

Article

The Employee Experience as a Heroic Journey: A Dynamic Conceptual Framework for Transformation and Meaning in Organizational Life

Stephan Sonnenburg^{1,*} ¹ICN Business School, CEREFIGE, University of Lorraine, 54000 Nancy, France*Correspondence: stephan.sonnenburg@icn-artem.com (Stephan Sonnenburg)

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Abstract

Employee experience (EX) is often described through managerial touchpoints that measure satisfaction or engagement but overlook how employees transform through work. This paper reconceptualizes EX as a process of transformation rather than a set of designed interactions. It introduces the Heroic Journey, a dynamic conceptual framework that integrates EX research, liminality theory, and narrative perspectives to explain how meaning, identity, and belonging evolve in organizational life. Transformation unfolds through three interwoven dynamics: temporal rhythm, emotional tension, and transitional movement, which together clarify how employees move through uncertainty and renewal across stages. The framework identifies four turning points—friction, onboarding, breakthrough, and offboarding—that concentrate transformation. Because these passages are not equally navigable, the framework is offered as an interpretive guide rather than a universal script. The Heroic Journey advances EX theory by explaining transformation as a continuous negotiation of meaning under shifting organizational conditions.

Keywords: employee experience; Heroic Journey; transformation; liminality; sensemaking; temporal rhythm; emotional tension; transitional movement; organizational development

JEL: J54, M14, O15, O31

1. Introduction

Human Resource Management (HRM) research increasingly recognizes that organizational success depends on the lived experience of employees, not only on the optimization of processes. Following the relational turn in HRM (Bannya et al., 2023), recent scholarship foregrounds meaning and identity as central to how organizations sustain adaptability and long-term performance. Within this perspective, the concept of employee experience (EX) has gained prominence as a way to understand how individuals engage with their work environments across time. A well-designed EX strategy is often associated with higher motivation, well-being, and retention in practitioner-oriented studies (Panneerselvam and Balaraman, 2022; Plaskoff, 2017). Industry reports such as Gallup's *State of the Global Workplace* (Harter, 2024) further illustrate the managerial relevance of EX, showing consistent links between engagement and organizational performance, yet they do not explain what experience is, how it develops, or why it transforms.

Despite growing interest, research on EX remains fragmented and uneven. Existing models and discussions often frame EX through established perspectives such as engagement, satisfaction, and employer branding (Batat, 2022; Das and Dhan, 2023; Mohanty and Kulkarni, 2023; Plaskoff, 2017; Vereb et al., 2025). These perspectives illuminate what employees feel or value but offer limited understanding of how those experiences reshape over

time. Related studies address dimensions such as well-being (Robertson and Cooper, 2010; Sivapragasam and Raya, 2017), digitalization (Gheidari and ShamiZanjani, 2020), and work relationships (Bannya et al., 2023), yet the field remains conceptually dispersed and largely descriptive. Although more integrative views are emerging (Andrés-Reina et al., 2024; Batat, 2022), the field still lacks a coherent explanation of transformation, including how meaning is constructed and communicated as work unfolds. Addressing this absence requires a developmental perspective that treats experience as an evolving pattern of narrated and enacted change.

To address this gap, the paper introduces the Heroic Journey as a conceptual framework for theorizing EX as transformation. Inspired by Campbell's hero's journey (1949/2008), a narrative structure that models transformation through challenge, initiation, and return, the framework adapts this archetype for organizational life. Campbell's model has been applied across fields such as cinematic storytelling (Vogler, 2007), psychology (Rebillot, 1993), leadership development (Sonnenburg and Runco, 2017), and education (Randles, 2012), but it has not been developed as a framework for EX in HRM scholarship. This paper therefore extends Campbell's model to EX theorizing in HRM, highlighting its capacity to explain transformation as meaning-making work in professional life. It conceptualizes EX as an unfolding process of identity change organized into twelve stages structured around four



turning points: friction, onboarding, breakthrough, and offboarding. Beyond mapping a sequence of stages, it introduces a narrative-liminal and developmental logic that explains how employees evolve through temporal rhythm, emotional tension, and transitional movement, three dynamics that specify how transformation is generated.

The added value of the Heroic Journey lies in reframing EX from a managerial design problem to a conceptual challenge of human development within organizational life. It connects individual sensemaking, relational dynamics, and organizational arrangements by explaining how experiences gain continuity and how change concentrates at specific points. By integrating contemporary EX research (Batat, 2022; Das and Dhan, 2023; Plaskoff, 2017; Vereb et al., 2025) with liminality studies (Banfield, 2022; Piironen, 2022; Winkler and Kristensen, 2022) and the narrative-symbolic model of the hero's journey (Campbell, 1949/2008; Vogler, 2007), this framework brings together perspectives that have remained conceptually separate. Each of these traditions captures a different dimension of transformation—experience, transition, and narration—and their integration makes it possible to understand how meaning and identity develop through the temporal, emotional, and symbolic dynamics of work. This integrative view clarifies the limits of touchpoint-focused EX models.

Articulating this framework conceptually before empirical testing is deliberate and necessary. While EX research has inspired rich empirical measurement (Acuña-Hurtado et al., 2024; Yang and Zhang, 2025), theoretical consolidation remains limited. Without a coherent model that explains how meaning unfolds through transformation, empirical work risks reproducing managerial rather than developmental logic. Following the principles of conceptual research (Jaakkola, 2020; Jabareen, 2009), this study advances understanding through theoretical integration. The resulting framework offers a foundation for future empirical inquiry and positions the Heroic Journey as a process model for advancing the theorization of EX.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical foundations of EX research and develops a nuanced conceptual grounding of the Heroic Journey, integrating liminality theory with Campbell's hero's journey. Section 3 presents the core framework by mapping the Heroic Journey onto the employee lifecycle, outlining twelve stages structured around four turning points. It also develops a methodological bridge specifying narrative markers and observable indicators for longitudinal and qualitative research. Section 4 elaborates the paper's theoretical contributions and implications for research and practice. Section 5 concludes with a reflective synthesis that highlights the broader significance of EX as transformation over time.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Toward a Dynamic Perspective on Employee Experience

In recent years, EX has emerged as a central theme in organizational research and HRM, reflecting growing interest in how employees perceive, engage with, and make sense of their professional lives. The following review draws on both scholarly and practitioner-oriented sources to trace how the concept of EX emerged in managerial discourse and gradually evolved into an academic field of inquiry. Yet despite its spread, EX remains conceptually thin, still grounded more in managerial design than in an understanding of experience as a dynamic process. The contemporary focus on EX is closely tied to the earlier rise of customer experience, which developed in response to the limitations of traditional marketing that emphasized transactions and satisfaction. Influential contributions such as Pine II and Gilmore's (1998) practitioner-oriented *Experience Economy*, Schmitt's (1999) *Experiential Marketing*, and Vargo and Lusch's (2004) service-dominant logic shifted attention from exchange to experience, redefining consumption as a holistic and emotionally engaging process (Jain et al., 2017). In contemporary customer experience research, experiences are commonly conceptualized as multidimensional, engaging consumers on cognitive, emotional, and relational levels (Bascur and Rusu, 2020). While these marketing foundations helped popularize experiential thinking, they also imported a consumerist logic that often reduces experience to moments of satisfaction rather than ongoing developmental change.

This experience-centered turn laid the conceptual groundwork for a parallel development within HRM, where organizations began applying similar thinking to employees. Although EX circulated in managerial discourse, early work by Abhari et al. (2008) was among the first to give it academic form, presenting in a conference paper the idea of EX management as a structured approach to understanding and improving employees' experiences. However, as a theoretical construct, the term employee experience remained underexplored for more than a decade. Practitioner-oriented contributions such as Morgan (2017) and Tucker (2020) broadened the perspective on EX by framing it as a strategic approach to attracting and retaining talent, strengthening engagement, and improving organizational functioning. Gradually, EX evolved from a managerial practice to a research construct within HRM, shifting attention from managing people through processes to shaping employee-centric conditions of experience (Batat, 2022).

Early conceptualizations frame EX as the set of perceptions employees form through their interactions with the organization (Yadav and Vihari, 2023). These interactions typically occur at key moments such as recruitment, performance reviews, workplace design, leadership contact, and offboarding. Together, these touchpoints shape how employees perceive and feel about their relationship with

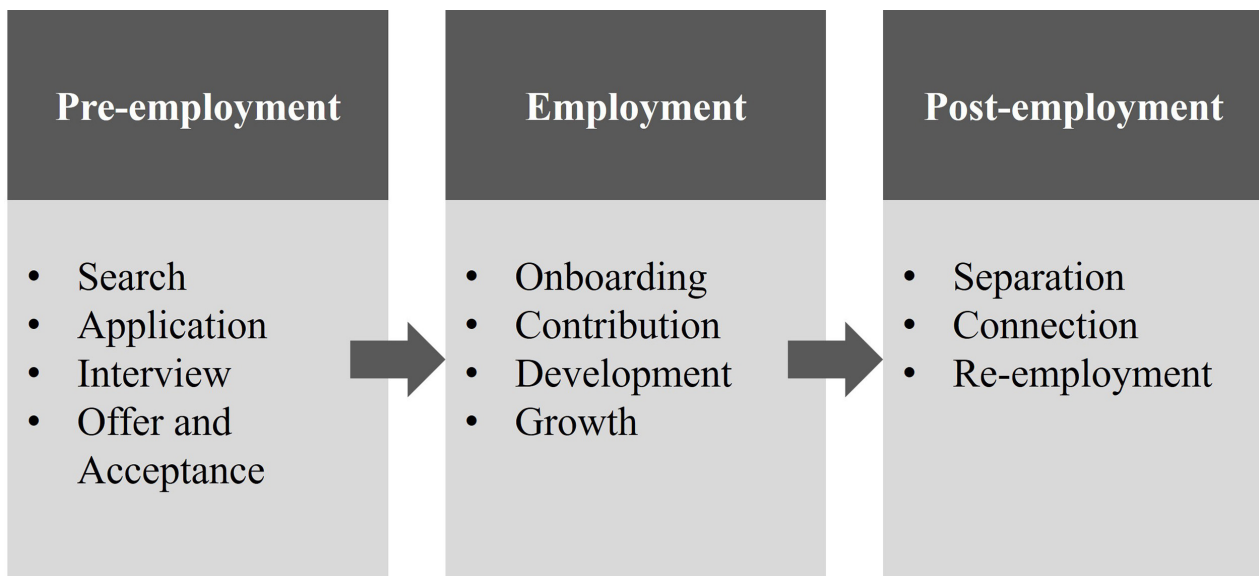


Fig. 1. The employee journey (Plaskoff, 2017, p. 138).

the organization (Das and Dhan, 2023). Such models contributed to highlighting subjectivity and well-being (Farn-dale and Kelliher, 2013), but they often conceptualize EX as a managerial tool instead of recognizing it as a lived and evolving process.

Recent studies illustrate both conceptual refinement and continuing limitations. Scholars link EX to job satisfaction and engagement (Grover and Chawla, 2025; Vereb et al., 2025), while others argue that EX is a strategic lever for organizational performance (Panneerselvam and Balaraman, 2022). Digital approaches, such as artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled experience platforms, extend this line of work by personalizing learning, feedback, and development (Abhari et al., 2023). Although empirical sophistication has increased, the theoretical vocabulary of EX has not kept pace with its managerial application. These advances deepen conceptual and operational precision but continue to treat experience as a variable.

Several scholars have questioned the adequacy of such episodic approaches. They argue that employees do not simply move through isolated events but navigate interconnected journeys reflecting deeper processes of development and identity negotiation, an emphasis increasingly visible across recent reviews and emerging academic work (Andrés-Reina et al., 2024; Chaudhari et al., 2023). Similarly, Sun et al. (2023) and Warhurst and Nickson (2007) emphasize the relational and interactional character of experience. Employees do not merely undergo experiences; they continuously interpret and reshape them through interactions with peers, leaders, technologies, and the organizational stories that surround them. Experience is not delivered but enacted, negotiated, and continually re-formed in practice.

Despite increasing attention to experience as an evolving process, most EX frameworks continue to apply the

journey metaphor superficially, reproducing structural and managerial logics. Design thinking models (e.g., Sinha et al., 2020) or Plaskoff's (2017) practice-oriented three-phase structure, spanning pre-employment, employment, and post-employment (see Fig. 1), offer valuable managerial overviews but still treat EX primarily as a design and management task. Even when these models invoke notions of journey or transformation, they typically remain linear and functional, describing movement through organizational systems rather than through self-understanding and sensemaking. Consequently, mainstream EX models remain grounded in cognitive and individualistic assumptions, overlooking how experience unfolds as a socially embedded process through which employees negotiate belonging and meaning.

These conceptual gaps are reflected in how EX is defined. Current definitions are predominantly perception-oriented and touchpoint-focused and often underplay temporality and social construction. Yadav and Vihari (2023) describe EX as mental perception formed through interaction, while Plaskoff (2017) frames it as a managerial design approach that integrates multiple touchpoints to support engagement. Batat (2022) extends this view by adding emotional and social dimensions. However, all three frame experience as a stable attribute rather than as an evolving process. Across the field, scholars increasingly call for a more dynamic understanding that connects lived experience with organizational context and change (Andrés-Reina et al., 2024; Das and Dhan, 2023; Vereb et al., 2025; Yang and Zhang, 2025).

Responding to these calls and to persisting conceptual limitations, this paper defines employee experience (EX) as a meaning-driven journey through which individuals navigate and interpret their professional lives, shaped by psychological, social, and organizational conditions over time.

This definition explicitly moves beyond the descriptive to the explanatory, providing a foundation for theorizing how experience becomes transformation, as elaborated in Section 3.

2.2 Reimagining Employee Experience as a Meaning-Driven Journey

Building on the critique of existing models and the redefinition of EX as a meaning-driven process, this section introduces the Heroic Journey as a narrative lens for understanding how experience unfolds. In this sense, ‘narrative’ is defined as a story-like representation of events that organizes experience into a coherent sequence and makes action and change legible (Shenhav, 2015). Such narratives help employees connect episodes and sustain coherence as conditions shift. Instead of passing through isolated events or managerial touchpoints, employees face evolving situations filled with uncertainty, challenge, and renewal. These transitions reshape how they interpret their work and their place within the organization. To account for such dynamics, EX research needs a framework that captures how experience shifts as people navigate changing contexts, engage with tension, and find coherence through reflection and interaction in and across episodes of work.

The foundations of the Heroic Journey lie in Joseph Campbell’s account of the hero’s journey motif. He first articulated this in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Campbell, 1949/2008) and later expanded it in *Myths to Live By* (Campbell, 1993) and *Pathways to Bliss* (Campbell, 2004). He proposed that mythic narratives across cultures share a recurring structure in which the hero departs from the ordinary world, encounters trials in an unfamiliar realm, and ultimately returns with insights or gifts that renew the community. This sequence of departure, initiation, and return mirrors the symbolic transitions found in rites of passage. The journey, in Campbell’s interpretation, is both personal and collective: transformation within the individual becomes a source of renewal for the group.

Campbell’s framework resonates widely across disciplines. Vogler (2007) adapted it for screenwriting; Rebillot (1993) developed it into a gestalt therapeutic process; Pearson (1991) translated its archetypes into a model of personal renewal. The pattern has informed education (Randles, 2012), law (Robbins, 2006), and organizational creativity (Sonnenburg, 2017). More recently, scholars have applied it to hybrid and collective transformation in leadership and change (Brokerhof et al., 2024), demonstrating its continuing adaptability as a framework for learning and renewal. Together, these uses show that the hero’s journey has evolved from mythic narrative to a flexible conceptual tool for studying human development across contexts.

Campbell identified seventeen interconnected stages that trace a full cycle of transformation. The hero begins in the ordinary world, receives a call to adventure, hesitates, encounters a mentor, and crosses a threshold into the un-

known. There, the hero faces trials, gains allies, endures ordeals, and acquires insight or reward. The final phase involves a return to the familiar world, often with additional challenges, culminating in the sharing of new knowledge or power with others. Although Campbell offered varying descriptions of the cycle, he created a single visual synthesis (see Fig. 2). This illustration captures key transitions, inviting interpretation rather than prescription.

While the hero’s journey captures essential transformation, its classical formulation shows limitations when viewed through contemporary narrative and organizational perspectives. Scholars have questioned its universality and linearity (Lehner, 2022; Sonnenburg, 2017). Campbell’s model centers on a solitary, often male-coded hero who departs, struggles, and returns as the main source of insight, following a goal-directed path toward triumph. Community remains largely passive, and emotional or moral complexities receive little attention. Recent research reinterprets transformation as non-linear, recursive, and relational, shaped by ambiguity and co-creation (Brokerhof et al., 2024; Megehee and Woodside, 2010; Veen, 1994). Such developments resonate strongly with contemporary work life, where growth seldom follows a single path. Transformation today unfolds through collaboration and negotiated meaning within teams, cultures, and institutions.

Building on these contemporary revisions, this paper reconfigures the classical hero’s journey into a new conceptual framework: the Heroic Journey. Grounded in the rhythm of departure, transition, and return, the Heroic Journey integrates insights from narrative theory and organizational scholarship (Beech, 2011; Boje, 2001; Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Shenhav, 2015) to offer a more fluid and context-sensitive understanding of transformation. As Sonnenburg (2024) notes, the term heroic moves beyond the individual focus of the original model and highlights change as a shared, situated experience. Reframed in this way, the Heroic Journey shows that transformation arises in relation to others and to organizational contexts.

Professional growth is both personal and collective. It develops through reflection, dialogue, and joint practice within everyday collaboration and in organizational routines that shape belonging. The Heroic Journey therefore links individual experience to organizational renewal by showing how employees’ narratives of work circulate, stabilize, and sometimes shift what organizations take for granted. The framework is designed for contemporary work contexts in which roles change, environments are hybrid, and meaning is negotiated. It treats EX as a recurring cycle of challenge, interpretation, and reorientation, shaped through interaction rather than through discrete touchpoints or linear progression. This perspective moves EX research beyond static models of satisfaction or engagement and sets up Section 3, where the Heroic Journey is developed as a dynamic framework for analyzing how professional experience changes across time and context.

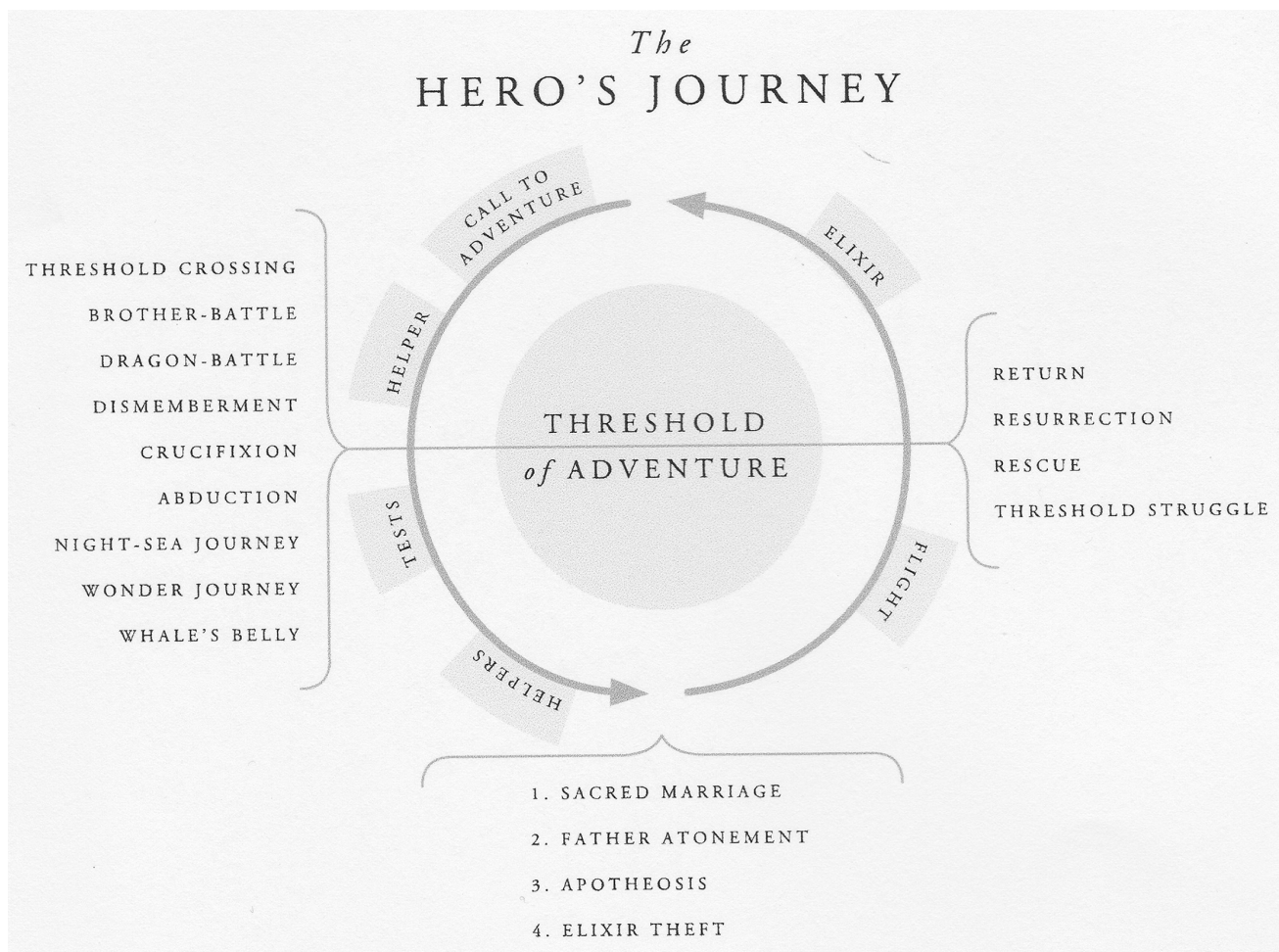


Fig. 2. The hero's journey, from Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Copyright © Joseph Campbell Foundation (jcf.org), used with permission (Campbell, 1949/2008, p. 210).

2.3 Liminality and Workplace Transitions

The narrative model of the Heroic Journey gains further depth when considered in relation to liminality. It refers to the transitional moments when old roles dissolve and new ones begin, exposing the uncertainty and openness inherent in professional life. Such moments are not limited to major transitions like onboarding or restructuring but also arise in everyday acts of role negotiation, collaboration, and change. By drawing attention to these in-between states, liminality deepens the Heroic Journey framework and highlights the relational and contextual nature of transformation at work.

The concept has deep theoretical roots. Van Gennep (1909/1960) first introduced liminality to describe the middle phase of rites of passage when individuals are no longer part of the old order but have not yet integrated into the new. Turner (1969, 1982) later expanded the idea, emphasizing its ambiguity, anti-structure, and potential for transformation and renewal. While early accounts focused on ritual and community transitions, later organizational scholars showed that similar dynamics occur in work life, where in-

dividuals and groups navigate uncertainty and shifting identities (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Söderlund and Borg, 2018). In this study, liminality provides the theoretical foundation for understanding the transformative passages that the Heroic Journey captures within organizational contexts.

Liminality pervades everyday work life. Starting a new role, taking on leadership, shifting between projects, or leaving an organization creates in-between spaces that can challenge and sometimes destabilize identity. These moments are often experienced as a mix of unsettlement and possibility. Familiar cues fall away and what counts as belonging becomes less clear. Yet these moments are central to how professional life unfolds. Beech (2011) links this unsettledness to identity reconstruction by showing how people use dialogical and narrative work to sustain a plausible sense of self while they are 'in-between'. This work is not only individual. Brandshaug and Sjølie (2021) extend the point to the team level by showing how interdisciplinary teams can remain in liminal phases marked by role ambiguity, where shared meaning and coordination are negotiated as the work progresses. Related research shows that change

interventions can be intentionally shaped as liminal spaces to foster reflection and experimentation (Piironen, 2022). These studies also show that liminality differs from ambiguity by marking a deeper loosening of roles and meanings in which identity and belonging remain under negotiation.

A further step is to shift the focus from what liminality feels like to how it is organized. Liminality is a cultural process accomplished through shared symbols and practices that make transitions intelligible and practicable (Howard-Grenville et al., 2011). It is therefore negotiated in collective settings rather than only within individuals. Banfield (2022) extends this move by shifting attention from ‘liminal spaces’ to the ‘spatialities of liminality’, showing how liminality can be multiple, nested, and mobile as it is conceptualized and lived. Together, these perspectives locate transition in the institutional configurations that organize movement and membership.

Transitional passages are shaped through infrastructures of coordination and evaluation. These infrastructures include categories, metrics, and review practices that define what counts as progress. The mechanism becomes especially visible in forms of work that routinely reorganize incorporation. Temporary agency employment is a clear case because it is structured as a triadic relationship between worker, agency, and client organization (Alewell et al., 2005). Because employer functions and day-to-day direction are split across the agency and the client firm, workers can remain only partially incorporated across work settings and organizational communities (Alewell et al., 2005; Winkler and Mahmood, 2015). ‘In-between’ can then be narrated either as a passage toward more stable membership or as a more durable condition of peripheral membership and limited inclusion (Winkler and Mahmood, 2015).

While liminality is often treated as generative, it also carries risks. Liminal transitions can intensify pressure and interpersonal tension. As roles and relationships are renegotiated, Winkler and Kristensen (2022) show how liminal transitions in episodic organizational change can be understood as social drama. Here, episodic change refers to discrete periods of divergence when organizations move away from equilibrium. In such periods, conflict becomes a driving feature of the passage that makes power dynamics visible. Willis et al. (2021) similarly describe how professionals in transition may occupy dual liminal roles, both shaping and being shaped by change. What matters for the Heroic Journey is that such pressure is rarely ‘just’ personal. The uncertainty of the in-between is often amplified by shifting evaluative expectations, new reporting demands, and contested definitions of good work.

These pressures also raise questions of power: who gets to name the situation, define progress, or declare closure is unequally distributed. To specify this unevenness, I draw on Schirmer and Geithner’s (2018) distinction between episodic power in concrete interactions and systemic power embedded in rules, monitoring, evaluation, and ca-

reer systems. Such infrastructures shape whether people experience themselves as recognized and progressing or as provisional and easily replaceable. They also condition whose identity work is enabled and whose is narrowed. Identifying these tensions deepens the Heroic Journey by showing that transformation depends as much on achieving renewal as on navigating vulnerability.

2.4 Toward a Developmental Logic of Employee Experience

Integrating liminality with the Heroic Journey re-frames how EX can be understood. Rather than a set of perceptions or managerial interventions, EX becomes a passage through which people grow and reinterpret themselves within changing organizational realities. Following classic studies of liminality (Turner, 1969, 1982; Van Gennepp, 1909/1960), this synthesis grounds transformation within the uncertainty, tension, and renewal that characterize everyday work life. Experience therefore becomes something employees move through and shape, defined by the interplay between what work demands and what it allows them to discover about themselves.

This developmental view conceives EX as an unfolding pattern in which individuals and collectives make sense of disruption and continuity, gradually integrating both into new forms of identity and practice. The Heroic Journey provides the temporal rhythm of this movement, while liminality infuses it with emotional and relational intensity. They show together how experience gains coherence through recurring cycles of challenge, reflection, and renewal that reshape both people and their shared contexts. As Section 2.3 showed, liminal passages may open renewal, but they can also expose vulnerability. What varies is how organizations shape the terms of the passage, including whether uncertainty is processed through recognition and dialogue or pushed into silence and pressure.

Adopting such a developmental logic moves EX research beyond describing interaction and engagement toward explaining how experience transforms. This direction aligns with emerging conceptual work calling for more coherent, integrative, and theoretically grounded models of EX (Andrés-Reina et al., 2024; Das and Dhan, 2023; Vereb et al., 2025). Section 3 builds on this logic by presenting a twelve-stage framework structured around four turning points. It shows how people construct meaning and reshape identity individually and collectively across shifting organizational contexts.

3. Mapping the Heroic Journey Onto the Employee Lifecycle

3.1 Introducing the Heroic Journey Framework

Drawing inspiration from Campbell’s archetypal sequence and its applied reinterpretations by Vogler (2007) and Sonnenburg (2017), the Heroic Journey translates the universal rhythm of departure, initiation, and return into

the realities of contemporary organizational life. It offers a foundation for understanding how employees navigate uncertainty and reconstruct identity and purpose within evolving work environments. Positioned in relation to dominant approaches, the Heroic Journey reframes how EX is understood and enacted. Plaskoff (2017) introduced EX as a human-centered design approach within HRM. This approach emphasizes co-creation and empathy across the employee journey. At the same time, it maintains a managerial focus on orchestrating touchpoints. Batat (2022) extended this view through the employee experience (EMX) framework. Her framework integrates cognitive, emotional, sensory, social, and spiritual well-being. However, employees still appear largely as recipients of designed experiences. Andrés-Reina et al. (2024) consolidated these perspectives through a systematic review. Their review reveals the field's fragmentation and calls for a more processual and contextual understanding of EX. Yet, it stops short of offering an integrative explanation of how experience develops through change. Building on these limitations, the Heroic Journey offers a developmental alternative. It replaces a design-oriented view with one centered on becoming, where transformation constitutes the organizing logic.

To make this organizing logic explicit, the Heroic Journey connects individual sensemaking with organizational context. It specifies three interwoven dynamics through which meaning, identity, and belonging evolve: temporal rhythm, emotional tension, and transitional movement. Time provides rhythm through pacing and continuity in how work arrangements and demands unfold across experience (Kozica and Kaiser, 2012); tension arises as expectations and evaluations are negotiated in interaction, creating pressure that invites reflection (Houben and Wüstner, 2014); transition turns movement into renewed meaning as people cross porous organizational boundaries through shifts in participation and positioning (Alewella et al., 2005). As a pattern, these dynamics depict EX as processual and integrative, allowing employees to navigate uncertainty while maintaining coherence. This shift reframes EX from managerial optimization to narrative development.

Fig. 3 illustrates this organizing logic as a cyclical process of twelve interlinked stages, with four turning points where transformation becomes most intense. The configuration shows movement and growth but not linear progression: early stages capture anticipation and entry, middle stages unfold within organizational life, and later stages open outward again, extending reflection and renewal. Unlike Campbell's (1949/2008) classical version, which concludes with the hero's return, the Heroic Journey of EX remains open-ended. Employees rarely return to a single 'home'; instead, they cross new thresholds, joining another organization, pausing for renewal, or redefining purpose.

Each stage configures the same three dynamics—temporal rhythm, emotional tension, and transitional movement—in a distinct way. Across the journey, these

dynamics shape how experience unfolds and link stages. Banfield (2022) notes that transitions are rarely singular or clearly bounded; they are often nested, creating temporary zones between stability and change. The nesting helps explain why movement between stages may accelerate, loop back, or appear uneven in lived experience. Within this developmental arc, four out of the twelve stages reach peak intensity, marking critical passages where meaning is re-configured:

- Friction, where inner dissonance surfaces as the first challenge that propels movement;
- Onboarding, where entry into the organization reshapes attachment and inclusion;
- Breakthrough, where struggle and reflection open space for renewal;
- Offboarding, where departure enables closure and new beginnings.

The framework offers an ideal-typical view. In practice, transitions vary in intensity as individuals navigate shifting roles and meanings across porous boundaries between work and life. Conceptually, the Heroic Journey framework adapts the hero's journey motif for organizational analysis by specifying stages and turning points through which experience can be traced. At the same time, the version of the hero's journey informing this adaptation stems largely from Campbell's synthesis and its subsequent Anglophone reinterpretations in scholarship and screenwriting. I therefore treat the Heroic Journey framework as an orientation rather than a culturally neutral template. Its value lies in directing attention to recurring passages of time, tension, and transition, while remaining open to how such passages are differently narrated across cultural and organizational contexts (Shenhav, 2015).

As noted in Section 2.3, this orientation also requires attention to unequal conditions of passage. When power is institutionalized in organizational infrastructures such as rules, monitoring, performance evaluation, and career systems, it can produce a surface calm that discourages challenge even where participation is formally invited (Schirmer and Geithner, 2018). Where development is organized through such infrastructures, it can slide into managerial pedagogy, that is, a mode of control through which managers seek to define reality and secure compliance (Ernst and Koll, 2024). Managers then struggle over how reality is defined in transition. The implication is that development can become another channel through which systemic power operates, rather than a neutral promise of growth. This risk intensifies when employee voice is mediated through algorithm-based decision-making in human resources (HR) and performance management. Such outputs can be difficult to contest. Voice then enters the process late, if at all, and silence can become normalized unless countered by dialogue, sensemaking, and critical 'big judgement' (Schank and Spindler, 2022).

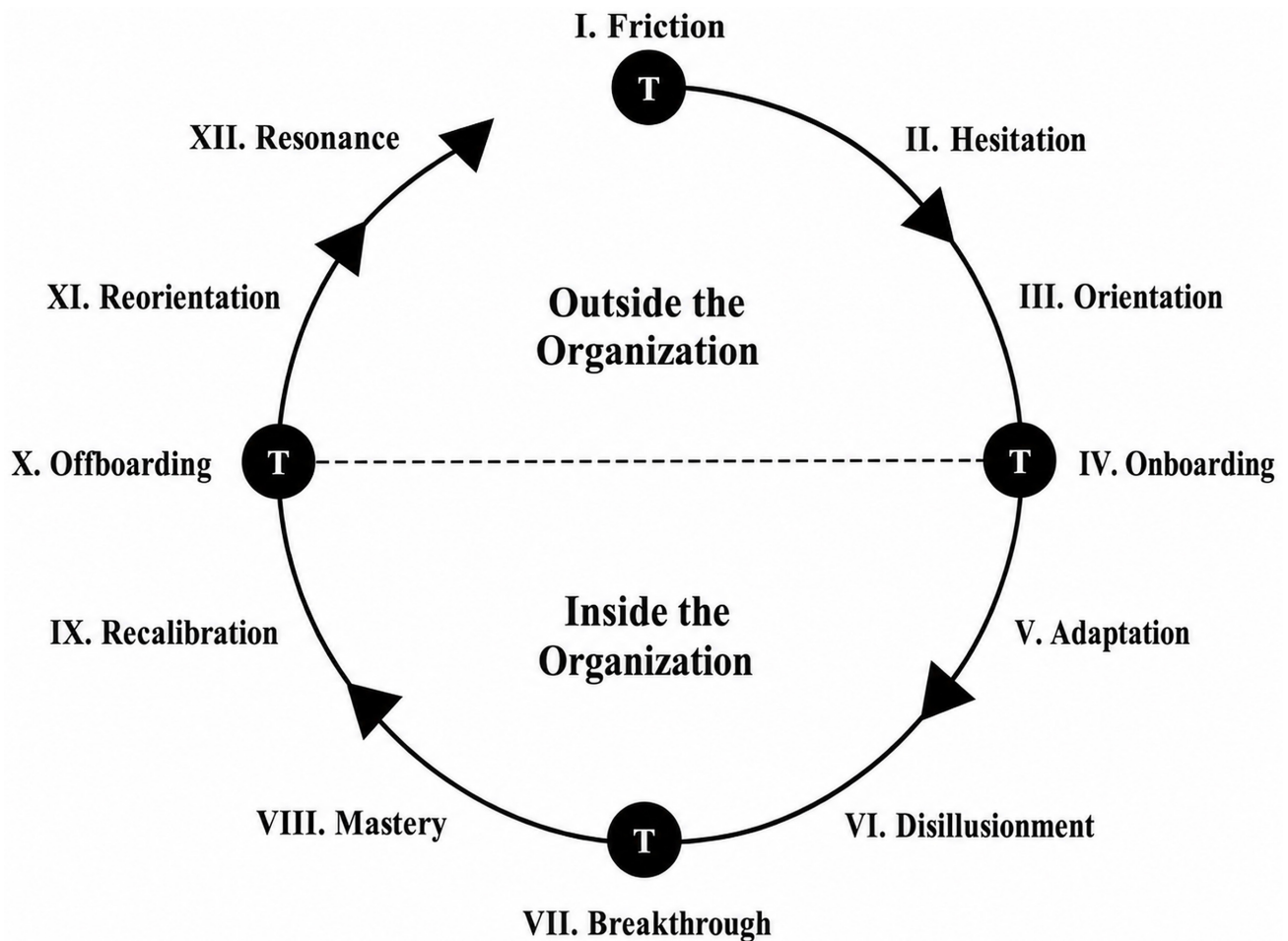


Fig. 3. The Heroic Journey of EX: Twelve stages of transformation with four key turning points (adapted from [Campbell, 1949/2008](#); [Sonnenburg, 2017](#); [Vogler, 2007](#)). T = key turning point.

The Heroic Journey avoids becoming a smooth script. It shows that EX passages can enable renewal, but also narrow voice, recognition, and continuity, depending on how evaluation, authority, and meaning-making are organized. The point is not that transformation can be designed at will. Turning points concentrate questions of meaning, legitimacy, and participation. A narrative framing makes visible where these questions become acute and how experience can be processed through dialogue and recognition across turning points.

3.2 The Twelve Stages of the Heroic Journey of EX

Building on the developmental logic outlined above, the twelve stages of the Heroic Journey translate this framework into a structured yet interpretive map of working life. Each stage combines an inner process of sensemaking, shaped by temporal rhythm, emotional tension, and transitional movement, with an outer layer of organizational structures, relationships, and practices. For analytical clarity, each description follows guiding principles that define the distinctive sensemaking patterns and developmental shifts of a stage. These principles connect individual

experience to the organizational conditions that influence it, including the design of feedback and the cultural norms that regulate belonging and change. As the preceding section suggests, the journey is not equally available to everyone. The space to explore, hesitate, or reset depends on how attachment and evaluation are organized. Where incorporation remains partial, the journey can narrow into a sequence of repeated conditional inclusion rather than a passage toward stable membership ([Alewell et al., 2005](#); [Winkler and Mahmood, 2015](#)).

I. Friction

A quiet restlessness begins to surface. A professional, still embedded in their work context, senses that the role no longer reflects who they are becoming. Friction names the tension between personal values and structural constraints, as identity starts to resist its established form. Attention narrows. Minor irritations start to matter because they point to a deeper misfit. Key questions emerge: Where has my energy gone? Which part of me is being underused or overlooked? In precarious and contingent arrangements, this quiet restlessness often sharpens into a struggle for visibility. People can feel caught between keeping their head

down and trying to get noticed, because being seen becomes a prerequisite for the next opportunity and, with it, the possibility of development (Purcell et al., 2011). For marginalized or low status workers, this visibility can also feel risky, so misfit is more often managed discreetly than voiced openly. In multi-employer arrangements, it can also mean falling between organizational responsibilities, as supervision and appraisal are distributed across boundaries, making recognition and support harder to secure (Kelliher et al., 2004). When misalignment persists, it is often accompanied by value incongruence and reduced job satisfaction (Hossli et al., 2024). This is why friction can be misread as decline. Organizations can channel this unease into reflection instead of disengagement by treating friction as a developmental signal, not a performance problem. Holding environments that contain uncertainty and support reflection and connection help people stay with tension long enough for exploration to remain possible (Petriglieri et al., 2019). When acknowledged rather than suppressed, friction becomes the first turning point, when a settled identity loosens and change becomes thinkable.

II. Hesitation

The restlessness matures into questioning. Alternatives become vivid but commitment remains elusive. Hesitation surfaces at the edge of action, as the professional is uncertain whether to move forward or hold back. It is a moment of suspension, where tension builds as familiarity and possibility pull in opposite directions. The mind rehearses scenarios while the heart lingers in what still feels safe. Key questions surface: What am I afraid to lose if I leave? What part of me might I never discover if I stay? As Coppola and Young (2022) note, career transition can create space to step back and reevaluate purpose, values, and direction, often requiring reinvention and repositioning in how people narrate the next chapter of work. Multiple selves coexist, one loyal to the known and another drawn to imagined futures (Ibarra and Obodaru, 2016). This oscillation fuels the emotional energy that precedes transformation. Organizations can respond to this liminal space by creating reflective, relational settings that invite exploration rather than press for early decisions. Practices such as developmental mentoring, cross-functional projects, and narrative coaching can provide low-risk experimentation and structured reflection, helping convert uncertainty into learning potential. When supported by an adaptive HR culture that encourages dialogue and career sustainability (de Vos and van der Heijden, 2017), hesitation becomes a contained pause that renews both commitment and the capacity for change.

III. Orientation

Exploration turns outward. The professional begins scanning new possibilities, testing how imagined futures might feel in practice. Conversations, interviews, or side projects become mirrors, using external encounters to clarify internal pulls. The focus shifts from what is wrong to what could be next. Key questions emerge: Where could I

thrive? Who am I becoming through these choices? This stage marks intensified identity work under threat, as people test possible futures while protecting valued self-definitions (Petriglieri, 2011). Time can feel faster now; experimentation accelerates learning and energy shifts to action. Orientation can unfold inside the current workplace or beyond it, as professionals explore new directions in search of renewed alignment. In platform-like and digitally governed settings, however, orientation is often felt less as open exploration and more as navigation through signals of access and worth. Possibilities appear through interfaces that sort opportunities and translate performance into scores, so the future is encountered through ratings and reputational traces. In gig and platform-mediated work, this logic often intensifies because ratings travel across clients and assignments, so orientation includes learning how reputation is produced and how it shapes access to the next job. This is where the autonomy promise can flip into control, as digital arrangements script what counts as acceptable and visible work (Bader and Kaiser, 2017). In such contexts, orientation becomes ongoing sensemaking under opacity. Employees continually work to understand how the system filters options and renders performance visible through recording and rating mechanisms that shape access and accountability (Kellogg et al., 2020). Whether it occurs internally or externally, the implication is that organizations can support this stage by fostering open, reflective processes that enable genuine alignment. Rather than offering choices as a test of ‘fit’, which can function as an exclusionary criterion (Tholen, 2024), organizations can treat orientation as a mutual inquiry with transparent criteria and accountable decisions. Narrative-based hiring and trial projects can then function as occasions for shared learning rather than staged performance. When mobility is experienced as reciprocal understanding, this stage becomes a collaborative process that prepares both individual and organization for meaningful integration.

IV. Onboarding

A contract is signed, and entry begins. Crossing into a new organizational space is procedural as well as symbolic and identity-shaping. The newcomer encounters rituals, cues, and norms that shape the feeling of belonging. Early weeks mix excitement with uncertainty as identity adjusts to new expectations and structures. Key questions arise: How am I being received? Which parts of myself can I bring, and which must I reshape to fit here? As the second turning point, onboarding marks the first visible transformation, a passage from outsider to insider. It may occur not only when joining a new organization but also when taking on new roles or projects within the same one, as professionals navigate new expectations and social worlds. Onboarding matters because it provides socialization resources, including welcome from managers and coworkers that help newcomers adjust and build organizational identification and well-being (Mosquera and Soares, 2025). The tem-

poral rhythm of entry is critical, as first impressions often set emotional trajectories that persist. The balance between clarity and openness determines whether adaptation feels like alignment or assimilation. However, entry can remain conditional. Belonging stays provisional, and newcomers watch closely how recognition is granted and how performance is judged. Organizations that frame onboarding as an initiation into ways of working and meaning foster deeper identity integration and confidence. Symbolic entry rituals, peer mentoring, and value-centered conversations help stabilize connection while keeping space for interpretation. When supported by psychological safety as a climate that enables interpersonal risk-taking (Dong et al., 2024), onboarding becomes the moment when belonging takes root and transformation gains form.

V. Adaptation

Participation deepens. Daily rhythms and unspoken norms reveal the inner workings of organizational life. The employee moves from observation to contribution, discovering how work really happens and how success is defined. Over time, learning transforms uncertainty into confidence. Questions arise: How can I add value without losing myself? What does belonging require in daily work? This learning is not purely cultural but also institutional. In flexible assignment settings, the employment relationship is often organized through intermediated structures that redistribute direction and responsibility, reshaping attachment and coordination across actors (Alewell et al., 2005). Flexible HRM can generate tensions as expectations shift and demands intensify, so adaptation remains ongoing rather than a one-time settling in (Kozica and Kaiser, 2012). When flexible staffing comes with high demands and limited support, people may experience precarity as part of everyday work, not just as a contract type. This shapes what ‘good performance’ and learning feel like day to day (Becker and Engel, 2018). In such contexts, visibility itself can become a pressure, as recognition and security depend on being seen in the ‘right’ way at the ‘right’ moments (Purcell et al., 2011). Adaptation then includes learning how to read cues and to time moments of exposure when evaluation concentrates. In parallel, professional identity is apprenticed through ongoing socialization, as employees learn role expectations, social norms, and performance criteria (Bauer et al., 2025). Small victories build confidence, yet new tensions appear between authenticity and conformity. Employees must balance fitting in and staying distinct, a creative tension that fuels development. Organizations can support this learning through structured feedback, inclusive meetings, and developmental coaching. When grounded in a learning-oriented climate that values experimentation and open dialogue (Carmeli and Gittell, 2009), adaptation supports both competence and psychological safety. Through practice and repetition, routines gain rhythm and confidence grows, marking the quiet transformation from observer to contributor.

VI. Disillusionment

The glow of novelty fades. Priorities shift, communication weakens, and promises lose clarity. What once inspired now irritates. A quiet tension grows between expectation and experience, revealing contradictions that unsettle belonging. Key questions arise: Was this ever my place? Have I changed, or have the criteria of ‘good work’ shifted? Disillusionment marks the descent of the journey, a stage that can be read as sensebreaking (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014) as earlier coherence begins to fracture. Familiar routines repeat without renewal, and meaning starts to erode. This erosion often intensifies when evaluation is hard to read or keeps shifting. Opaque criteria, shifting targets, and limited voice can make disappointment harder to name and address, so disillusionment is lived as private pressure rather than a discussable organizational issue (Schank and Spindler, 2022). Yet this loosening can also open space for deeper understanding if it is met with reflection rather than denial. Many organizations mistake this stage for disengagement, but it can become a passage toward renewal. Shared reflection, open dialogue about values, and honest conversations about the future can turn disappointment into inquiry, helping both employees and organizations recognize deeper misalignments and learn from them. When psychological safety supports speaking up without fear of negative consequences (Carmeli and Gittell, 2009), disillusionment becomes the moment when old meanings fade and new sense begins to form.

VII. Breakthrough

Intensified pressure culminates in clarity. Challenge, conflict, or crisis forces a re-evaluation of what matters most. Instead of withdrawing, the professional re-engages on new terms as boundaries shift and priorities are redefined. Key questions emerge: What have I learned from this disruption? How can I act differently while remaining true to myself? As the third turning point, breakthrough marks the central moment of the Heroic Journey, where accumulated tension gives way to insight and renewed purpose. Breakthrough is not equally available. In high-control or strongly hierarchical contexts, attempts at renegotiation can be reclassified as noncompliance, which raises the cost of speaking up and narrows what renewal can look like. Still, turbulence can be contained and processed, so that unsettling emotions become material for sensemaking and self-positioning rather than something to suppress or ignore (Petriglieri et al., 2019). Breakthrough is often triggered when tensions can no longer be managed quietly and must be named and worked through. The situation becomes a site for clarification, where roles, interests, feelings, and needs are made explicit in relation to organizational expectations. In this way, conflict can become a site of self-reflection and narrative reframing, rather than a trigger for withdrawal (Mayer, 2009). Breakthrough strengthens professional identity when people can articulate a more viable position within competing meanings and expectations.

With a more workable story in place, people can act with clearer priorities, and energy once blocked is redirected toward contribution. Organizations can facilitate this renewal by offering coaching, peer learning circles, and opportunities for experimentation. When supported by cultures that value psychological safety and learning behaviors such as trying new approaches (Frazier et al., 2017), breakthrough becomes both collective and individual, strengthening professional identity and widening what can be done next.

VIII. Mastery

Confidence stabilizes as earlier disruptions blend into a clearer sense of purpose and contribution. Work feels fluid, relationships deepen, and learning shifts from adaptation to guidance, enabling others while continuing to grow. It is a phase of balance, where past lessons and present contributions connect to future goals. Mastery is visible when competence no longer depends on constant self-monitoring and instead supports reliable contribution. Key questions arise: What do I now stand for? How can I help others grow through what I have learned? What sustains this stage is not perfection but a workable rhythm of competence and curiosity. Flow experiences become more frequent and may extend into shared or collective engagement (Sawyer, 2003), while motivation shifts from self-development to collective contribution (Grant, 2007). The implication is that organizations can sustain this vitality by fostering mentorship pathways, recognition practices, and spaces for reflective dialogue. When supported by a learning culture that values shared expertise and peer development (Ellinger and Cseh, 2007), mastery grows from individual accomplishment into organizational knowledge.

IX. Recalibration

From strength, a pause emerges. Recalibration starts as a deliberate step back, not from fatigue but to adjust focus and direction. Key questions emerge: What should I move toward? Which commitments will I renew, and which boundaries must I reset? It is a moment of balance between stability and change, where priorities are weighed and next steps take shape. Recalibration is an act of fine-tuning that repositions purpose and identity with evolving conditions (de Vos and van der Heijden, 2017; Savickas, 2013). Meaning becomes clearer as choices are adjusted with greater awareness. The mechanism is selective recommitment. People clarify what they will carry forward, what they will let go, and what they will no longer absorb as ‘just part of the job’. Organizations can encourage this adjustment through internal mobility, structured dialogue, or project-based sabbaticals. When supported by a sustainable career framework that emphasizes the interplay of person, context, and time, recalibration prevents stagnation and turns change into renewed engagement, informing both individual development and organizational sustainability (Donald et al., 2024). Transformation here unfolds through subtle alignment rather than disruption.

X. Offboarding

A decision crystallizes and the journey turns toward closure. Offboarding begins here. Responsibilities are handed over, relationships shift, and identity begins to detach from the role. Closure does not end experience. It creates space to interpret it, inviting reflection on legacy and continuity. Key questions arise: What am I leaving behind? What part of this experience will travel with me? As the fourth turning point, offboarding marks the transition from one context to the next, whether leaving the organization or moving into a new role or project. When approached as a ritual rather than a transaction, it renews meaning for both the individual and the organization. Departure becomes constructive when people craft a coherent narrative of what they did and learned and the organization carries forward their knowledge and contribution, including through deliberate knowledge transfer across coworkers and generations (Burmeister et al., 2020). Yet closure is uneven across work arrangements. In gig work and platform-based arrangements, exit can be abrupt and thinly acknowledged, with limited handover, weak closure, and little opportunity to secure recognition or repair ties (Petriglieri et al., 2019). Structured handovers, storytelling sessions to mark contributions and transfer tacit knowledge, and reflective exit conversations help turn separation into learning. When supported by a relational approach to transition that preserves trust and communication, as shown in applied management work by Dachner and Makarius (2021), offboarding becomes an act of continuity that carries meaning into future roles and networks.

XI. Reorientation

In the quiet that follows departure or the transition into a new role, reorientation takes shape as perspective widens. Familiar routines fade and a new sense of possibility emerges. Past experiences are seen anew through the lens of change, where endings open beginnings. Key questions arise: What did this experience teach me about who I am? How will it shape where I go next? Reorientation is the work of creating narrative continuity, linking what happened to what comes next through a story that can be carried forward (McAdams and McLean, 2013). In later career transitions, this forward-looking sensemaking also involves questions of meaning in life and social identity, as people decide which identities to sustain and which to loosen (Smith et al., 2024). Transformation here is gentle but deep. However, when departure was abrupt or recognition was withheld, reorientation can be marked by residual exposure and questions of legitimacy, making it harder to carry meaning forward (Petriglieri et al., 2019). Organizations can support this ongoing connection through alumni networks, mentoring initiatives, and collaborative platforms that sustain belonging. When shaped by a mindset of relational continuity that values long-term ties (Bardon et al., 2015), reorientation turns transition into continuing learning and renewal.

XIII. Resonance

Traces remain and continue to echo. A person's influence endures through relationships, memories, and the exchange of ideas. Resonance captures this lasting vibration of experience, showing how meaning endures after exit and identity lives on through connection. Key questions emerge: How does what I contributed continue to live on? Which relationships or values persist beyond my time here? Resonance illustrates how professional experience travels into new contexts through maintained ties and continuing relationships after leaving (Dachner and Makarius, 2021). Shared memory takes shape through the stories and artifacts that remain, and through the practices by which they are revisited and reinterpreted (Do et al., 2019). In many workplaces, resonance is also shaped through digital traces that remain after exit. These traces often sit in EX platforms and HR systems (Abhari et al., 2023). Ratings, endorsements, and work histories can stay visible there and influence later opportunities. Access and inclusion are then shaped partly by how the system captures and presents this information. The risk is detachment. Digital traces can circulate alongside continuing ties and shared memory, yet become detached from the contexts that give them interpretive grounding. Resonance holds when digital traces stay connected to those contexts. Sustaining it requires ongoing work to reconnect what remains to meaning. When organizations revisit contributions through shared narratives, artifacts, and rituals of remembering, anchoring digital traces in these interpretive practices, resonance becomes a practice of continuity that carries meaning forward (Do et al., 2019). In that sense, resonance closes one cycle of EX and sets the conditions for the next.

3.3 Empirical Operationalization

Although the Heroic Journey of EX is developed as an ideal-typical framework, it is intended to be empirically workable in qualitative process research, preferably with longitudinal designs. The framework is not meant to be tested through one-off measurements or static comparisons. Instead, it is structured to be examined through documented changes in how people make sense of their work and narrate their experience. Such an approach is consistent with sensemaking and narrative-identity research, which treats development as something that becomes visible through shifts in meaning and self-positioning across work life (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; McAdams and McLean, 2013).

In empirical terms, researchers can track movement across stages by working with repeated first-person narratives, such as diaries and repeat interviews, alongside concrete materials from everyday work, such as onboarding artifacts and documents. Stages are distinguished by shifts in narrated experience: how people talk about time, how tension is expressed and handled, and how transitional movement shows up in changing agency and positioning. A stage shift is recognized when participants retrospectively

redescribe what is happening, revise expectations, and redirect action across successive episodes of work (Weick et al., 2005).

To translate this logic into empirical settings, Table 1 operationalizes the Heroic Journey of EX through three components: narrative markers, observable indicators, and data sources. These components correspond to different levels of empirical engagement, from expressed interpretations through enacted participation to traceable materials, and are designed to work together rather than in isolation. Narrative markers specify what researchers should listen for in people's own words. They capture ways individuals describe what is happening and what it means, especially expectation contrasts, stage-shift statements, and boundary claims. They are presented as 'descriptors + exemplars', pairing an analytic label with an illustrative formulation that may recur across episodes. Observable indicators, framed as 'practices + signals', point to changes in participation and interaction and in task and boundary negotiation, including claims of legitimacy and belonging. Data sources, framed as 'materials + analysis', specify what to collect and how to analyze it longitudinally, comparing episodes to see how stages unfold, overlap, or recur.

Used this way, Table 1 supports process tracing of stage shifts and enables investigation of questions of power and voice. It directs attention to how one interpretation becomes treated as the 'right' one through evaluation language, categories, and feedback routines, while other narratives are ignored, reframed, or discouraged (Ernst and Koll, 2024). By comparing participants' narratives with observed interactions and organizational records, researchers can examine whether voice is taken up, translated into compliance language, or cast as resistance, and how such dynamics shape what can be said and done (Schirmer and Geithner, 2018).

4. Theoretical Contributions and Implications

4.1 Advancing Employee Experience Research

This paper advances EX theory through three connected contributions that address the field's limited processual and integrative theorization and its tendency to study what employees perceive at specific moments rather than how experience develops over time. The framework is termed dynamic because it conceptualizes EX as a continually unfolding process that links individual sensemaking with organizational and temporal structures. It introduces a new lens for understanding how transformation becomes the organizing principle of work life, positioning employees as active co-authors of meaning and not merely as recipients of managerial design.

First, it reconceptualizes EX as a process of transformation unfolding across thresholds, instead of being limited to a sequence of managerial touchpoints or satisfaction metrics. This reframing establishes a developmental orien-

Table 1. Empirical translation of the twelve stages for longitudinal qualitative study.

Stage	Narrative markers (descriptors + exemplars)	Observable indicators (practices + signals)	Data sources (materials + analysis)
I. Friction	Misfit, dissonance, early strain “I can still perform, but this role no longer fits who I am.”	More frequent irritation talk, reduced discretionary participation, early withdrawal moves	Diaries or short weekly logs, critical incident write-ups, comparison of accounts to trace intensification or stabilization of misfit
II. Hesitation	Ambivalence, risk framing, suspended choice “I can see options, but I am not ready to commit to one.”	Delays in decision moments, reassurance seeking, low-risk probing of alternatives	Repeat interviews or diary sequences, micro narrative extracts, mapping back and forth movement across time points
III. Orientation	Scanning, comparison, possibility testing “I am exploring what could be next and testing what would actually work for me.”	Information seeking episodes, comparison conversations, asking how opportunities are evaluated and referencing gatekeeping criteria	Fieldnotes or interaction logs, documents and platform traces, episode comparison of search, evaluation, and choice narratives
IV. Onboarding	Entry, belonging work, legitimacy testing “I am inside, but I am still learning what counts and how to belong.”	Participation in entry rituals, positioning moves in meetings, testing what can be said without penalty	Onboarding artifacts and communications, shadowing or observation notes, analyzing positioning and legitimacy cues across episodes
V. Adaptation	Routine uptake, role shaping, practical fit “I am learning the unwritten rules and shaping how I work to meet expectations.”	Routine stabilization, boundary setting moves, selective compliance in response to shifting demands	Diary entries plus meeting or feedback snippets, mapping routine formation and boundary negotiations over time
VI. Disillusionment	Expectation breach, coherence loss, disappointment “What I was promised and what I am living no longer match.”	Repeated expectation contrast statements, reduced initiative bids, feedback shocks followed by withdrawal or cynicism talk	Diary and interview episodes, coding expectation contrasts, identifying rupture moments and their aftermath across time points
VII. Breakthrough	Reframing, regained agency, workable position “Now I see how to act differently here, and it feels viable.”	Explicit renegotiation attempts, conflict engagement with naming of needs, adoption of new practices after clarification	Before and after narratives around a focal event, process tracing across episodes, comparing agency and boundary claims before and after the focal episode
VIII. Mastery	Recognized contribution, craft confidence, guidance “I know what I bring, and I can deliver it reliably while helping others grow.”	Recognition episodes, mentoring invitations, stable contribution patterns referenced by others in meetings or feedback	Peer feedback and recognition artifacts, observation or interaction records, tracing contribution and legitimacy cues across episodes
IX. Recalibration	Priority shift, boundary reset, selective recommitment “I am redefining what I will take on and what I will no longer absorb.”	Reprioritizing work, renegotiating workload or scope, explicit boundary statements in conversations	Longitudinal comparisons of goals and commitments, boundary narratives, tracking reprioritization decisions across time points
X. Offboarding	Closure work, detachment, legacy framing “I am preparing to leave and deciding what I want to carry forward.”	Handover practices, closure conversations, reduced future-oriented claims about the current role	Exit narratives and closure artifacts, handover materials, analyzing authority shifts and detachment signals across episodes
XI. Reorientation	Retrospective integration, learning forward, next chapter “I can name what this period changed in me and how it shapes what comes next.”	Explicit lesson statements, linking past, present, and future in talk, repositioning identity claims beyond the former role	Retrospective and follow-up interviews, mapping continuity themes, analyzing past, present, and future link structures across episodes
XII. Resonance	Enduring trace, continued ties, ongoing influence “What I did here continues through people, shared memories, and traces that still circulate.”	Ongoing contact after exit, reuse of artifacts or stories, trace circulation beyond membership boundaries	Follow-up interviews, artifact and trace mapping, tracking continuity cues and tie maintenance across time points

tation within EX theory, showing how meaning and identity evolve through periods of uncertainty when established roles dissolve and new forms of belonging take shape. Second, it introduces three intertwined dynamics—temporal rhythm, emotional tension, and transitional movement—through which employees reshape their professional selves in the flow of work. By linking time, tension, and transition, this contribution clarifies how experience unfolds as a living process of renewal. Third, it outlines a developmental structure of transformation by identifying four turning points—friction, onboarding, breakthrough, and offboarding—that anchor these dynamics within the unfolding of work. These turning points mark where transformation becomes most visible. Together, these contributions establish a novel conceptual framework for EX that explains how employees live, question, and continually reimagine work across time. The following subsections elaborate each contribution in turn.

4.1.1 Contribution 1: Reframing EX as Developmental Transformation

Current EX frameworks, whether grounded in academic or practice logics, largely reflect a managerial design orientation focused on engagement outcomes, satisfaction indicators, and touchpoint-based journey mapping (Andrés-Reina et al., 2024; Batat, 2022; Das and Dhan, 2023; Plaskoff, 2017). Such approaches clarify what employees perceive but not how those perceptions evolve through time and change. They treat experience as something to be designed and measured rather than as a process through which meaning and identity are continually renegotiated. Even models invoking the journey metaphor (Sinha et al., 2020) remain anchored in fixed stages that implicitly reproduce managerial assumptions.

The Heroic Journey addresses this gap by shifting the unit of analysis from touchpoints to development. It positions EX as an evolving process through which employees negotiate identity, meaning, and belonging, a view consistent with sensemaking perspectives that emphasize ongoing interpretation and adjustment (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Weick et al., 2005). Drawing on narrative and liminality theory (Beech, 2011; Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Ibarra and Obodaru, 2016; Turner, 1969, 1982), the framework interprets professional life not as progression through roles but as a succession of threshold experiences where transformation unfolds. This reframing moves EX from a functional to a meaning-centered orientation, revealing how work serves as a space where employees confront uncertainty, reinterpret purpose, and continually reconstruct who they are in relation to others. The framework provides a foundation for process-based theorizing and responds to review work that portrays EX as an expanding field and points to the need for more holistic accounts of experience across contexts (Andrés-Reina et al., 2024; Vereb et al., 2025).

4.1.2 Contribution 2: Explaining Transformation Through Narrative-Liminal Dynamics

Research points to the dynamic nature of EX, but the mechanisms through which it emerges remain largely unexplored. Existing studies conceptualize meaning-making mainly in cognitive or affective terms (Tucker, 2020; Yadav and Vihari, 2023), overlooking how reflection, emotion, and context interact. The Heroic Journey advances this conversation by identifying three core dynamics – temporal rhythm, emotional tension, and transitional movement – that together explain how employees reconstruct meaning and identity through work. Temporal rhythm reframes changing HR arrangements as an experience of shifting demands that create competing time horizons and recurring trade-offs that require ongoing balancing. This helps explain why EX can intensify or stall even when core tasks change little (Kozica and Kaiser, 2012). Emotional tension extends role expectation research by treating emotion regulation as interaction work under competing expectations. It also highlights how self-concept and professional identity shape how people interpret these expectations and manage felt and displayed emotion to keep cooperation workable, clarifying why participation becomes sustainable for some and costly for others (Houben and Wüstner, 2014). Transitional movement sharpens research on intermediated employment by explaining how stage crossings are institutionally structured through contracts that distribute directive authority and employer functions across parties. Because responsibility and evaluation are split between actors, this division constrains what belonging and positioning can mean, helping explain why transformation may remain conditional even when individuals seek change (Alewell et al., 2005).

The three dynamics are narrative in that they give coherence to transformation, linking events and interpretations into a storyline that unfolds through the twelve interconnected stages of the Heroic Journey (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Gabriel, 2000). They are liminal because they become most visible at thresholds, when employees loosen established role attachments, explore alternatives, and reconfigure their sense of belonging (Beech, 2011; Turner, 1969). While the preceding discussion positions each dynamic in relation to a distinct research conversation, Table 2 abstracts their functional role within the Heroic Journey and shows how transformation emerges from their interplay. In this way, the Heroic Journey offers a processual lens for understanding how employees reauthor their identities within changing organizational contexts (Petriglieri, 2011), moving EX research from episodic description to processual explanation.

4.1.3 Contribution 3: Establishing an Architecture of Turning Points

The third contribution adds an architectural layer to EX theory by specifying four turning points that concentrate

Table 2. The three narrative-liminal dynamics leading to transformation in the Heroic Journey of EX.

Dynamics	Functions within the Heroic Journey	Insights for EX Theory
Temporal rhythm	Shapes the pacing and sequencing of experience, creating continuity between past, present, and future while allowing reinterpretation over time.	Repositions EX as a temporally embedded dynamic in which understanding and identity evolve through ongoing reinterpretation, replacing static, design-oriented notions with a developmental perspective.
Emotional tension	Activates affective energy within moments of challenge and uncertainty, sparking the dialogue and insight through which new perspectives emerge.	Establishes emotion as a generative dynamic in EX sensemaking, demonstrating how affective intensity drives learning, adaptation, and renewal in professional life.
Transitional movement	Propels motion across and within stages, turning disruption into movement toward renewed coherence and belonging.	Conceptualizes threshold navigation in EX as an active dynamic of reorientation, explaining how employees sustain identity and belonging through periods of change.
▼	▼	▼
Transformation (emergent)	Arises from the continuous interplay of temporal rhythm, emotional tension, and transitional movement, crystallizing new patterns of identity and understanding.	Positions transformation, rather than engagement or satisfaction, as the central developmental principle of EX, providing an integrative foundation for understanding professional becoming.

Note: ▼ = convergence of the three dynamics.

transformation and make it empirically traceable in process data. It identifies friction, onboarding, breakthrough, and offboarding that anchor the Heroic Journey and translate a general developmental logic into a small set of diagnostic thresholds. These turning points provide the framework's key empirical references because they mark moments when identity, meaning, and belonging are renegotiated and when stage movement either opens, loops, or stalls. Friction signals early misalignment and value incongruence that can undermine job meaningfulness and satisfaction (Hossli et al., 2024). Onboarding marks entry and cultural negotiation through socialization and early interactions that shape belonging and adjustment (Mosquera and Soares, 2025). Breakthrough captures redefinition under pressure, as conflict and interruption rework meaning and social order in transitional settings (Winkler and Kristensen, 2022). Offboarding turns departure into symbolic closure and relational continuity by organizing knowledge transfer and sustaining ties beyond formal membership (Dachner and Makarius, 2021). By locating transformation at recurring thresholds rather than along a smooth continuum, the framework specifies when the three dynamics intensify and why change becomes diagnosable at these moments. This addresses a central limitation of current EX models, which map touchpoints or engagement outcomes but rarely explain where, when, or how transformation unfolds across time (Andrés-Reina et al., 2024; Batat, 2022; Das and Dhan, 2023).

The turning-point architecture also makes explicit that these thresholds are not equally navigable. The same turning point can be experienced as development for some and as exposure for others, because voice, recognition, and le-

gitimacy are structured by power rather than evenly distributed. Schirmer and Geithner (2018) distinguish episodic power in interaction from systemic power that is stabilized through organizational rules and evaluative infrastructures, which helps explain why turning points become contested sites of interpretation rather than neutral moments of progress. In such settings, calls for autonomy and self-development can operate as governance when people are told to 'be agile' and 'own their development', yet remain shaped by expectations and assessments they do not fully control (Weiskopf and Loacker, 2006). Contribution 3 therefore introduces a critical guardrail: the Heroic Journey is not a universal script of growth but an architecture that foregrounds how interpretation can be widened, constrained, or blocked at moments of heightened change.

Finally, the architecture strengthens empirical application by indicating when longitudinal data should be densest and which indicators should be treated as diagnostic. Linking back to Section 3.3, Table 1 specifies narrative markers, observable indicators, and data sources that allow researchers to trace whether a turning point opens movement, produces looping, or blocks transition over time. In this way, the contribution is both conceptual and methodological: it identifies not only what transformation is, but how and where to study it.

4.1.4 Integrating Narrative and Liminality: Consolidating the Heroic Journey Framework

The three contributions together establish the Heroic Journey as a comprehensive dynamic framework linking lived experience with organizational context. Employees appear not as measured variables but as narrative agents

who interpret, revise, and recompose their professional stories through work. This reframing connects EX theory with research on narrative sensemaking (Beech, 2011; Boje, 2001) and social media ‘life at work’ storytelling (Chaudhari et al., 2023), illustrating that coherence in professional life is shaped through narrative interpretation in interaction. Within this developmental process, narrative authorship unfolds through liminal experience, as employees navigate recurring thresholds that challenge and renew identity. Organizations thereby become collaborative arenas of evolving stories where meaning, belonging, and identity are continuously reconstructed. Whereas traditional models treat onboarding or exit as discrete events, the Heroic Journey views them as extended transition spaces and contested passages through which people and organizations evolve together. Recent studies on the spatial production of liminality (Banfield, 2022; Brandshaug and Sjølie, 2021) and post-pandemic shifts in work boundaries and expectations (Mohanty and Kulkarni, 2023) underscore this reorientation. Within this view, HR practices such as onboarding or offboarding become symbolic acts of transition that invite reflection and recognition. The integration of narrative and liminality distinguishes the Heroic Journey from prior EX frameworks by explaining transformation not only as a cognitive or affective state but as a process of becoming that is narrated, negotiated, and organized across time.

Collectively, the three contributions advance EX theory in four interrelated ways:

- They reframe how experience develops and transforms over time, rather than describing only what employees perceive at a moment in time.
- They link individual meaning-making with organizational structures, showing how sensemaking unfolds within evolving contexts.
- They integrate narrative and liminal perspectives into a single developmental framework that explains where, when, and how transformation emerges from temporal, emotional, and transitional dynamics.
- They position transformation as an emergent process, treating it as the central organizing principle of EX rather than an intended managerial effect.

Through these integrated advances, the Heroic Journey offers a coherent foundation for renewing EX theory. It shifts the field from measurement toward interpretation, from outcomes toward processes, and from managerial design toward human development. It introduces a distinct conceptual language for analyzing EX through stories of change, negotiated thresholds of renewal, and the ongoing co-creation of meaning between people and organizations.

4.2 Practical Implications: Designing for Transformation

The Heroic Journey invites leaders and HRM practitioners to shift design effort from optimizing touchpoints to supporting transitions. In practice, this means concentrating on the four turning points, friction, onboarding,

breakthrough, and offboarding, where experience becomes most discussable and support can change the course of EX. Rather than trying to ‘engineer’ moments, practitioners can create repeatable conditions for reflection and dialogue, using light rituals, clear temporal pacing, and opportunities for participation. The aim is to keep developmental movement possible by making expectations and concerns more discussable at the points where they most often intensify.

This approach requires a guardrail, because voice, recognition, and legitimacy are not evenly distributed in organizations: designing for transformation is not the same as scripting experience. Practices aligned with the Heroic Journey should protect narrative agency by widening who can speak, how meanings are negotiated, and how closure is authorized. A simple rule follows: do not turn the journey into a checklist. Used as a managerial template, design can become a form of reality definition that narrows interpretation and reallocates voice upward (Ernst and Koll, 2024). Guardrails become concrete when evaluation is discussable and when employees have protected moments to raise concerns, revise expectations, and co-author closure without penalty. Because conflict often concentrates at turning points, it should be facilitated rather than suppressed (Winkler and Kristensen, 2022).

Transitional moments such as onboarding, role change, or offboarding are typically handled as administrative procedures. The Heroic Journey reframes them as symbolic thresholds where belonging and identity are renegotiated. Designing small rituals around these moments can turn routine procedures into developmental experiences. For example, a ‘first-day map’ can surface expectations and aspirations, while a ‘legacy capsule’ can transform exit into continuity. These are low-cost interventions that signal recognition and invite narration. As deliberate sensemaking occasions, they can create temporary liminal spaces for renewal (Piironen, 2022).

The Heroic Journey also strengthens narrative continuity and shared belonging within organizations. Narrative expression around work, including employees’ own storytelling, can strengthen continuity and belonging (Chaudhari et al., 2023; Mohanty and Kulkarni, 2023). Organizations can translate this into practices such as milestone reflection, peer story sharing, and visual mapping of personal growth. Workplace design can support this by providing physical and digital formats that shape interaction and support shared interpretation (Markkanen and Herneoja, 2024). Validated EX measures can add empirical precision (Acuña-Hurtado et al., 2024; Yang and Zhang, 2025). When paired with narrative formats, such measures can be used as prompts for inquiry rather than endpoints for evaluation.

A further implication concerns leadership in liminal contexts. The Heroic Journey shifts attention from maintaining stability to facilitating navigation through uncertainty. Leaders act as facilitators of reflection. Developing this capacity requires dialogical time and environ-

ments that enable experimentation and collective sense-making (Markkanen and Hernejoja, 2024; Piironen, 2022). What leaders need are repeatable reflection formats at turning points, not additional culture slogans.

4.3 Research Directions and Conceptual Limitations

Future research can clarify when the Heroic Journey enables movement and when it produces looping or standstill. Turning points are useful anchors because they concentrate pressure and interpretation, yet the task is to trace trajectories across the full twelve-stage arc, including overlap and return. This invites questions about workability and risk: what makes a stage navigable in one setting and costly in another, and how do these conditions shape pace, belonging, and agency. Relevant resources and conditions can be specified by drawing on work on need satisfaction and moral purpose, and on research on spatial and design arrangements that shape reflection and interaction during transitions (Markkanen and Hernejoja, 2024; Piironen, 2022; Vereb et al., 2025; Yang and Zhang, 2025). The agenda becomes especially salient in employment forms where attachment and evaluation are organized differently. In intermediated arrangements such as temporary agency work, in-betweenness may be prolonged and expectations may come from multiple parties, reshaping how movement is narrated and enacted (Alewell et al., 2005; Winkler and Mahmood, 2015).

Empirically, the framework calls for longitudinal designs that capture change as it unfolds. Building on Section 3.3 and Table 1, researchers can treat stage shifts as patterns across episodes rather than as single statements, combining repeated diaries and interviews with artifacts and observed interactions. Data collection will often be richest around turning points, but analysis should follow how earlier stages set up later ones and how later stages revise earlier interpretations. Validated multi-dimensional EX measures can complement qualitative material when used at several time points, helping relate shifts in narrated experience to changes in reported EX over time (Acuña-Hurtado et al., 2024).

Conceptually, the Heroic Journey is an interpretive framework, not a predictive model and not a fixed sequence. Empirical cases may skip stages, compress them, or return to earlier ones. The framework also carries cultural assumptions. What counts as friction, breakthrough, or legitimate closure may differ across languages, occupations, and institutional settings, and the narrative form of 'heroic' movement may fit some contexts better than others. Although the paper integrates power and unequal agency into the journey logic, important boundary conditions remain under-specified. Future research should examine how inequality shapes what can be said, recognized, and acted upon across stages, and when turning points intensify pressure, silence voice, or enforce conformity. These boundary conditions specify when the Heroic Journey explains development, delay, or constraint.

5. Conclusions

This paper reimagines EX as a developmental journey in which meaning, identity, and membership are renegotiated over time. The Heroic Journey offers a structure for understanding how people move through uncertainty and renewal in organizational life. It brings together narrative, liminal, and developmental perspectives to show how transformation gives coherence to experience. The framework specifies three dynamics, temporal rhythm, emotional tension, and transitional movement, and identifies four turning points where transformation becomes most visible: friction, onboarding, breakthrough, and offboarding. Together, the dynamics and turning points clarify where change concentrates and how identity and participation are reworked across stages.

At its heart, the Heroic Journey treats EX as a meaning-making phenomenon rather than a set of managed touchpoints. It suggests that organizations can support transformation by protecting space for reflection and dialogue, without turning the journey into a script. For researchers, it offers a processual and narrative lens for studying how experience develops across stages and how turning points open or constrain movement. The Heroic Journey ultimately invites us to see work as a field of becoming, where meaning is continually made and remade, and where transformation links the person and the collective in the ongoing story of organizational life.

Availability of Data and Materials

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Author Contributions

The author conceived the study, developed the conceptual framework, conducted the theoretical analysis, and wrote and revised the article. He read and approved the final manuscript and is accountable for all aspects of the work.

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The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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