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Leveraging Employee Engagement: The Practical Implications

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The focus of this commentary is on the practical significance of employee engagement for organizational leaders. We examine why employee engagement has garnered so much attention from managers and the difficulties associated with operationalizing the construct appropriately in applied settings. We also provide some suggestions for future directions in applied engagement research.

Why Engagement Matters to Managers

Organizational researchers have long recognized that organizations cannot function through purely contractual relationships with employees. The difficulty of specifying contracts covering all possible contingencies is a common explanation for the reliance on organizations, rather than markets, to carry out various activities (Williamson, 1975). By tying employers and employees together in ongoing employment relationships, organizations are presumed to align the interests of individuals with those of the firm such that employees can be counted on to act more frequently in ways that are consistent with corporate objectives.

In the early 20th century, Chester Barnard, Elton Mayo, and others similarly emphasized that organizations require *cooperation* from employees rather than mere compliance. Perfunctory adherence to minimal role requirements is likely to have dysfunctional consequences in most settings. Unionized employees who "work to rule" in contract disputes, for instance, can quickly bring organizations to their knees. As a consequence, fostering high (or even adequate) individual performance necessarily requires attending to employees' motivations as well as their behaviors.

In our view, the engagement construct has captured the attention of managers insofar as it raises the notion of cooperation to a higher level, made all the more important in the context of growing competitive pressures and more rapid change. Although cooperation is required and to some extent, expected of all employees, engagement, as Macey and Schneider (2008) point out, involves going *above and beyond* the typical in-role performance. In that sense, engagement holds out to organizational leaders the prospect of increasing productivity (i.e., getting more output from a finite set of human capital resources). In an environment of increasing global competition, where organizations are running "leaner" and forced to do more with less, tapping into the discretionary effort offered by engaged employees becomes all the more imperative for success in the marketplace. In other words, *state engagement*, as Macey and Schneider define, is essential in competitive environments in which margins are pressured and productivity is critical, insofar as

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it is associated with "feelings of persistence, vigor, energy, dedication, absorption, enthusiasm, alertness, and pride" on the part of employees (p. 24).

Interest in engagement is also fostered by the ever-increasing pace of change in modern organizations. In fast-changing environments, it becomes all the more difficult to precisely specify roles and responsibilities across a diverse set of jobs. To the extent that employees at all levels are likely to be faced more frequently with unanticipated and ambiguous decision-making situations, organizations have to count on employees to act in ways consistent with organizational objectives based on their understanding of, and alignment with, organizational standards, cultures, and values. In Macey and Schneider's terms, the demands of change require higher levels of *behavioral engagement* from employees, insofar as behavioral understandings of engagement emphasize the proactive direction of personal initiative in ways that are "adaptive" from the perspective of the organization.

A final push for the modern emphasis on engagement in organizations comes from employees themselves. Although the personality attributes that Macey and Schneider discuss as contributing to *trait engagement* (e.g., positive affectivity, conscientiousness, proactive and autotelic personalities) may lead some employees to be more inclined to evidence engagement in the workplace, the redefinition of the social contract surrounding the employment relationship in organizations across industries makes engagement a more pressing concern for many individuals. As the old loyalty-for-security bargain has been cast aside, individuals and organizations are more tenuously connected. Whereas careers were once defined by the steady movement over a period of time through a hierarchy of jobs in a single organization, today individuals are increasingly cobbling together careers that involve a series of moves across organizational boundaries. In charge of their own work paths—and the definition of career success—more and more employees are looking for environments where they can be engaged and feel that they are contributing in a positive way to something larger than themselves.

Challenges in Operationalizing Engagement in Applied Settings

For better or worse, we view definitions of *engagement* used by consulting firms and human resources (HR) practitioners to be more consistent than Macey and Schneider acknowledge. Generally speaking, consulting firms focused on employee engagement view the concept as encompassing, in some combination, *affective commitment* (e.g., pride in the organization, willingness to recommend the organization as an employer), *continuance commitment* (e.g., intentions to remain with the organization), and *discretionary effort* (e.g., feeling inspired by the organization, being willing to go above and beyond formal role requirements). Thus, whereas the academic literature as reviewed by Macey and Schneider generally references engagement with work and job roles, applied frameworks tend instead to emphasize engagement with *the organization*.

Although among HR professionals and consultants there tends to be broad conceptual agreement as to what the concept of employee engagement entails, these practitioners generally do not agree with respect to how the concept should be operationalized and measured. In looking across organizations and the measures used to assess employee engagement, one sees a wide variety of survey items and other metrics in use. In other words, although practitioners may concur on what employee engagement is, they are often measuring very different things. Some of these indicators may indeed capture employee engagement. Others, however, most likely do not.

Accordingly, although further clarity regarding the concept and definition of *employee engagement* is likely to be useful from a practitioner perspective, still more important would be a more thorough debate regarding how to effectively operationalize the concept. Because commonly held definitions of *engagement* among practitioners are similar and relatively easy to understand,

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many HR specialists may be led to believe that operationalizing engagement should be equally straightforward. However, creating psychometrically sound measures of engagement is not an easy task, and many measures created, although relatively reliable, are not likely to be valid. The unfortunate consequence is that those charged with understanding and acting on employee engagement metrics (e.g., through engagement-focused employee surveys) risk focusing limited organizational resources in areas where the impact on engagement is likely to be significantly less than what it could or should be. A particular challenge in operationalizing employee engagement in applied settings stems from the fact that because a positive value is widely assigned to engagement by organizations and employees alike (e.g., as a marker of a "good" or "valuable" contributor), individual responses to engagement-focused survey questions are likely to suffer from social desirability biases unless the items are carefully constructed and tested.

Future Directions in Applied Engagement Research

Despite the conceptual and measurement challenges associated with leveraging the concept of employee engagement, there is an increasing body of research available to confirm the impact of employee attitudes generally, and employee engagement specifically, on organizational performance. From the practitioner perspective, however, we would suggest two important future directions for engagement research. First, what are the consequences of a lack of engagement? And second, are the individual and organizational outcomes resulting from high levels of engagement always positive?

As Macey and Schneider note in passing, folk theories of engagement commonly regard the concept as the opposite of disengagement (p. 4). Although much attention has been paid to defining and understanding what engagement entails in organizations and its impact on individuals and organizations, much less conceptual and operational energy has been devoted to specifying what a lack of engagement involves. Is the opposite of engagement simply a lack of positive energy toward role tasks or the organization itself? Or should the continuum more appropriately be viewed as extending from engagement to the absence of engagement to *active disengagement*, where employees may be investing effort in a deliberate attempt to undermine the organization and its objectives? Engagement measures currently in use are not well suited to identify employees who may be actively disengaged. And as a result, applied studies are not well positioned to determine the antecedents and consequences of negative forms of employee motivation.

Similarly, because a positive value is typically assigned to employee engagement, it is generally always regarded everywhere as a good thing for individuals and organizations. But are there some circumstances under which high levels of engagement lead to negative outcomes? Britt (2003) has, for instance, explored the negative consequences of high levels of engagement where individuals face significant challenges to getting their jobs done effectively. In a survey of U.S. Army rangers, Britt found, not surprisingly, that obstacles to high performance, such as work overload, resulted in lower levels of morale and job satisfaction. Notably, however, these effects were greatest for the most highly engaged soldiers. Indeed, "the most committed and personally invested rangers, the ones who ranked work-relevant values as the most important, ranked morale and job satisfaction lower in the face of insurmountable impediments. Simply put, the rangers who cared most about their work were the most demoralized when they were thwarted from doing their best" (p. 16). Along with the negative consequences of a lack of support for the motivation of highly engaged individuals, Britt also points to the likelihood of increased turnover. "For these high performers," he argues, "factors they can't control—role ambiguity, inadequate resources, and overwork itself—can hinder their best work and drive them to seek jobs elsewhere. The ones

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who stay behind may well be the ones who just don't care" (p. 17).

Conclusion

Macey and Schneider's article is timely, as employee engagement increasingly resonates with the business imperatives of organizational leaders. As a relatively new construct, common frameworks for understanding what engagement entails (and what it does not) are necessary to ensure that studies of its antecedents and consequences are comparable and complementary. To monitor and manage levels of engagement in the workplace, however, practitioners would benefit from better developed measures of engagement and a more complete understanding of its implications along the full spectrum from active engagement to active disengagement.

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