

A perfect match: decoding employee engagement – Part I: Engaging cultures and leaders

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Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this two-part article is to introduce engagement and review key research on engagement-related factors.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The author conducted a literature search on employee engagement and pilot interviews with ten professionals.*

Findings – *Environment, leadership, job, and individual factors are connected to employee engagement. Environmental engagement factors include congruency between organizational and individual values, the quality of the workplace relationships, and work-life balance. Leadership engagement factors include vision and integrity. Job engagement factors include the meaningfulness of the job, its level of challenge, and the amount of control the employee has on the job. Finally, individual factors related to engagement include resilience, locus of control, active coping style, self-esteem, neuroticism, and extraversion. The author suggests that the connections (or the match) between organizational, leadership, job, and individual characteristics is particularly relevant for engagement.*

Research limitations/implications – *The article includes a preliminary investigation of engagement. Further research is needed connecting environmental, leadership, job, and individual engagement factors, and confirming the importance of the “match” for engagement.*

Practical implications – *The implications are that leaders should be educated on engagement, that career development opportunities are particularly important, that performance improvement professional should champion work-life balance, and that initiatives enhancing workplace relationships are likely useful to increase engagement.*

Originality/value – *This paper connects research on various engagement factors, making it easier for performance improvement professional to gain an introductory yet holistic view of the topic.*

Keywords *Leadership, Employee behaviour, Employee attitudes, Motivation (psychology), Organizational culture*

Paper type *Conceptual paper*

Introduction

Time stood still. At least, it felt that way. The night before, flying between Rio de Janeiro and Atlanta, I had visualized a new team building program inspired by old James Bond movies. The program idea was fun, edgy, and powerful. Now I was quarantined in my office, ignoring the outside world and refusing all phone calls. I was in creative heaven. Something had just “clicked” – and whatever that something was, it had given me the energy of a marathon runner, the passion of a missionary, and the focus of an arrow. I was fully engaged (personal experience).

The word “engagement” has lately become the focus of considerable enthusiasm. For instance, Welbourne (2007) said that engagement is one of the “hottest topics in management” (p. 45) and Frank *et al.* (2004) suggested that engaging employees is “one of the greatest challenges facing organizations in this decade and beyond” (p. 15).

Arguably, the excitement around engagement is not surprising. According to one of the most frequently cited engagement models (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002) engagement is a combination of *vigor*, *dedication*, and *absorption*. In other words, engaged employees are highly

energetic (vigor), feel great pride and enthusiasm (dedication), and are willing to completely focus on the task at hand (absorption). Moreover, because engaged employees are fully “psychologically present” (Kahn, 1990), they give their “all” to their jobs and are willing to go “the extra mile” to achieve success (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002).

While engagement is still a relatively new area of research (Saks, 2006), the evidence so far seems to support considerable engagement-related benefits for organizations. For instance, Harter *et al.*'s (2002) meta-analysis of 7,939 business units in 36 companies identified significant relationships between employee engagement and improvements in customer satisfaction, productivity, profits, turnover, and safety records. More recently, Saks (2006) found that engagement significantly predicted job satisfaction and employee commitment to the organization.

This two-part article introduces, discusses, and connects the myriad factors impacting a person's decision (whether conscious or unconscious) to engage or disengage. Specifically, I will define engagement, summarize the latest research on environmental, leadership, job and individual engagement factors, and make the case for the importance of a “match” between individual needs and the general characteristics of the job. This first part of the article will focus on engagement definitions, the connections between engagement and burnout, and the environmental and leadership factors related to engagement. The second part of the article will focus on job and individual engagement factors. I will offer performance improvement implications at the end of Part II. Specifically, I will discuss whether we can or should “train for engagement”. Can we really create an “engagement workshop” for our employees? And if we can't, what *can* we do?

Throughout the article, I will include interview comments from ten colleagues who agreed to participate in a small pilot study on engagement. The interviewees resided in Brazil, Mexico, or the USA. Six of the interviewees were male and four were female. Because some of the interviewees spoke English as a second language, minor adjustments in the language and wording were made to enhance clarity. Nationalities were omitted and names were changed to protect the confidentiality of the respondents.

What is engagement?

It's a feeling of passion – it can even become an obsession. It gives you a huge amount of energy but it's also a double edged sword. You could become a workaholic, ignore important things. On the other hand, that's when you get your qualitative leaps – your “Eureka” moments (“James”, university professor).

The term “engagement” is rooted in role theory, in particular the work of Erving Goffman (1961). Role theory studies the various roles individuals occupy in society, as well as the social expectations and behavioral boundaries attributed to such roles (Bailey and Yost, 2007). Goffman (1961) defined engagement as the “spontaneous involvement in the role” and a “visible investment of attention and muscular effort” (p. 94). Later, William Kahn (1990) published findings from two qualitative studies, the first on camp counselors and the second on members of an architectural firm. Kahn (1990) defined engagement as “the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles” (p. 694). The more of ourselves we give to a role, Kahn claimed, the more exciting and comfortable is our performance. Kahn suggested, however, that individuals could *vary* how much of themselves they assign to each role.

From Goffman (1961) and Kahn (1990) we learn two key components of engagement:

1. spontaneity (Goffman); and
2. variability (Kahn).

First, engagement is “spontaneous” and voluntary. We can accept an unwanted role, we can be forced to perform it, but we cannot be *ordered* to engage. Secondly, engagement is “variable”. Kahn's (1990) research demonstrated that the same person could be engaged in one role and not in another.

I was very excited because it was my first very important project. I was the owner, and I had to create it from scratch. I felt really energized in face of the possibility to create something that could bring valuable input to the company. I felt like nothing would prevent me from going where I

wanted to go. Later, however, the project cost me a lot of stress. I had to handle personal interests, political interests, the managers' and my own fears of failures. I had to handle all sorts of conflicts [...]. I became kind of selfish and did not pay attention to the emotional part of the project, which was very important. I finished the project after lots of fights and misunderstandings. I got the results but did not get the leaders' commitment, so I failed in that sense ("Julia", training and development manager).

Julia's story illustrates both spontaneity and variability. No one ordered Julia to "get excited". Her enthusiasm was her own, likely caused by a sense of ownership, challenge, and by the potential significance of her job. Later, however, pride, enthusiasm, and the belief that "nothing could prevent her from going where she wanted to go" were substituted by stress and anxiety. She became "selfish", lost focus, and ultimately felt that she failed.

Julia's testimony also exemplifies a phenomenon often considered the "antithesis" of engagement – burnout. Burnout is a complex syndrome involving *personal*, *interpersonal*, and *self-evaluation* components (Maslach *et al.*, 2001).

From a *personal* standpoint, burnout causes an overwhelming sense of stress, frustration, and exhaustion. Individuals may feel like their energies – physical and/or emotional – are entirely depleted. As a result, burned-out individuals may lack the emotional resources needed to deal with their challenges (Zellars *et al.*, 2004).

Interpersonally, burnout causes "cynicism" (Maslach *et al.* 2001), which was defined as a generalized "negative attitude towards work" (Langelaan *et al.*, 2006, p. 522). A common symptom of cynicism is emotional detachment. For instance, a nurse might separate himself from the patients; a teacher could antagonize her students. When Julia recalled becoming "selfish" and not paying attention to the "emotional side" of her project, she exemplified detachment. Detachment might sour the relationships between the burned-out professional and her clients (Maslach *et al.*, 2001).

Finally the burnout syndrome often includes a negative "self-evaluation" component. The person may no longer feel effective and competent. As a result, professional effectiveness and the accomplishment of professional goals could be negatively impacted (Langelaan *et al.*, 2006).

The burnout syndrome is not the *exact* antithesis of engagement (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002). Even though the energy and passion that characterize engagement are arguably opposite to exhaustion and cynicism, the negative "self-evaluation" component of burnout finds no opposing match in engagement. The analysis of burnout, however, is useful for two main reasons. Firstly, burnout and engagement are clearly related, and a considerable body of research on burnout is available. Engagement, on the other hand, is a relatively new field of study (Saks, 2006). Secondly, excessive engagement could *lead* to burnout. Paradoxically, the very energy surge generated by engagement could lead the employee to ultimate exhaustion (Hallberg *et al.*, 2007). For these reasons, burnout studies will be included in the research summaries presented in the following sections of this paper.

After defining engagement and burnout, our next step is to understand the conditions under which both phenomena occur. Why would some people be more "engaged" than others given the same environmental and work stimuli? Alternatively, why would the same person demonstrate strong engagement in certain environments and situations but not in others? These questions will be addressed in the section that follows.

The roots of engagement

Engagement does not bring benefits to employers only. Individuals could profit as well. Loehr (2005) suggested that individual engagement benefits include enthusiasm, greater value to the employer, improved physical health, and happiness. Reasonably, few employees would *choose* to be unhappy at work.

Even though engagement brings both organizational and individual benefits, however, most US employees are not engaged. Amongst all currently employed US workers, an estimated 25 percent are fully engaged, 50 percent not engaged, and 15 percent are actively disengaged (Branham, 2005). The difference between "not engaged" and "disengaged"

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matters – actively *disengaged* employees are not only “dispassionate”. Instead, they are disgruntled enough to undermine the work of their team members (Krueger and Killham, 2006).

Understanding the conditions under which some would actively engage while others would actively disengage is, therefore, particularly relevant for both employer and employee. This section summarizes the engagement and burnout research that sheds light on these conditions. In particular I will address:

- organizational environment;
- leadership characteristics; and
- job characteristics.

Individual and personality factors connected to engagement will be addressed in the second part of this article.

Organizational environment

The analysis of various research studies on the organizational roots of engagement and burnout (for a good review of engagement, see Saks, 2006; for a good summary of burnout research, see Maslach *et al.* 2001), revealed three important environmental factors connected to engagement:

1. relationships;
2. work-life balance; and
3. values.

Relationships

Working with an intelligent, confident client with a sense of humor was a gift from the beginning of the project. The combination of working with others who really cared about their company and creating a product that promoted real behavior change was the right combination for me. The camaraderie was a motivator, and the creative process was fun [...]. I don't remember one bad day – only good ones (“Elisa”, training and development director).

Rewarding work relationships such as the ones described by Elisa make the employee feel safer, able to experiment and “be herself” (Kahn, 1990). The employee's energy may be spent on the job rather than on interpersonal conflict. Indeed, supportive workplace relationships were found to be important predictors of engagement by various studies (e.g. Maslach *et al.*, 2001; see also May *et al.*, 2004). Good interactions with co-workers, supervisors, and even clients fulfill employees' “relatedness needs” and provide them with a comfortable and respectful environment. Conversely, lack of support was also an important component in burnout research, predicting emotional exhaustion (see Janssen *et al.*, 1999; see also Lindblom *et al.*, 2006).

Work-life balance

Interestingly, work-life balance emerged as an important predictor both of burnout and engagement. The data, however, seems contradictory. On the one hand, Sonnentag's (2003) study on engagement and recovery revealed that engagement levels *increased* when individuals had the opportunity to recuperate from workplace stressors. Another study, however, (Hallberg *et al.*, 2007) reached two apparently disparate results: first, they

identified a connection between excessive workload and emotional exhaustion. They also found, however, that increased workload was related to *higher* levels of engagement. The researchers suggested that the very enthusiasm leading employees towards engagement could also, paradoxically, make them more vulnerable to burnout.

Values

I was working for an organization which didn't provide ways for people to be involved or feel ownership in their jobs and/or the organization. Turnover was at an extremely high level and whenever ideas or suggestions on how to improve engagement (were made) they were dismissed as costing too much in money and time ("Mark", director of human resources).

The third environmental factor connected to engagement is the congruence between the organizational and the individual values. When the culture of Mark's organization failed to match his involvement and empowerment values, a general sense of frustration was generated. Values *matter* to employee engagement in at least two levels:

1. safety; and
2. meaningfulness.

Safety means the ability to be oneself without the fear of negative consequences (Kahn, 1990). Safety means that an employee does not need to leave the most important aspects of herself at home – whatever she believes in, whatever is important to her, can be freely expressed at work. Kahn (1990) found that safe jobs were predictable, clear, and open to employees' values and beliefs.

Meaningfulness is a feeling of being useful, valuable, and relevant (Kahn, 1990). Kahn suggested that *meaningfulness* gives employees a "return on investment" (p. 704) for their efforts and energy. That feeling is more likely to be experienced at work when there is an alignment between the employee's values and the organizational values (Chalofsky, 2003). Individuals want to make a difference, and are more engaged when they perceive their organization to be ethical and trustworthy (Holbeche, 2004).

If values are that important for employee engagement, then the current organizational emphasis on expressing and promoting values (Cartwright and Holmes, 2006) should be good news. Organizational values, however, are of little importance if they are not lived and visibly supported by all organizational stakeholders – most especially, by the organizational leaders. The connection between leadership, values, and engagement will be addressed within the larger context of engaging leadership practices.

Leadership practices

[The job] was extremely stressful, but engaging, because I wanted to do the job well for [my manager] and I respected him as a manager, so I think that added to the engagement ("Jenny", OD consultant and manager).

The stressful nature of Jenny's job could have led her towards burnout. Instead, she recalled feeling "engaged" solely because of her respect for her direct manager. This example illustrates the power of the leader. After all, "leadership is influence" (Maxwell, 1993, p. 1). This influence can be used to engage or disengage, to inspire or to alienate followers.

Predictably, one of the first requirements of an engaging leader is that she herself is engaged (Welbourne, 2007). Indeed, Welbourne explained that an important component of engagement is employee interest in "non-core" jobs, functions that go beyond obvious responsibilities. If, she argued, leaders are burned out and focused solely on immediate results, how can they role model or reward "non-core" innovations? After all, overworked leaders are unlikely to tolerate employees who spend time and energy on non-core responsibilities.

Recent research on the relationship between leadership and engagement (see Avolio *et al.*, 2004; see also Amarjit *et al.*, 2006) identified two "engagement-friendly" leadership styles. These were "transformational leadership" (Bass, 1999) and "authentic leadership" (Jensen and Luthans, 2006).

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Transformational leaders inspire followers to adhere to a common vision. As a contrast, transactional leaders focus on the employees' immediate interests and individual rewards (Bass, 1999). Reasonably, the style of leadership most likely to encourage employees to do energetic, enthusiastic, and focused work is inspiring and visionary, rather than transactional. In particular, the transformational leader's "visioning" and "inspiring" competencies are of considerable importance to engagement (Densten, 2005). For example, Densten (2005) found that a leader's inspirational motivation reduces employee exhaustion and depersonalization. After all, he explained, a leader's vision, when clearly and compellingly transmitted, gives followers *reasons* to reach goals.

A second leadership style connected to engagement is "authentic leadership" (Avolio *et al.* 2004). Authentic leadership (AL) combines ethical and transformational leadership qualities. Authentic leaders are inspiring, motivational, and visionary – but are also unwaveringly moral, compassionate, and service-oriented. Authentic leaders, therefore, strongly and visibly demonstrate their values in their leadership practices. Furthermore, the authentic leader's interest in the well-being of the employee leads him to recognize individual differences, identify complementary talents, and help employees build upon their strengths. Not surprisingly, Avolio *et al.* (2004) found significant relationships between AL and employee engagement.

Together environmental and leadership factors help engage or disengage employees. Reasonably, however, individual and job characteristics *should* matter as well. After all, different leaders and organizations could be attractive to different employees. Moreover, even an organization named consistently as "one of the best places to work" might have its fair share of uninspiring, routine, or excessively stressful jobs. Diverse individuals, furthermore, might need more or less "inspiration", present a higher or lower tolerance for routine, and handle stress differently. The vital role played by individual preferences and personality traits on engagement will be discussed in the second part of this article.

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