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The Personal Side of Engagement

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## THE PERSONAL SIDE OF ENGAGEMENT

### Introduction

*If we are truly interested in a personal connection to work, shouldn't we measure the person instead?*

Ed Gubman, 2004

We must bring the *person* to the engagement debate. This was the gist of the argument made by business consultant Ed Gubman (2004) in *From Engagement to Passion for Work: The Search for the Missing Person*. Gubman argued that current discussions on engagement involve two components: *where* the person works and *what* the person does. As an alternative, organizations should start focusing on *who* the person is.

Truly, William Kahn's (1990) landmark study on engagement did not focus on the *person*. Instead, Kahn sought to understand powerful psychological conditions that could "survive the gamut of individual differences" (p. 695). Kahn identified three such conditions: meaningfulness (the perceived "worth" of engaging at work), safety (how safe it is to be oneself at work), and availability of resources, both emotional and physical, to perform one's duties.

Engagement researchers, however, have acknowledged the potential impact of the *person* on engagement. First, Kahn (1990) argued that individual differences might influence the kinds of roles employees find engaging or disengaging as well as personal experiences of meaningfulness, safety, and availability of resources. Secondly, Schaufeli and Bakker (2003) described engagement as a relatively "persistent and pervasive affective-cognitive state" (p. 4). Such longer-term description of engagement seems to suggest at least some level of connection between engagement and the makeup of the individual.

This chapter addresses the personal side of engagement. Specifically, the relationship between engagement and the five-factor model of personality (FFM) is explored. The chapter

includes a) an introduction to the FFM; b) a review of Macey and Schneider's (2008) tri-dimensional model of engagement including trait, state, and behavioral components; c) a summary of recent research studies on personality and engagement and d) a discussion of existing findings, including practical implications, an integrated model of engagement, and topics for future research.

### The five factor model of personality

During the last decade, the five factor model (FFM) of personality has gained considerable support among researchers. The origins of the model are generally linked to the pioneer work of Gordon Allport on personality and linguistics. Allport was a Harvard professor and a personality pioneer who taught the first college level personality course in the United States (Owen, 1998). Arguing that natural languages were an excellent source of personality information, Allport issued a challenge to the psychological community: the search for the smallest number of "clusters" combining 18,000 trait-related words found in the Webster's Second International Dictionary (Saucier & Goldberg, 2003).

While the exact names attributed to each FFM trait may vary, most sources consulted (Howard & Howard, 2001a; Judge, Heller, & Mount, 2002; McCrae & Costa, 1997; Mount, Barrick, & Stewart, 1998) agreed on the following five traits: neuroticism (also referred to as need for stability and emotional stability), extraversion, openness to experiences (also called originality and intellect), agreeableness (also called accommodation) and conscientiousness (also called consolidation).

*Neuroticism* has to do with the individual's general tolerance for stress. Individuals who are high in neuroticism are more reactive than average and often report less satisfaction with life.

Conversely, those who are low in neuroticism tend to present more composed, resilient, and adaptable behaviors (Howard & Howard, 1995).

*Extraversion* represents a person's general sociability and tolerance for sensory stimulation (Howard & Howard, 2001a). Extraverts tend to be ambitious, assertive, adventuresome and gregarious (Walsh & Eggerth, 2005). Introverts, on the other hand, may be more reserved and comfortable with solitude (Howard & Howard, 1995).

*Openness to experiences* refers to an individual's general range of interests, comfort with change, and fascination with innovation. Individuals who score high in this trait tend to be original and take interest in a wide range of topics and theories. Those who score low, on the other hand, tend to present a more conservative worldview (Howard & Howard, 2001a).

*Agreeableness* relates to service orientation, harmony seeking, and the propensity to defer to others. Individuals who are high in agreeableness are known to be more courteous, good natured, cooperative, and caring. Individuals who are low in agreeableness tend to focus on their own needs and to be more competitive (Howard & Howard, 2001a).

Finally, *conscientiousness* (Howard & Howard, 2001a) relates to methodicalness and discipline. Individuals who are high in conscientiousness tend to be careful, thorough, organized, and focused (Walsh & Eggerth, 2005). On the other hand, those low in conscientiousness may be more spontaneous and "free flowing" (Howard & Howard, 2001a).

Three characteristics of the five factors are noteworthy. First, the factors are thought to be quasi normally distributed (McCrae, 2006). In other words, the distribution of any given trait approximately follows a normal curve, where most people score somewhere in the middle between two extremes. Secondly, there seems to be a strong biological/genetic basis for the five factors (McCrae, Costa, Ostendorf, Angleitner, Hrebickova, & Avia, 2000). Finally, the five

factors are believed to be *stable*. A person's personality is not expected to change significantly during adult years. Indeed, even though some variation is to be expected, personality traits could provide a "core of consistency" (Matthews, Deary, & Whiteman, 2003, p. 3) that influences the way one responds to *most* situations one encounters.

In particular, this last characteristic of FFM traits – stability – may impact our ability to connect personality and engagement. Logically, personality traits can only bear a relationship with a reasonably *stable* engagement. If, as Kahn (1990) suggested, engagement varies according to the "momentary ebbs and flows" (p. 693) of self-in-role, a relationship between engagement and personality is unlikely. A possible solution to this dilemma is reviewed next.

#### Macey & Schneider's tri-dimensional model of engagement

While Kahn (1990) suggested that individuals frequently "calibrate" their levels of engagement at work (thus engaging or disengaging according to their perceptions of meaningfulness, safety, and availability of resources) other researchers (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003) positioned engagement as a longer-term *state of mind*. Indeed, Schaufeli and Bakker argued that "rather than a momentary and specific state, engagement refers to a more persistent and pervasive affective-cognitive state that is not focused on any particular object, event, individual, or behavior" (p. 4-5).

Recently, Macey and Schneider (2008) proposed a tri-dimensional model of engagement that might reconcile Kahn's (1990) "momentary" and Schaufeli and Bakker's (2003) "persistent" portrayals of engagement. Macey and Schneider's model included three engagement components: behaviors, state, and traits.

First, engaged individuals demonstrate certain visible *behaviors*. These behaviors surpass the "typical" expectations for a professional role. For instance, a teacher might spend

extra time tutoring students and a customer service agent may help a customer solve a personal problem.

Secondly, these engaged behaviors may result from a “state” of engagement. The person who goes “above and beyond” at work may do so because of general and longer-term feelings of energy, enthusiasm, and pride. Macey and Schneider (2008) proposed that the “state” of engagement is a complex combination of constructs such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, job involvement, and empowerment.

Thirdly, certain individuals could have a “disposition” or “tendency” towards feelings of engagement. This tendency increases the likelihood of a longer-term state of engagement in these individuals. Macey and Schneider (2008) connected the tendency to engage to the following engagement traits: conscientiousness, proactivity, positive affect, and an “autotelic personality” (Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 2002). Conscientiousness, an FFM trait, was defined previously in this chapter. Following are possible connections between the other listed traits and the FFM.

*Proactivity* means a “general tendency to create or influence the work environment” (Macey & Schneider, 2008, p. 20). Proactive individuals take initiative and persevere until they are able to improve their environment (Bateman & Crant, 1993). Major, Turner, and Fletcher’s (2006) study on the proactive personality found significant correlations between proactivity and four of the FFM traits. Proactivity correlated positively with conscientiousness, extraversion, and openness to experience and correlated negatively with neuroticism.

Positive affect (PA) is the “degree to which an individual feels enthusiastic, active, and alert” (Rich, 2006, p. 15). PA has been connected to pleasant experiences and interpersonal satisfaction. Watson and Clark (1992) found that PA correlated positively with

conscientiousness, extraversion, openness to experience, and agreeableness, and negatively with neuroticism.

Finally, the “autotelic personality” combines higher than average levels of curiosity, interest in life, and perseverance (Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 2002). *Curiosity* related positively to openness to experience and conscientiousness and *perseverance* related positively to conscientiousness and negatively to neuroticism (Johnson & Ostendorf, 1993).

Logically, connections between personality and engagement lie primarily in “trait” engagement. After all, a psychological state – while relatively durable – is still time-bound (Macey & Schneider, 2008). A trait, on the other hand, is expected to endure across situations. The findings of three studies investigating personality and engagement are reviewed in the following section.

#### Personality and engagement: A research review and leadership implications

Three studies recently connected engagement and personality: Langelaan, Bakker, Van Doornen, & Schaufeli’s (2004) study on personality, temperament, burnout, and engagement; Rich’s (2006) validation study for the development of a new job engagement scale; and my own study (Wildermuth, 2008) contrasting engagement and the FFM.

Langelaan and colleagues (2004) conducted the first study in Holland. The sample included 572 Dutch employees from various organizations and professional backgrounds (111 blue collar workers, 338 managers from a Telecom organization, and 123 participants at a seminar on “positive thinking”). Participants completed the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003) to assess engagement and Costa and McCrae’s (1997) NEO inventory to test the FFM. The researchers examined two engagement components: vigor and dedication. Vigor meant energy, resilience, and perseverance. For instance, items measuring

vigor included “When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work” and “I can continue working for very long periods of time” (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003, p. 5). Dedication meant a sense of pride and enthusiasm. Items measuring dedication included “I find the work that I do full of meaning and purpose” and “my job inspires me” (p. 5). Likewise, the researchers measured two FFM traits: neuroticism and extraversion.

The results revealed significant relationships between engagement (characterized by high vigor and high dedication) and the two analyzed personality traits. First, vigor correlated negatively with neuroticism ( $r = -0.48$ ) and positively with extraversion ( $r = 0.44$ ). Secondly, dedication correlated negatively with neuroticism ( $r = -0.40$ ) and positively with extraversion ( $r = 0.37$ ). The researchers were able to accurately classify 84.4% of the sample as engaged (high vigor and high dedication) or non-engaged (low vigor and low dedication) according to scores in extraversion and neuroticism.

Bruce Rich (2006) conducted the second study as part of his dissertation at the University of Florida. Rich’s study involved 245 Northern-California fire fighters. The researcher’s primary objective was to develop and validate a new job engagement scale measuring Kahn’s (1990) physical, emotional, and cognitive engagement components.

The results supported a positive correlation between conscientiousness and engagement ( $r = 0.59$ ). The researcher concluded that “certain types of individuals are more likely to become engaged in their work role than others” (p. 126) and recommended that organizations “assess an applicant’s self evaluations as well as conscientiousness in order to select individuals who have a general proclivity for job engagement” (p. 130).

Finally, I recently investigated relationships between engagement and FFM traits (Wildermuth, 2008). My sample included 292 non-managerial professional and paraprofessional

employees from three social service agencies in the Midwest of the United States. Two of the agencies provided various health and social services to individuals with developmental challenges. The third agency was a faith based organization. Respondents received a survey combining a shortened version of the WorkPlace Big Five Profile™ (Howard & Howard, 2001b) and Bruce Rich's (2006) Job Engagement Survey. The WorkPlace Big Five Profile™ is a FFM instrument designed for applications in the workplace. The short version of the instrument – which I used – includes 48 items. All five FFM traits were measured.

The results supported significant correlations between three FFM traits and engagement: neuroticism, extraversion, and conscientiousness. The correlations, however, were low (neuroticism,  $r = -0.19$ ; extraversion,  $r = 0.30$ ; conscientiousness,  $r = 0.16$ ).

The study data analysis also included a multiple regression and a series of two-way ANOVAS. The multiple regression analysis revealed an overall predictive model of engagement including extraversion and conscientiousness. These two traits, combined, affected nine percent of the variability in engagement. Results from the ANOVAS supported interactions between two personality traits and job rank: extraversion and agreeableness. Paraprofessionals were more engaged when their extraversion scores were high and their agreeableness was low. Professionals were more engaged when their extraversion was high and their agreeableness was medium. Effect sizes, however, were low for both extraversion and agreeableness ( $\eta^2 = 0.04$ ).

To summarize, research results so far support a low to modest relationship between FFM traits and engagement. The following section discusses these findings, suggests practical implications, offers a model of engagement, and recommends topics for further research.

## Discussion and future directions

The results from the reviewed engagement studies (Langelaan et al., 2004; Rich, 2006; Wildermuth, 2008) supported significant negative relationships between neuroticism and engagement and significant positive relationships between extraversion / conscientiousness and engagement. Following are discussions on the possible impact of each personality trait on engagement and implications for leaders.

### *Extraversion and engagement*

*Extraversion* had a low or modest correlation to engagement in two of the studies described (Langelaan et al., 2004; Wildermuth, 2008). The following are possible explanations.

First, extraverted individuals are naturally energetic, enthusiastic, and action-oriented (Howard & Howard, 2001a). These characteristics logically tie to physical and emotional components of engagement. After all, physical engagement relates to energy and emotional engagement relates to enthusiasm (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003). For instance, two of the items of the UWES are “at work, I feel bursting with energy” and “I am enthusiastic about my job” (p. 5).

Secondly, extraverts’ sociability and relationship building abilities could positively impact all three psychological conditions of engagement: meaningfulness, safety, and the availability of resources (Kahn, 1990). By definition, extraverts are more comfortable with social interactions *in general*. Extraverted workers might thus invite and receive feedback that is more positive and supportive from colleagues and clients. The highly social world of work, therefore, could simply be more comfortable for extraverts.

What may be most important for leaders is not the simple realization that the naturally enthusiastic and energetic extraverts may be, predictably, more enthusiastic and energetic at work. Rather, leaders may need to understand why and how extraversion impacts engagement

and use such understanding to engage *introverts*. For instance, leaders may provide educational opportunities for all employees on personality differences, encourage networking in ways that are more comfortable for employees who are less sociable and gregarious (via smaller or quieter opportunities for networking, small-group meetings, and mentoring partnerships), and promote a culture of support and recognition for *all* employees. Additionally, leaders may pay special attention to the importance of team and relationship building activities. While extraverts may forge relationships on their own, introverts may need “special nudging” or help.

#### *Neuroticism and engagement*

*Neuroticism* correlated negatively to engagement in two of the studies (Langelaan et al., 2004; Wildermuth, 2008). A possible explanation could lie in the feelings of self consciousness and worry (Howard & Howard, 2001c) found in individuals high in neuroticism. Indeed, Langelaan et al (2004) suggested that “employees high in N perceive their work environment as more threatening” (p. 529). Such perception could reduce a person’s feelings of safety and drain his or her emotional resources.

Two types of leadership interventions might benefit the engagement of high neuroticism employees. First, leaders could alleviate these employees’ feelings of self consciousness and anxiety by increasing their own levels of tact (especially during performance appraisal processes and feedback sessions). Intensifying positive feedback and enhancing recognition processes might be helpful. Secondly, employees higher in neuroticism may have less tolerance for stress. Leaders should pay special attention to times of high turmoil, change, or instability in the workplace. Additionally, leaders should promote a safe work environment and take action to prevent workplace harassment and bullying.

### *Conscientiousness and engagement*

*Conscientiousness* correlated significantly with engagement in two of the studies (Rich, 2006; Wildermuth, 2008). Here is a plausible explanation: Since high conscientiousness individuals tend to be more focused and goal-oriented, they may simply find it easier to succeed. This could enhance their perception of availability of resources. Additionally, conscientiousness is tied to higher levels of persistence in the face of obstacles (Johnson & Ostendorf, 1993). Thus, high conscientiousness employees might be more successful in changing their environment to fit their needs.

Indeed, conscientiousness bears ties to professional success (Judge, Higgins, Thoresen, & Barrick, 1999). Individuals high in conscientiousness may find it easier to plan their work days, follow up on agreed upon actions, and focus on objectives. Low conscientiousness, however, may generate greater ease in multi tasking (Howard & Howard, 2001b). Thus, individuals lower in conscientiousness might find it more comfortable to work in occupations requiring constant switches between activities. Leaders must understand this natural tendency and strive to distribute job responsibilities and requirements accordingly.

### *Agreeableness, openness to experiences, and engagement*

Only one of the three studies described (Wildermuth, 2008) investigated relationships between *all five* traits and engagement. This study did not identify significant correlations between engagement and openness to experience or agreeableness. Further, a multiple regression revealed only two traits composing an overall predictive model of engagement: extraversion and conscientiousness.

The absence of correlations between agreeableness and engagement was intriguing given the population analyzed in my study (human services professionals and paraprofessionals). After

all, high agreeableness individuals tend to be more adaptable to the needs of others and tender-hearted (Howard & Howard, 2001b).

Agreeableness did, indeed, interact with job rank to impact the engagement of professionals and paraprofessionals. The highest engagement means for professionals were found in the medium agreeableness level. Paraprofessionals, however, seemed to benefit from a *lower* score in agreeableness.

Here is a possible explanation for these results. A “professional” status could convey higher status and power. Professionals might find it easier to have their needs met. A “softer” nature consistent with mid-range scores in agreeableness could help professionals build ties with colleagues and better relate to clients. Paraprofessionals, on the other hand, have less status and power. Engaged paraprofessionals may have thus learned to negotiate with their environment and fight for what they need. This hypothesis would require additional testing and research.

Openness to experience did not correlate with engagement in my study. Further, this trait was not a significant predictor of engagement (i.e., was not part of the multiple regression formula) and did not interact with job rank to benefit engagement.

I had expected openness to experience to significantly correlate with engagement for two main reasons. First, various authors (Kahn, 1990; Macey & Schneider, 2008) connected engagement and innovation. For instance, Kahn (1990) argued that those who are disengaged “act as custodians rather than innovators” (p. 702) for the role they occupy. Also, Macey and Schneider (2008) suggested that engaged employees do not simply work *more* – they work *differently*, “initiating or fostering change” (Macey & Schneider, 2008, p. 18). Both innovation and comfort with change are connected to openness to experience (Howard & Howard, 2001b).

The evidence, however, is insufficient to rule out relationships between openness to experiences and engagement. Possibly, human services professionals within a government agency need a more practical nature to perform their duties. Thus, connections between openness to experiences and engagement could still be identified within other occupations.

The following section connects personality, Kahn's (1990) psychological conditions of engagement, additional antecedents of engagement, and Macey and Schneider's (2008) tri-dimensional engagement model.

#### *An integrated model of engagement*

Even though current evidence supports significant relationships between certain personality traits and engagement, these relationships were not very strong. Four possible explanations emerge.

First, various situational antecedents – consisting of organizational and job-related characteristics – could *also* support or hinder engagement. Examples include job variety and wholeness (Hackman, Oldham, Janson, & Purdy, 1975); organizational support (Saks, 2006); the availability of rewards and recognition (Koyuncu, Burke, & Fiksenbaum, 2006); and the authenticity of the leader (Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004).

Secondly, personality could impact individual perceptions of meaningfulness, safety, and availability within a given situation. For instance, the same situation may be perceived by a calm individual as safe and by a nervous individual as unsafe.

Thirdly, personality may influence a person's decision to engage or disengage. For instance, someone who is calm, resilient, energetic and action-oriented may choose to engage *in spite of* a perception of lack of meaningfulness or safety.

Fourthly, personality traits could help individuals *change* a situation. For instance, someone who is action and goal oriented (high in conscientiousness and extraversion) could interact with an environment and make it more engaging. This view is consistent with Macey and Schneider's (2008) inclusion of "proactivity" amongst engagement traits.

Thus, a complex interaction of personality and several other environmental and job antecedents could impact employees' state of engagement and subsequent engaged behaviors. Figure 1 offers an integrated model of engagement connecting the situation experienced by the employee (including organizational and job characteristics) personality traits, Kahn's (1990) psychological conditions of engagement (meaningfulness, safety, and availability), and Macey and Schneider's (2008) state of engagement and engagement behaviors.

#### *Future directions*

Further research is needed to analyze relationships between engagement and personality across situations and professional fields. In particular, research is needed to a) investigate connections between personality traits and Kahn's (1990) psychological antecedents of engagement; b) refine and test the integrated model of engagement offered; and c) explore connections between openness to experience, agreeableness, and engagement. In particular, qualitative studies investigating the *processes* through which personality impacts engagement might be valuable.

While future studies may refine the exact way in which personality traits influence employee engagement, there seems to be some support for the notion that personality matters. Specifically, employees who are extraverted, calm, and focused may have an "edge" in the search for engagement.

This “edge,” however, is slight. The relationships identified so far between personality and engagement still leave plenty of room for uncertainty. It may be premature, therefore, to start “selecting for passion” (Gubman, 2004, p. 44). For practical purposes, leaders need to understand that individuals of various personalities may still be engaged or disengaged.

The benefit of the personality-engagement research, however, may not lie in identifying those who are “born to be engaged” for selection purposes. Instead, personality-engagement research may help leaders promote an environment where *all* employees are free to express their true identities and find strong meaning, regardless of their personality traits.

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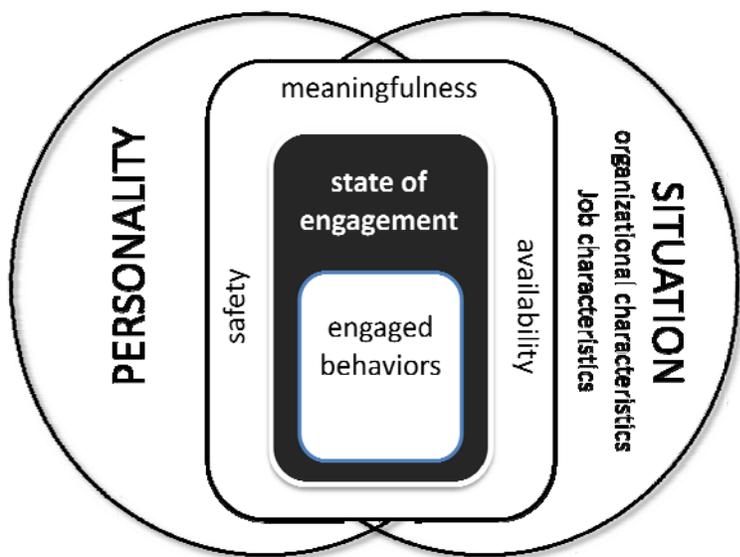


Figure 1. An Integrated Model of Engagement