. The finance team understands their invoice clarity affects customer satisfaction. IT understands their security protocols affect employee productivity. Marketing understands their campaigns set expectations and brand promises that operations must deliver on.

Feedback—and especially complaints, structured or not—is treated as a gift, not a metric. When an employee or customer tells you something's wrong, the first response isn't defensive or dismissive. It's curiosity and gratitude. "Thank you for trusting us enough to tell us this. Help me understand more."

Leadership models responsiveness. If the CEO isn't reading feedback and occasionally jumping in to solve problems, middle managers won't either. Culture flows downhill. What leaders pay attention to becomes what the organisation values.

Psychological safety enables truth-telling. Employees need to know they can flag problems without repercussion. Customers need to know criticism won't

damage the relationship. Without safety, you only hear what people think you want to hear.

The Virtuous Cycle: Why This Actually Matters

Here's what happens when you get this right:

Happy employees create happy customers. Engaged employees who feel heard and empowered don't just show up—they bring discretionary effort, creativity, problem-solving. They *care* about the customer experience because they're experiencing a great employee experience. You can't deliver exceptional external experiences with disengaged internal teams.

Happy customers stay longer. Retention compounds. A customer who stays two years versus one year often becomes exponentially more valuable—they buy more, buy more frequently, they know your products better so support costs drop. The economics of retention beat the economics of acquisition every time.

Happy customers become advocates. They don't just stay—they recruit. Word-of-mouth from genuine advocates has higher conversion than any marketing campaign because it comes with pre-built trust. Your best customers become your best salespeople.

This becomes self-reinforcing. As customer satisfaction improves, employees feel proud of what they're creating. As employee engagement rises, they innovate and improve the experience further. Revenue grows. You can invest more in your people and products. The flywheel accelerates.

And here's the kicker: This isn't just good ethics or "nice to have"—this is competitive advantage and long-term sustainability. Organisations with strong cultures and genuine people-focus weather disruption better, attract better talent, command pricing power, and build deeper moats than those competing on product features alone.

In a world where products and services can be copied, culture and experience are your most defensible advantages.

The Bridge Between Vision and Reality

But culture doesn't emerge from mission statements or values posters. It emerges from **systems, behaviours, accountability, and reward and recognition**:

- **Systems** that make it easy to hear and understand feedback – direct or indirect
- **Behaviours** modelled by leaders that show people matter
- **Accountability** for closing loops and driving improvement
- **Recognition and reward** when things are done well

This is where technology meets humanity. Technology and especially AI gives you the capability to listen continuously and respond personally at scale. But you still need the organisational will, the process discipline, and the cultural foundation to turn capability into impact.

Questions to Ask Yourself

Before we finish, I want you to consider a few diagnostic questions. Be honest with yourself:

- **How long does it currently take from receiving feedback to implementing a solution?** Weeks? Months? Never?
- **What percentage of issues that really drive experience identified in your last survey have actually been addressed?** Can you even track this?
- **Can you trace a specific piece of customer or employee feedback to a specific change you made?** If I asked your team for three examples, could they provide them?
- **When someone gives you feedback, do they ever hear what you did about it?** Or does feedback go into a black hole?
- **How many touchpoints does it take for someone to achieve a typical outcome with your organisation?** Do you even know?
- **Who owns the end-to-end journey?** Or does responsibility fragment across departments with nobody accountable for the whole experience?

If you're feeling uncomfortable reading these questions, that's actually a good sign. It means you're ready.

The Path Forward

The shift from periodic surveys to continuous intelligence, from aggregate reporting to real-time action, from measurement to meaningful improvement—this isn't a technology project you can delegate to your CX team.

This is a strategic imperative that requires organisational change management, culture work, process redesign, cross-functional collaboration, and yes, smart use of technology.

It requires someone who understands all those dimensions and can help you navigate the complexity.

It requires moving from knowing what to do to actually doing it.

It requires bridging the gap between where you are and where your customers, employees, students, members, or citizens need you to be.

And the ultimate goal may be this: if you create great experiences for the customers who interact and engage with you, how do you encourage the 80% of existing customers who don't engage to do so—giving you the opportunity to build relationships and trust among your people and your customers, so they stay longer, buy more, pay their bills, and tell their friends.

Does Any of This Resonate? Worry You?

If so, let's talk. I would love to help.

Kind regards,

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