

Once You See It

ONCE YOU SEE IT

Dr. Zanna van der Aa

THE EXECUTIVE GUIDE TO HUMAN-CENTRIC
CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE TRANSFORMATION

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Table of Contents

Foreword by Professor Dan Cable	7
Preface	9
PART I: The CEO Perspective	11
Dear CEO	13
Introduction	16
Failing Customer Experience	20
Defining Transformation	23
Choosing Human Centricity	26
The Three Layered Model	30
<i>Layer 1: Ignite Successful Transformation</i>	<i>31</i>
A. Speak the Language	33
B. Design Daily Habits	38
C. Energize All Employees	40
D. Prove It Works	43
<i>Layer 2: Scale Impactful Transformation</i>	<i>47</i>
Build It In	49
Flip the Perspective	54
Impact the Business	60
<i>Layer 3: Inspire Meaningful Transformation</i>	<i>67</i>
Lead Yourself	69
Lead Others	74
Lead the System	79
INTERMISSION: AI and Experience	85
Demystifying Five Strongly Held Beliefs	

PART II: The CX Transformation Lead Perspective	95
Dear CX Transformation Lead	97
Introduction	99
Failing Customer Experience	104
Defining Transformation	110
Choosing Human Centricity	115
The Three Layered Model	121
 <i>Layer 1: Ignite Successful Transformation</i>	 123
A. Speak the Language	125
B. Design Daily Habits	151
C. Energize All Employees	163
D. Prove It Works	170
 <i>Layer 2: Scale Impactful Transformation</i>	 175
Build It In	176
Flip the Perspective	192
Impact the Business	215
 <i>Layer 3: Inspire Meaningful Transformation</i>	 231
Lead Yourself	233
Lead Others	239
Lead the System	243

Foreword by Professor Dan Cable

Most organizations underestimate just how human they really are. They talk about processes, systems, and efficiencies, but in the end, there are no organizations – only people. And people have brains wired not just to perform tasks, but to explore, to create, to connect, and to find meaning. When those innate seeking systems are activated, people feel alive at work. They innovate, they care, and they bring energy to problems in ways that competitors cannot copy. When those systems are suppressed, people disengage, and organizations slowly wither, even if the spreadsheets look good for a while.

This is why I was so energized when I first met Zanna. We were both working with Randstad (the global staffing firm): I was bringing ideas from *Alive at Work* into their leadership programs, and she was guiding their global customer experience transformation program. Someone there thought we'd hit it off, and they were right. Zanna took one of the concepts dearest to me – helping people activate their “Best Self” – and made it radically practical. She turned it into a playful, energizing approach that mobilized hundreds of employees to volunteer for Randstad's Customer Delight program. It was one of those moments where research leapt off the page and into the bloodstream of an organization. I thought, “Here's someone who not only gets it, but makes it happen.”

Since then, our paths have kept crossing in ways that felt natural. I've invited her several times as a guest lecturer in my MBA program at London Business School, inspiring students with her real-world cases on CX transformation and the power of purpose. We were invited to do a keynote together in the GCC region for a large telecom company called Zain – me speaking on purpose, her on customer transformation – and then worked side by side, blending our approaches to create both inspiration and measurable business results. We've recorded podcasts together, exchanged ideas, and kept learning from each other. At every turn, I've been struck by her courage to challenge “business as usual” and

her ability to translate lofty human ideals into concrete organizational practices.

That's what this book delivers. Where my research has focused on *why* human-centric leadership matters – rooted in neuroscience and psychology – Zanna lays out *how* to do it. Step by step. With precision. With proof. She shows how to speak the language of hard metrics, while never losing sight of the human truths underneath. She demonstrates how small daily habits can transform culture, how experiments build momentum, and how purpose comes alive when it is experienced, not laminated.

We share some core beliefs. That purpose isn't a slogan but a lived experience. That humble leadership – leaders willing to say, "I don't know, let's learn together" – is the key to unlocking collective energy. That big transformations start with tiny shifts in behavior. Since emotions drive economics, human engagement, connection, and meaning are not soft extras, but the very engines of loyalty, innovation, and performance.

If you are a CEO or a CX leader, this book will challenge you to see differently. Zanna offers you a roadmap to lead transformation with both courage and clarity. One that builds organizations where customers feel valued, employees feel alive, and purpose drives sustainable success.

It is rare to find a book that is both deeply practical and profoundly human. This is one of them. My hope is that, as you read, you will feel the same energy I felt the first time I saw Zanna take an idea and make it come alive in an organization. Because that is the real promise of human centricity: it makes work, and life, more worth living.

Dan Cable
Professor of Organisational Behaviour
London Business School

Preface

When I considered writing this book, I quickly thought about the importance of combining two perspectives: the perspective of the CEO and the perspective of the CX transformation lead. As a young professional I always felt that we could run the “revolution” bottom-up, just by getting employees energized and excited to focus on customers. And I have to admit, it worked well (up to a certain point), so I was not very focused on the importance of the system or leadership. As I grew into a more senior transformation leader, I learned a few important lessons that changed my perspective on the importance of leadership.

I saw that the system (think of KPIs for example) does have an impact on most employees. If they are steered on revenue or average handling time and their (team) leader is constantly focusing on that, it becomes a huge challenge – and sometimes even a frustration – for them, because focusing on the customer is not incentivized or stimulated. That means that, unless an employee has a super high internal drive to focus on the customer, the system will take over and they will align their behavior with the steering and focus of their (team) leader.

I also saw how quickly a new CEO can have an impact, negative or positive, on the direction of the organization. Or how a CHRO can seriously delay or accelerate the transformation depending on whether they support the transformation or not. If they are aligned, that means performance management, leadership development, talent management, and cultural values are all aligned with the desired transformation. So this is what I learned: if I want systemic change and not just a nice CX program, leadership was crucial.

One final learning was that many CX professionals tend to complain about their leaders not being on board, not prioritizing, not taking the time. They tend to not realize that if this happens, it's time to reflect on their own role. Because 9 out of 10 times, the problem is not the leader-

ship, it's how the CX professionals themselves show up. You will learn more about that in this book.

All these insights combined led me to the decision to incorporate both perspectives into this book. At one point I even had the idea of creating a book with two covers, with cover A for the book from the CEO's perspective and cover B for the book from the CX transformation lead's perspective. For several reasons, in the end I chose to write the book in two parts instead of creating two covers, but I maintained the structure of the two perspectives:

- *Part I: The CEO Perspective.* A one-hour read to fully understand the vision and methodology on a high level, but sufficiently complete to assess (1) if the vision aligns with the vision of the organization, (2) why most CX transformation programs fail and how to prevent it, using the elements of this methodology, and (3) what behaviors are required from the CEO and C-level leaders to make the transformation succeed.
- *Part II: The CX Transformation Lead Perspective.* A more extensive read with all the details of the methodology, with links to many additional sources like podcasts and videos, this part of the book reads like a blueprint for CX leaders wanting to level up their CX transformation program.

The best way to use this book, therefore, is for the CEO to read part 1 and the intermission part about AI, and for the CX transformation lead to read the entire book – including part 1, so you really understand how to work together with the leadership to transform the organization with more focus on customer, employee and purpose.

A final tip: what also works beautifully is to have all your C-level colleagues read part 1, so the leadership can have a proper discussion about what CX transformation really means, what it requires from them to be able to embark on this journey.

Dr. Zanna van der Aa
CX Transformation Leader

PART I

The CEO Perspective

Dear CEO,

“I want to set a new standard of how service providers think about profitability and the purpose of doing business, because I believe they both go together. People are at the heart of everything we do as an organization. Yes, of course, my primary KPI is increasing shareholder value and I don’t lose sight of that. But I’m convinced that human centricity will boost results and create an advantage that no one can copy. Customer experience, especially in telco, is the only way to create a competitive edge. I don’t have all the answers how we get there, but it’s an exciting journey that I’m willing to take because my heart is fully in it.” – Nawaf Algharabally, CEO of Zain, in the Human-Centric CEO podcast hosted by Dr. Zanna van der Aa.

If this quote resonates with you, then I wrote this book for you. Nawaf and I worked together because we share the same dream: to bring more human centricity to organizations in this world. Human centricity to me means a focus on customers, employees and purpose. And yes, in that order. Customers want to feel seen and heard. Employees want to thrive in their work, make a meaningful impact on customers and their colleagues and be part of an organization that has a strong purpose that energizes them. This is how organizations thrive, drive growth and create sustainable differentiation.

The question that has driven me for the last 25 years is, “How do we transform industrial-era management systems to bring human centricity to life?” Not fluffy concepts, but practical, measurable approaches that create energy across the organization. That’s what led me to my PhD in 2005 and to developing a CX transformation methodology that speaks the language of today’s product-centric, KPI-driven systems while gradually shifting them toward human centricity.

The good news? We are no longer the crazy ones we were a decade or more ago. People and purpose are getting much more attention, and

leaders like Hubert Joly (former CEO of Best Buy who transformed Best Buy successfully) have proven the business case – he quadrupled Best Buy's stock by implementing human-centric transformation.

That's why I'm convinced we can create more organizations that embrace human centricity. Let's put customers, employees and purpose back in the heart of your organization because it makes the most business sense. That's driving meaningful transformation.

If there is one thing I have learned in the last 25 years, it's that YOU, the CEO, can make or break transformation. My mission in life is to support CEOs who share the vision of putting people and purpose at the heart of their organization yet are looking for the best way to get there. I'm sharing the systematic approaches I've developed along with the personal behaviors so you can make transformation stick.

I hope you and your CX transformation lead will enjoy reading and experimenting with all the insights shared!

Warm regards,
Dr. Zanna van der Aa

PS: Would also love to hear what you think about the book! Just send me a DM on LinkedIn if you feel like reaching out.

PPS: Professor Dan Cable and several other inspiring people have been guests on my Human Centric CEO podcast. I'm sure you will find a lot of inspiration there as well. Check out my YouTube channel for the video versions (<https://www.youtube.com/@dr.zannavanderaa>) or Spotify for the audio versions (<https://open.spotify.com/show/7zYpw3qza6ssgz3b44Gmvs>).

If you are reading this book in the paperback version, here are the QR codes to both links for your convenience:



Prefer **watching**? Check the *Human Centric CEO* podcast series on **YouTube**. In this series, Dr. Zanna van der Aa interviews CEOs, CEO-level experts and C-level leaders who share their vision of creating human-centric cultures through a focus on customers, employees and purpose.



Prefer **listening**? Check the *Human Centric CEO* podcast series on **Spotify**. In this series, Dr. Zanna van der Aa interviews CEOs, CEO-level experts and C-level leaders who share their vision of creating human-centric cultures through a focus on customers, employees and purpose.

Introduction

Do you find your organization struggles to figure out which customer improvements will actually move the needle? Do you feel you are not maximizing the benefits from your customer centricity initiatives?

Solving the Transformation Puzzle

If you recognize these challenges, you're not alone. I see too many CEOs lacking CX transformation knowledge to effectively challenge their CX teams, or needing more ammunition to convince fellow C-level leaders to maximize the benefits that customer centricity brings.

That's exactly what my three layered model addresses. Over 25 years, I've experimented, failed, learned and succeeded in figuring out this complex puzzle – working with large, global organizations to make customer experience transformation deliver tangible business impact while staying true to human-centric principles.

Results Gained

The proof is in the results. I've guided transformations across 21 brands in 9 industries and 25 countries, with organizations consistently achieving measurable satisfaction increases within three to five months and financial impact within one to two years:

- 25% reduction in call center costs totaling €2.5 million
- Eliminated €250K in spending on insufficiently impactful external research
- Reduction of churn
- Three times faster rollout of CX transformation, saving time and money
- Increase in CSAT from 6.3 to 7.1 or 7.5 to 8.3
- 17-point increase in NPS
- 30-60% of employees volunteering to experiment with new habits
- Employees sharing they feel their work is more fulfilling

A One-Hour Read

I know you love these topics and I know you are super busy. It's a tough balance to strike. To respect that, I have written your CEO part of the book as concisely as possible. It should be a one- to one-and-a-half-hour read for you. To keep it concise, that also meant not using too many examples and getting straight to the point. So, if at times you feel you want some more explanation or some tangible examples, just flip to the exact same chapter and paragraph in Part II (The CX Transformation Lead Perspective) and you'll find it there.

How This Book Works

This book covers the complete system I've developed during all these years. A CX transformation approach that speaks the language of business results while staying true to human-centric principles. Of course, from your perspective as a CEO, you don't need to know the nitty-gritty details of these concepts. That's why I've written this book in two parts:

- Part 1 addresses specifically what your role as CEO entails
- Part 2 addresses the CX transformation lead with the full implementation playbook

Both parts contain exactly the same structure and chapters, but each is fully written from the selected perspective. So you can easily dive deeper if you want to by checking the same chapter in the CX transformation lead section. Or vice versa, your CX transformation lead can check the same chapter to help facilitate your role in CX transformation.

Before diving into the model, you might be wondering about the elephant in the room: artificial intelligence. While AI isn't part of the core CX transformation model, it absolutely impacts your customers, employees, and organizational purpose. That's why you'll find an intermission between Part 1 and Part 2 called "AI and Experience: Demystifying Five Strongly Held Beliefs" where I share my perspective on separating the sense from the nonsense in current AI developments.

To be successful, you and your transformation lead need to work very closely together. I'd advise you to get together, stop and reflect on the progress of your transformation initiatives at least once a month.

That's why I wrote this book from these two perspectives, so together you can support and strengthen each other and accelerate your CX transformation rollout, by making use of the three layered model (figure 1).

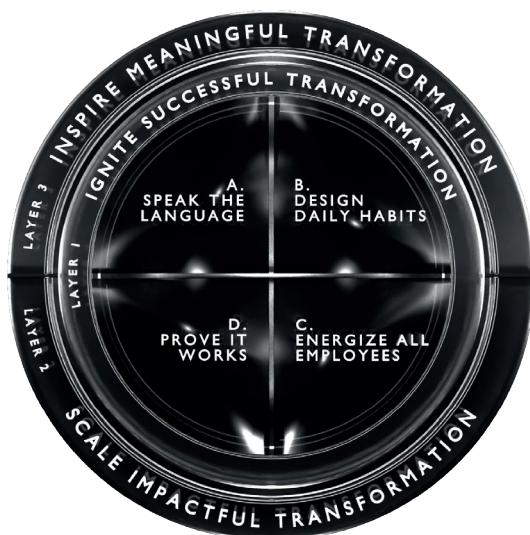


Figure 1. The Three Layered Model

Layer 1: Ignite Successful Transformation

You have to speak the language of hard steerable information or you will stay stuck in good intentions. **Driver Mapping™** addresses what I see wrong with most surveys and root cause techniques. It translates experience insights into statistical priorities that finance and operations can actually work with.

In this layer you will also learn about the **Habit Hacking™** approach. A unique combination of the insights from **Driver Mapping™** and behavioral science such as Tiny Habits to mobilize and energize the entire organization to experiment with new habits that impact the most im-

portant drivers. Throughout the book you will find many habit examples for you to experiment with, to make your role really tangible. Most CEOs tell me they embrace CX transformation but ask, “What can I actually do?” That’s exactly what this book answers – with specific behaviors you can try, not abstract principles.

Layer 2: Scale Impactful Transformation

During the first six to nine months, you will focus on *Igniting Successful Transformation*. Everyone is now excited to join, your fellow C-level leaders start seeing the business impact. You are generating a pull instead of a push strategy. Now is the perfect time to build on this excitement and *Scale Impactful Transformation*. I have collected 15 ways for you to successfully scale CX transformation throughout your organization so it really sticks. And no, that’s not by building a large CX team that would hurt your P&L (yes, the cliffhanger is intentional).

Layer 3: Inspire Meaningful Transformation

And last, but definitely not least, I’m sharing 21 behaviors for you as a CEO to successfully guide transformation by *Inspiring Meaningful Transformation*. It’s impossible to lead any transformation without transforming yourself. These 21 behaviors are divided across three perspectives: leading yourself, leading others and leading the system. Be compassionate, embrace your courage, listen without fixing, have some fun. Just to mention a few. It’s a menu for you to read through, take time to reflect upon and assess which behaviors would enhance your impact during your CX transformation journey.

Of course, you can start with any layer depending on your organization’s maturity and your own experience in CX transformation. Nine out of ten times, organizations start with Layer 1: *Ignite Successful Transformation* because it fixes the most common design flaws in CX programs.

The fastest *and* at the same time most sustainable way to use the three layers though, is to use them in parallel. You need specific, inspirational behaviors (Layer 3), while igniting the organization (Layer 1) and the

faster you build in CX elements into the existing system (Layer 2), the faster the customer will become part of your organization’s DNA.

Excited to get started?

Let’s first start by understanding why I believe CX is failing and how to fix it.

Failing Customer Experience

1996	2003	2010s	2021	TODAY
Reichheld’s book <i>The Loyalty Effect</i>	<i>The Ultimate Question</i> NPS launch	Cracks in the NPS system	Reichheld proposes alternative metric	Boards still push for NPS despite issues
Proof: loyalty enhances profitability	Simple metric for complex loyalty	Becomes KPI for organizations	Gaming (ask for 9 and 10 for bonus)	CX programs fail to show business impact
CX and EX drive business results	Put CX on the agenda of boards worldwide	Root cause analysis alters use of NPS	Counterproductive focus on number	CX programs are being shut down

Table 1. The Rise And Fall of the Net Promoter Score

The importance of CX is increasing, while the quality of CX is decreasing. Most boards by now have embraced customer experience as a strategic enabler or at least have adopted the Net Promoter Score (NPS) as a key metric. That might seem like a great strategy for successful CX transformation, but often it’s not maximizing the potential you are looking for.

Let me briefly share why the CX industry is currently failing and how this helps you ask better questions to guide and challenge your CX team and fellow C-level leaders.

The Rise and Fall of NPS

When I think about the best way to explain why CX is failing, the rise and fall of the Net Promoter Score serves as a perfect case study for what's happening across the entire CX field.

Reichheld's 1996 book *The Loyalty Effect* proved something every CEO instinctively knows but needed data to support: treating people well – customers and employees – drives revenue, profit, and reduces costs. His focus was always on long-term loyalty and relationships over short-term financial gains. Hence, I fell in love with this book. It was the first book I read that confirmed my belief that treating people well is a smart business strategy, not just the right thing to do.

He understood that loyalty is complex to measure and businesses need simpler metrics. When he discovered that the most profitable companies were those whose customers recommended them, the Net Promoter Score was born. Initially, the research confirmed that customers with high recommendation likelihood were indeed more profitable.

But here's where business strategy got derailed by marketing hype. Despite Reichheld clearly stating that creating profitable experiences requires a balanced set of metrics (not just NPS), his *Ultimate Question* book title suggested otherwise.

Cracks in the System

At first, NPS was a predictor of profitability. Then Bain introduced “root cause analysis” with predetermined topic lists to explain ratings. NPS became a KPI for employees, boards, and bonuses. Car dealers pressuring customers for 9s and 10s. Call centers measuring NPS immediately after service calls instead of tracking genuine customer sentiment over time. How about your organization? Are you putting pressure on NPS as a metric?

Even Reichheld now expresses concern that NPS misuse is counterproductive and actually harms customer and employee experiences (see

<https://hbr.org/2021/11/net-promoter-3-0>). The metric became the goal instead of the means.

But here's what NPS did accomplish: it put customer experience on every board agenda. McKinsey, Forrester, and countless business cases have proven CX's financial impact. The issue isn't the why, it's the how.

Malinvestments in CX

This is exactly what I see happening across CX departments today. Journey mapping, research, service design: all valuable tools when used to solve actual business challenges. But too many CX teams operate in isolation, creating beautiful journey maps while the rest of the organization wonders, "What exactly are they delivering?" If you have been feeling this nagging feeling in the back of your head, you are not wrong.

CX strategies get written following academic frameworks. CX promises get defined. But there's a fundamental disconnect from real business outcomes. Teams can't prove ROI. Budgets get cut, and rightfully so, if you can't demonstrate business value.

I've seen organizations spend millions on CX initiatives with zero measurable impact on revenue, retention, or operational efficiency. The intention isn't the problem, every CX professional wants to make a difference. It's the approach that needs fixing.

Aiming for CX Transformation

CX is not a goal in itself. It's a strategic enabler, a design principle, a competitive advantage tool. When you treat it as such, CX transformation becomes a powerful means to drive business results instead of an expensive end in itself.

That's exactly what we're going to fix. Let me show you what CX transformation actually means when focused on business impact.

Defining Transformation

I'm sure also in your organization the word transformation is used on a daily basis. Digital transformation, culture transformation, CX transformation. In order to prevent this coming across like a buzzword for all your employees, it's up to you to really reflect on what transformation actually means and why it matters. Let me walk you through my perspective on what transformation really means and how it applies to CX transformation.

Operational Versus Transformational CX

Most organizations are still doing operational CX: mapping journeys, creating CX strategies, measuring touchpoints, implementing journey management tools, and defining customer promises. These are isolated CX activities that rarely connect to business outcomes.

CX transformation means integrating customer perspective into your existing business strategy. Instead of creating separate CX initiatives, you're using customer insights to solve operational challenges, break down silos, and drive measurable business results. Instead of CX posters on walls, you're embedding customer-focused behaviors into daily operations. Instead of separate CX dashboards, you're ensuring leadership KPIs include balanced customer outcomes alongside financial metrics.

The CEO's role in operational CX	The CEO's role in transformational CX
CEO only focuses on NPS or metrics outcome and asks for separate CX reporting	CEO ensures each department integrates CX metrics in their own reporting
CEO leaves journey mapping as occasional tool for CX team	CEO drives journey management as new way of working across silos
CEO leaves responsibility for CX with CX or marketing team	CEO ensures each fellow C-level leader understands and takes their role for more customer focus in DNA
CEO organizes CX separate from the business operations	CEO positions CX as a valuable tool to solve business challenges
Essence of Transformation: Change in Perspective	
From: "How do we do CX?"	To: "How can we better solve our business challenges by adding the customer perspective?"

Table 2. The CEO's role in operational CX vs CX transformation

Here's the difference in practice: one organization reduced €2.5 million in operational costs while simultaneously improving customer satisfaction. That's business impact, not just mapping journeys or measuring touchpoints.

Essence of Transformation

As I mentioned, transformation has become a buzzword. But at its core, all transformation comes down to one thing: a fundamental shift in perspective.

“The most profound transformation is a change in perspective. Once you see it, you cannot unsee it. It drives changes in behavior, one tiny habit at a time. That’s how systems begin to thrive.” – Dr. Zanna van der Aa

Organizational transformation starts with personal transformation. Let me share some personal examples of how I learned the profound impact of changing perspective:

Less judgement, more compassion. Once I realized I was judging leaders harshly due to childhood patterns, everything changed. I became more compassionate, respectful, and connected in my approach. Leaders immediately felt the difference, and our collaboration became more profound and effective.

Less preaching, more impact. Once I realized that evangelizing about “doing the right thing” wasn’t working, I pursued my PhD to translate customer and employee insights into hard, statistical data. Speaking the organization’s language made me infinitely more effective at driving change.

Less responsibility, faster scaling. Once I realized that taking all responsibility for CX programs made others lean back and disengage, I changed my approach. Instead of trying to integrate CX into leadership after year one, I embedded it from day one in tiny steps. Results: faster and more sustainable transformation.

Business Impact of Transformation

The same holds true for transformation in the business context: a shift in perspective is the crucial ignition for lasting change.

Stumble over the truth: Once leaders watch actual customers struggling to navigate their website, multi-year budget discussions for digital improvements get resolved in a single afternoon. Seeing the problem changes everything.

No more business case: Once leaders see that Driver Mapping™ shows them exactly which improvements will deliver 5x more ROI than others, they stop asking for business cases. The data speaks their language and makes investment decisions obvious.

See the impact: Once teams see how small behavioral changes – like daily sincere recognition – dramatically improve performance metrics, they adopt these habits organization-wide because the business impact is undeniable.

Without the perspective shift, you might get compliance but not commitment. Without translating new insights into specific behaviors, nothing actually changes. Without systematic implementation, improvements don't scale or sustain.

Next to these personal levels of transformation, never underestimate the impact of transforming the organizational system itself. You need both in order to thrive.

From a Product-Centric to a Human-Centric System

Most organizations are still product focused. Many want to become more customer centric but struggle with execution. The next evolution is to become truly human centric – optimizing for customers, employees, purpose and business outcomes simultaneously.