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A Perfect Match: Decoding Employee Engagement

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Abstract

Engagement has been defined as “the harnessing of organization members’ selves to their work roles” (Kahn, 1990, p. 694). The main objective of this paper is to present the topic of engagement to performance improvement professionals. Specifically, this paper includes (a) engagement definitions and (b) job, organizational, leadership, and individual factors connected to engagement. Next, the author argues that engagement depends on the existence of a “perfect match” between the individual and his or her job, direct supervisor, and organizational culture. As a conclusion, performance improvement implications and future research needs are addressed.

A PERFECT MATCH

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, Finnegan, and Taylor (2004) suggested that engaging employees is “one of the greatest challenges facing organizations in this decade and beyond” (p. 15).

The excitement around engagement is not surprising. According to one of the most frequently cited engagement models (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 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, Schmidt and Hayes’ (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 article will introduce, discuss, and connect the myriad factors impacting a person's decision (whether conscious or unconscious) to engage or disengage. Specifically, I will (a) define engagement, (b) summarize the latest research on job, organizational, leadership, and individual engagement factors, and (c) make the case for the importance of a "match" between individual needs and the general work environment. As a conclusion, 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? I will intersperse throughout the article engagement testimonies from colleagues on the OD and educational field. All comments were collected via telephone conversations or electronic messages in May of 2007. The names were changed to protect confidentiality.

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," U.S. university professor from Seattle, United States).

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 & Yost, 2007). Goffman 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 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.

From Goffman (1961) and Kahn (1990) we learn two key components of engagement: spontaneity (Goffman) and 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 research (1990) 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,” OD consultant and manager).

Julia’s story illustrates both spontaneity and variability. No one ordered Julia to “become excited.” Julia’s 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. Indeed, her 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, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 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, Hochwarter, Perrewé, Hoffman, & Ford, 2004).

Interpersonally, burnout causes “cynicism” (Maslach et al. 2001), which was defined as a generalized “negative attitude towards work” (Langelaan, Bakker, & van Doornen, 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. As a result of detachment, the burnout professional could feel alienated from 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: First,

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, Johansson, & Schaufeli, 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: The Job, the Organization, the Leader, and the Individual

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 U.S. employees are not engaged. Amongst all currently employed U.S workers, an estimated 25% are fully engaged, 50% not engaged, and 15% are actively disengaged (Branham, 2005). The difference between “not engaged” and “disengaged” matters – actively *disengaged* employees are not only “dispassionate.” Instead, they are disgruntled enough to undermine the work of their team members (Krueger & 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 (a) job characteristics, (b) organizational environment, (c) leadership characteristics, and (c) individual factors.

Job Characteristics

I was very determined; I really wanted to see the results. I felt that I could help those people (the factory employees) to speak out and get what they needed (“Julia,” OD consultant and manager).

I feel engaged when (...) I can identify the impact of my actions to the organization and know that what I'm doing can be perceived as something valuable to the final client (“Lucy,” OD consultant and manager).

Both Julia and Lucy reported feeling engaged when their work was considered important. This concern about the “impact” of one’s job connects to a key component of engagement: *meaningfulness*. Originally coined by Kahn (1990), the term *meaningfulness* relates to feelings of usefulness and relevance. Kahn suggested that *meaningfulness* gives employees a “return on investment” (p. 704) for their efforts and energy. Possibly for this reason, *meaningfulness* relates more strongly with engagement than a safe environment or the availability of resources (May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004).

Engaging jobs are not only meaningful: They also provide job incumbents with a certain amount of *challenge*. *Challenging* jobs increase feelings of accomplishment (Kahn, 1990), providing individuals with a satisfying combination of routine and novelty (Kahn, 1990). For

instance, Jenny, the manager of a large training division in Latin America, and George, a U.S. American HR director reported:

I feel energized when I have new projects to work on, a new problem, something new to solve, a situation that is usually beyond anyone else's capabilities to solve. ("Jenny," training manager).

I had spent much time doing a training analysis of supervisory skills (...) which resulted in developing a week-long training program (...). Prior to the first week of actual training (...), I definitely felt a great deal of apprehension about being able to successfully deliver the material, maintain the interest of the class, and successfully transfer the required knowledge. Amazingly, once the initial ice was broken on the first morning of training, it felt as if the rest of the week just flew by. The many different obstacles that I had created in my own mind never materialized...I was never at a loss for words, never was stumped by questions (...), maintained the attention of the class, and almost never had to refer to the variety of notes I had created as back-up (...). It turned out to be a great experience" ("George," Director of HR).

A last key engagement-related job characteristic is the *level of control* experienced by the employee. Maslach et al. (2001) suggested that employees need to sufficiently control their job and resources in order to succeed. The connections between control, engagement, and burnout were also supported by studies conducted by Kahn (1990); Lindblom, Linton, Fedeli and Bryngelsson (2006); and Kuyuncu, Burke, and Fiksenbaum (2006).

Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) research on "Flow" illustrates the relationship between challenges and the control of resources. A "Flow" situation optimally balances a particular *challenge* and the *resources* needed to face it. When one's resources exceed one's challenges, the result could be boredom. On the other hand, severe burnout could result from a combination

of intense challenges and insufficient resources. Logically, if an employee cannot control her job she may not be able procure the resources needed to adjust “Flow.” The resulting stress could then impact engagement.

Even though job characteristics such as meaningfulness, challenge, and control emerge as a key engagement factor, one’s job does not occur in a vacuum (Maslach et al., 2001). After all, organizational norms influence the design of the various jobs available. Organizational engagement and burnout factors will be, therefore, examined next.

Organizational Culture

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).

Geert Hofstede (1997) defined organizational culture as “*the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one organization from another*” (p. 180). This socially shared “programming” prescribes what behaviors are tolerated or rewarded in areas such as process vs. results orientation, concern for employees, tightness of controls, etc. (Hofstede 1997). Accordingly, the culture of an organization may be more or less friendly towards areas such as “involvement” and “ownership.” When the culture of Mark’s organization failed to match his own involvement and empowerment values, he felt disengaged.

Indeed, the “fit” or level of congruence between the values of the organization and those of the employee are a significant engagement factor (Saks, 2006). The analysis of various research studies on the organizational roots of engagement and burnout (for a review of

engagement, see Saks, 2006; for a summary of burnout research see Maslach et al. 2001), revealed two additional areas: (a) relationships, (b) work-life balance.

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 (for instance, Maslach et al., 2001; 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, Schaufeli, & Houkes; 1999; also Lindblom et al., 2006).

Even though work relationships are important, life at home also seems to matter. Interestingly, work-life balance surfaced 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. Yearly vacations, Sonnentag explained, did not provide sufficient relief – regular rest helped employees recuperated their energies to re-engage on the following day. 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.

Reasonably, the culture of an organization will impact organizational views on workplace relationships and work life balance. Cultures, however, are not static – they are permanently maintained and supported by organizational members and, in particular, by organizational leaders (Schein, 2004). Leadership practices, therefore, will be examined next.

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 be engaged (Welbourne, 2007). 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, they are unlikely to reward non-core job contributions and innovations.

Recent research on the relationship between leadership and engagement (see Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004; also Amarjit, Flaschner, & Shachar, 2006) identified two “engagement-friendly” leadership styles. These were “Transformational Leadership” (Bass, 1999) and “Authentic Leadership” (Jensen & Luthans, 2006).

Transformational leaders inspire followers to willingly adhere to a common vision (Bass, 1999). Densten (2005) found that such “visioning” and “inspiring” competencies associated to transformational leadership reduce the exhaustion and depersonalization connected to employee burnout. Densten further explained that a leader’s vision, when clearly and compellingly transmitted, gives followers *reasons* to reach goals and provides meaning to their work. A lack of meaning, on the other hand, is a key root factor of burnout (Densten, 2005).

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 as inspiring, motivational, and visionary as their “transformational” counterparts – but are also unwaveringly moral, compassionate, and service oriented. 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. found significant relationships between AL and employee engagement.

Job, organizational and leadership characteristics, however, fail to explain why the same job, organization and leader may support both engaged and disengaged employees. It is useful, therefore, to focus our attention on *individual* personality characteristics supporting either engagement or burnout.

Individual Characteristics and Personality

In “The Search for the Missing Person” (Guman, 2004) argued that if engagement is “a heightened personal connection to the organization” (p. 42) research should focus on the person rather than on other factors. Is it possible for someone to remain engaged in spite of a negative environment, a particularly difficult job, or a poor boss? And if so... how can we find those “permanently engaged” people?

So far, most of the available research focuses on the personal characteristics related to *burnout* rather than engagement. A few themes, however, seem to emerge from burnout research. Possibly, the person most likely to be engaged even under less than ideal circumstances is *hardy*, has an *internal locus of control*, and is able to *actively cope* with whatever problems come her way (Maslach et al., 2001). *Hardiness* means openness to change, the ability to survive when “the going gets tough,” resilience. *Internal locus of control* means that the individual is more likely to attribute events and achievements to her own abilities and efforts rather than to external events. Finally, individuals more likely to remain engaged have an *active* rather than *passive* coping style. They seem more assertive, expressing their needs more clearly.

Self-esteem is another trait that positively impacts engagement. Indeed, Janssen et al. (1999) found that individuals with high self-esteem were less likely to become emotionally drained and exhausted. Higher levels of self esteem could allow individuals to see situations more positively. Janssen et al. admitted, however, that at this point it is still unclear whether self-esteem is a *cause* or simply a *consequence* of engagement. After all, engaged individuals are more productive and happy, and productivity and happiness could enhance self-esteem.

Recently, “Five Factor Model” (FFM) personality traits were connected to both burnout and engagement. The FFM is a robust personality model that has been the focus of considerable interest by researchers during the last 15 years. For instance, Schneider and Smith (2004) said that “these days if one mentions personality, it is assumed he or she is referring to the five-factor model” (p. 388). The FFM personality traits cluster around 5 factors: Need for Stability (also called Neuroticism), Extraversion, Originality (also called Openness), Accommodation (also called Agreeableness), and Conscientiousness or Consolidation (Howard & Howard, 2001).

Langelaan et al. (2006) found that burned out individuals were more likely to score high in “Neuroticism” (a correlated set of traits that includes pessimism, anxiety, worry, and other negative emotions). As a contrast, engaged individuals scored lower in Neuroticism and higher in Extraversion. In particular, the Extraversion-Engagement connection makes sense: After all, extraversion is connected with enthusiasm, outgoingness, and a feeling of “take charge” (Howard & Howard, 2001). Reasonably, “take charge” kinds of persons will attempt to *change* undesirable environments in order to suit their needs.

To summarize, certain personality traits could predispose an individual for greater engagement. Arguably, however, certain situations could be more engagement-friendly for individuals – regardless of their personality traits. For instance, a non-resilient individual could be happier in a less stressful environment. A non-take charge person could be happier if the environment does not need to be changed in the first place. This leads us to a final discussion on engagement-related factors: the importance of “matching” the individual needs and characteristics to job, organization, and leadership.

In Search of the “Perfect Match”

A moment of disengagement for me came when I attempted to sell insurance. I am an introverted person and a person of great imagination. Both of these personal attributes are not important in an insurance sales position. For instance, many say that if one calls or sees enough people, one will make a sale. For a person with an introverted personality, the number of calls ones makes for a sale becomes a great burden. Trying to deal with a large number of people (...) resulted in a hatred for the phone and the doorbell. I had hoped to work in the marketing area of the company; however, I had no chance for promotion into the marketing department because my sales were not good enough. Where I could have become engaged in marketing, I could not become engaged in sales and ultimately left the company (“John,” OD consultant and trainer).

John’s story exemplifies a common organizational problem: Promotions are based on the employee’s current performance, rather than on her future potential (Howard & Howard, 2001). This practice assumes that an employee’s behaviors in one particular area predict his behaviors in another. John’s inability to engage in sales would inevitably predict his failure to engage in marketing.

There is, however, an intrinsic fallacy to this logic. Quite possibly, *different environments engage different people*. Rather than an absolute and inevitable condition firmly attached either to an employee’s personality or to his general environment, engagement could simply be the result of a “perfect match” between the employee and her work conditions. Concretely, the very introversion and originality that disengaged John, the salesman, could provide him with the ideal resources needed to write brilliant marketing pieces in the solitude of his office.

Conceptualizing engagement as a “match” issue seems to make sense if we consider once again Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) “Flow” theory. As we saw previously, “Flow” depends on a congruency between resources and personality. If our personality and preferences are “resources” then they will also determine the size and type of challenge we can comfortably absorb. For example, a study in the retail industry (Eisenberger, Jones, Stinglhamber, Shanok, & Randall, 2005) found that the high skill/challenge combination was more pleasurable to employees with high need for achievement. Others might prefer comfortable tasks and routine responsibilities.

As we discussed previously, jobs are embedded in organizational cultures and cultures support and are supported by organizational leaders. The challenges of a given job, therefore, depend not only on the design of the job itself but also on the employee’s leader and on the general organizational culture. Reasonably, different organizational environments or leadership styles could “match” various individual resources and needs. For instance, the same individual who would be happy and engaged in a free-spirited advertising agency might be miserable working in a bank. The key to success, therefore, might not lie in the search for Gubman’s (2004) elusive “missing person” (p. 42). Instead, those of us in the performance improvement business should make it our mission to constantly search for the missing *link* between like-minded individuals, jobs, organizational cultures, and leaders.

Performance Improvement Implications

As discussed earlier in this paper, individuals are unlikely to become engaged because someone told them they should. Engagement occurs naturally, when the conditions are right, when the leaders are inspiring, when individuals find the ideal place in which to apply their strengths. If this is true, company-wide lectures on “how we should all become engaged” are

unlikely to work. Instead, performance improvement and human resources professionals might consider the following interventions:

Educate the leaders. Leaders should understand (a) the importance of engagement, (b) the personal and business benefits of engagement, (c) their role as leaders inspiring engagement, (d) leadership styles most likely to enhance engagement and most especially (e) the importance of matching employees to areas in which they are more likely to be happy, engaged, and successful. In addition, leaders should understand environmental and personal conditions most likely to lead to burnout and disengagement. This understanding could help leaders create an environment more likely to engage *all* employees – including those who are anxious, non-resilient, non-assertive, and have poor self-esteem.

Select for engagement. If resources and challenges must be congruent for maximum engagement, then selecting the right people for the expected levels of challenge and opportunity within a certain job is key. For instance, a highly original and flexible individual could be very engaged in a creative and free-flowing position and disengaged in a structured and bureaucratic one. Review your selection procedures to make sure you are putting the right people in the right places.

Focus on career development. Help employees inventory their strengths and weaknesses. Personality and competency assessments could be particularly helpful. Regularly educate employees on various opportunities within the organization. Encourage employees to find a place within the organization where they can make the strongest contributions. Actively promote job openings internally – and make applications easy and risk-free.

Periodically review job descriptions. “Flow” is a dynamic concept: As resources increase (and experience is, by definition, a resource), the employee might crave higher level

challenges. Support employee career development efforts by reviewing job descriptions and allowing job enrichment, even *within* the same position.

Champion work-life balance. As revealed by Sonnentag's (2003) research, excessive workloads could prevent vital recovery processes. Beware of workaholism. Include wellness programs in your curricula.

Encourage relationships. Promote formal and informal opportunities for employees to get to know one another on a personal basis. Consider offering regular team building processes. Champion a culture of celebration and camaraderie.

Above all, remember that engagement is a complex topic and a challenging goal. An engagement-friendly culture values the diversity of talents employees bring to the table, respects individual needs, and inspires all employees to pursue a common and exciting vision of the future. Logically, engagement will *not* be impacted by a single training program, regardless of its quality. Enhancing engagement is a long-term proposition.

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