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Jason A. Wolf
*The Beryl Institute / Patient Experience Journal*

Vishal Bhalla
*Advocate Health*

Brian Carlson
*Vanderbilt University Medical Center*

Jennifer Carron
*BJC Healthcare*

Lanie Dixon
*Essentia Health*

*See next page for additional authors*

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Authors
Jason A. Wolf, Vishal Bhalla, Brian Carlson, Jennifer Carron, Lanie Dixon, Julie K. Oehlert, and Brant J. Oliver

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COMMENTARY

Investing in the Bottom Line: The Value Case for Improving Human Experience in Healthcare

Jason A. Wolf a,*, Vishal Bhalla b, Brian Carlson c, Jennifer Carron d, Lanie Dixon e, Julie Kennedy Oehlert f, Brant Oliver g

a The Beryl Institute / Patient Experience Journal
b Advocate Health
c Vanderbilt University Medical Center
d BJC HealthCare
e Essentia Health
f ECU Health
g Dartmouth Health Care Experience & Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth

ABSTRACT

Investment in human experience is imperative for healthcare organizations. It is a strategic focus that can lead to great benefits. Those that overlook experience, seeing it as “simply” about satisfaction or survey data, do so at great cost to their organization, team members, and most importantly those we serve – patients. A commitment to human experience – integrating the patient, workforce, and community experience – is essential for all healthcare organizations in realizing the goals they strive for and the impact they aspire to achieve. It leads to high-quality outcomes for those they care for. It creates a positive environment for those who show up to serve each day. It fosters trust from the communities they serve. It is a central driver for financial viability and operational sustainability. It is a driver of quality outcomes, safety, and workforce engagement. It fosters consumer loyalty leading to stronger payor relationships, increased physician referrals, and greater patient, family, and consumer choice. Ultimately, a commitment to experience is the path to realizing a viable and thriving future for healthcare organizations. The concept of value in healthcare as initially proposed focused on healthcare outcomes per dollar spent. The reality is healthcare is a complex system driven by not only what is spent or patient outcomes, but also by how healthcare organizations engage with patients as people, care for their workforce, and address the needs of the communities they serve. A value case is not one solely about clinical outcomes but about the comprehensive healthcare experience through which a much broader set of outcomes is achieved. This paper proposes a model for the value of investment in human experience as a practical bottom-line issue for healthcare leaders.

Keywords: Human experience, Patient experience, Value case, Value, Return on investment, Workforce engagement, Patient engagement, Community engagement, Operational excellence

1. A commitment to human experience

Investment in human experience is imperative for healthcare organizations. It is a strategic focus that can lead to great benefits. Those that overlook experience, seeing it as “simply” about satisfaction or survey data, do so at great cost to their organization, team members, and most importantly those we serve – patients.

A commitment to human experience – integrating the patient, workforce, and community experience – is essential for all healthcare organizations in realizing the goals they strive for and the impact they
aspire to achieve. It leads to high-quality outcomes for those they care for. It creates a positive environment for those who show up to serve each day. It fosters trust from the communities they serve. It is a central driver for financial viability and operational sustainability. It is a driver of quality outcomes, safety, and workforce engagement. It drives reputation and consumer loyalty leading to stronger payor relationships, increased physician referrals, and greater patient, family, and consumer choice. Ultimately, a commitment to experience is the path to realizing a viable and thriving future for healthcare organizations.

Investment in experience represents an integrated approach that aligns resources and actions with broad and significant outcomes. While distinct improvement efforts may have a positive impact, disparate efforts or commitments to singular pillars or targets, such as quality or cost management alone, often lead to a competition for resources – in people, time, and funding – at the cost of more comprehensive and lasting outcomes that can be found in integration and collaboration. They can also lead to fragmented or inconsistent experiences for both those receiving and delivering care.

Ultimately, an investment in experience is a commitment to looking beyond achieving specific short-term results to truly addressing the breadth of an organization’s priorities and identity with a longitudinal and lasting impact.

2. The imperative for experience

Experience reflects the strategic manifestation of an organization’s overall strategy – from its brand promise and community reputation to its efforts to attract and retain the best workforce to the safe, quality care it seeks to provide. A commitment to experience is more than a series of disconnected processes focused on satisfaction. It is something people have come to expect in every engagement they have with a healthcare organization.

The imperative for experience is grounded in the foundational definition of experience developed by The Beryl Institute’s global experience community – the sum of all interactions shaped by an organization’s culture that influence patient perceptions across the continuum of care. The idea that experience reflects the collection of an individual’s interactions, at all touchpoints on their care journey and well before and after a specific clinical visit, is critical. It affirms that every person matters in a patient and care partner encounter. It reinforces that the culture a healthcare leader shapes and sustains becomes the foundation on which every experience occurs.

The evolution of the experience concept to that of human experience is particularly suited to healthcare, where the integration of the patient experience at its core, linked to the workforce and community experience, can no longer be overlooked. This idea of the human experience in healthcare underlines a critical point, that the healthcare experience is influenced primarily by the healthcare workforce. Especially now when workforce challenges are heightened, attention to the human experience of our workforce is critically important. Their actions are the levers through which the interactions at the core of any experience occur. A focus on human experience also underlines an organization’s community commitments and touches on the very real issues of equity, access, and health disparities that all organizations strive to positively impact.

In the recent paper, The Human Experience Imperative: Practical insights for executives on organizational strategy, structure and impact, the authors reinforce a critical point, that an investment in experience is essential and must be built upon a clear experience structure. This investment will show returns in multiple ways, as this paper seeks to reinforce. The authors offer, “Structuring experience efforts is not just an exercise in determining boxes and lines or building processes to improve a set of metrics. It is a strategic decision with broad-reaching implications for healthcare organizations today. While healthcare has and will again find itself in moments like the present with constrained resources, an exhausted workforce, supply shortages, and more, a decision to invest in experience provides a solid backstop to diminished returns.”

What is asserted here is that it is through a commitment to human experience that the true strategic value of experience is realized. In fact, we offer that an understanding of and commitment to the human experience is the essential competency for healthcare leadership today. This paper will reinforce this criticality and frame the impact a commitment to human experience will have on healthcare’s future.

3. Strategic actions for experience excellence

A great deal of work has gone into identifying key actions that drive experience excellence. In this paper,
we share six fundamental strategic actions that drive outcomes. While we will not expand extensively on each of these items here, they provide an important context in linking action to the impact that will be realized through an investment in experience.

3.1. Experience efforts must be driven by executive leadership

Executives must be clear in statements, investments, and actions that a commitment to experience is a fundamental strategy for an organization’s success. This commitment spans from advocating for human experience at the board level and role modeling the importance of experience through policy decisions and personal behaviors to operationalizing and setting clear expectations for experience efforts with the workforce and reflecting this commitment to the community through external communications and engagements. All decisions should be considered through the lens of or effects on the experiences of patients, staff, and more broadly, community members.

3.2. Experience efforts must be mission-critical and value-driven

Experience must be woven into the very mission of who an organization seeks to be, not a separate strategy from it. It must be reflected in the values on which an organization is built and seen in the behaviors and actions of its people. It must be a clear and visible part of any strategic plan.

3.3. Experience efforts must be grounded in a positive, caring, and respectful culture

Culture is the filter through which any organization acts and how it is perceived by others. Culture is reflected in the structures, values, and beliefs that drive the behaviors of an organization’s people. A focus on positive culture, behaviors, and positive deviance can improve care quality and overall outcomes. A positive and caring culture is built with intention, based on open communication and respect, and it is reinforced in the actions and behaviors of every team member in every interaction.

3.4. Experience efforts must positively impact the well-being and engagement of all who serve

The idea that healthcare is about human beings caring for human beings is central to this idea. The experience people have with an organization is heavily influenced by the staff and providers themselves. If they feel engaged supported and included, it fosters a positive work environment and ultimately enhances the overall experience for everyone involved. Better workforce engagement translates into better patient experiences and better quality and safety outcomes. Therefore, a commitment to well-being, listening, and engaging the entire workforce as owners of an organization’s experience effort is essential.

3.5. Experience efforts must actively invite partnership and co-ownership

Efforts to achieve experience excellence must be focused on both ensuring partnerships with, and fostering ownership from, patients and care partners. Organizations must also do more than just listen to the voices of patients. They must include patients and families in the co-design and co-production of healthcare services. They must take clear and evident action on what is heard and share what they did as a result. They too must reinforce the need for greater internal collaboration and connection to ensure effective and efficient outcomes.

3.6. Experience efforts must have clear and shared organizational objectives

While experience should not be simply about metrics, it is important that any experience effort have clear and stated goals and a means to measure success. These should be reflected in the organization’s strategic plan and shared broadly in an organization. Efforts to align disparate efforts in pursuit of these goals are essential. The value case that follows begins to touch on the very impact a comprehensive and integrated experience effort can have.

4. The value case for experience

Value by its definition is central to healthcare success. It refers to the ideas of excellence, distinction, and even advantage, all objectives that are essential to healthcare leadership today. The concept of value in healthcare as initially proposed focused on healthcare outcomes per dollar spent. The reality is healthcare is a complex system driven by not only what is spent or patient outcomes, but also by how healthcare organizations engage with patients as people, care for their workforce, and address the needs of the communities they serve. A value case is not one solely about clinical outcomes but about the comprehensive healthcare experience through which a much broader set of outcomes is achieved.
In considering the value case for experience, we must examine the impacts of human experience as an integrated effort that positively contributes to a wide range of desired outcomes. A focus on human experience has us consider patient and care partner, workforce, and community experiences in connection to one another and the outcomes that positively support each of those priorities. The point here is while we can identify and tackle very specific actions to address a singular critical issue, patient safety or wait times for example, an integrated experience strategy has a greater overall impact.\textsuperscript{19,20} We believe an investment in experience drives value in four key areas and has a positive, measurable impact on the overall objectives of healthcare organizations.

4.1. Workforce/team value

- **Vibrant culture.** At the heart of the definition of experience itself is the idea that it is based on an organization’s culture. Yet a commitment to experience is also a strategic choice that helps build a positive and vibrant culture. In committing to building and sustaining a positive environment, organizations can realize greater attraction and retention of team members and increased team engagement and loyalty, all of which support better and sustained outcomes.\textsuperscript{21–23}

- **Team well-being.** A healthy workforce in mind, body, and spirit is more important now than ever with the stress levels and mental health challenges experienced by the healthcare workforce at an all-time high. A focus on team well-being reinforces purpose, instills joy, and promotes commitment to and trust in the organization. It also fosters an environment of workforce safety where both individuals and teams can grow and thrive and where they feel listened to, respected, and appreciated.\textsuperscript{24–26}

4.2. Patient, family, and care partner value

- **Clinical outcomes.** People come to healthcare organizations with the expectation of receiving safe, quality care. A commitment to experience—one that acknowledges safe care is part of, not separate from, an experience someone has. Safety stems from managing processes effectively, communicating openly, and listening to the patient’s perspective of safety. All are comprehensive outcomes of an experience effort.\textsuperscript{27–30}

- **Positive engagement.** Engaging patients and care partners as key team members of a care team and co-owners and co-producers of their care experience is a critical approach essential to any experience effort. Ensuring partnership, a clear willingness to listen, and communicating in ways people can understand all ensure greater engagement and increased value.\textsuperscript{31–33}

4.3. Organizational/business value

- **Brand strength.** Healthcare organizations thrive based on brand strength and community reputation. This is represented in every encounter someone has with a healthcare organization. Strong experience efforts frame the stories people will tell, drive loyalty to an organization, and encourage patient choice.\textsuperscript{34,35}

- **Operational efficiency.** Enacting process and operational improvements alone can impact an organization’s expenditures, but operational efficiency is built on much more. It is delivered through people who are clear on their expectations and grounded in open and honest communication processes. A commitment to experience lays a foundation for operational efficiency and financial viability.\textsuperscript{36,37}

4.4. Community/consumer value

- **Access and community wellness.** Healthcare organizations must also link the impact they have in their communities as a key value realized in experience. A commitment to experience inspires efforts to reach beyond the walls of traditional care settings and explore new models and modes of care. It also calls for active efforts to ensure expanded access to care and a commitment to elevating the health of the communities in which healthcare organizations operate.\textsuperscript{38,39}

- **Ensured equity.** An essential part of an organization’s experience is a focus on ensuring equity, creating easier more accessible paths to care and treatment, and working to dismantle the disparities still evident in the day-to-day workings of healthcare. This requires intentionality and purpose. An effective experience strategy is only able to be fully effective if it works for all in the community a healthcare organization serves.\textsuperscript{40–42}

Overall, an integrated experience strategy not only has a broad impact but also aligns the actions and efforts of an organization. For example, while effective communication may be a tool taught specifically for team building and workforce well-being, it is a resource that supports how people communicate more broadly with patients and care partners, and/or has a direct impact on reducing mistakes and positively affecting quality outcomes. It is critical that
improvement efforts and experience strategies are recognized as more than addressing one specific need and look toward the broader impact they can have.

We have long held that a commitment to experience is about realizing much more than improved survey scores. That is but one of several integrated outcomes realized by this commitment, including:

- Improved workforce engagement
- Increased workplace safety
- Enhanced workforce wellbeing
- Elevated team member attraction/retention
- Improved clinical outcomes
- Increased quality and safety
- Strengthened patient partnership
- Sustained high reliability
- Improved financial strength
- Increased loyalty and market share
- Reduced cost of care/cost avoidance
- Recognized provider of choice
- Improved community trust
- Increased access to care
- Decreased health disparities
- Boosted external ratings

The full model is outlined in Fig. 1 above.

5. Experience is who you are

In elevating the value case of experience, we must not get lost in the complexities and chaos of healthcare. Rather, we must lean into the power found in simplicity and intent. We must focus on the real human work that elevates healthcare’s impact on patients, the healthcare workforce, and the communities we serve. An investment in experience excellence from this integrated view is vital for leaders seeking distinction, competitive advantage, and overall excellence.

Experience is not an initiative or a single strategic pillar. It is not another thing for a healthcare organization to fund. It is not simply the results of a survey. A true and integrated commitment to experience reflects who healthcare organizations are through the way people encounter them every day, in every interaction they have.

Experience is not what organizations do, but who they choose to be. It is an essential competency for healthcare leadership. In taking on an integrated approach, healthcare organizations will truly realize the value of their investment and the true impact they seek, for their communities, people, and patients.

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