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Has engagement had its day: What's next and does it matter?

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There is little doubt that employee engagement has been one of, if not *the*, 'hot' HR concept of the new millennium. Certainly during the first decade, internet searches yielded thousands of links, many to the webpages of consulting companies promoting the benefits of an engaged workforce and offering strategies to achieve it. Sessions on engagement at many of the annual conventions I attended (for example, the *Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology* and the *Academy of Management*), and I'm sure many that I did not, were filled to capacity and often overflowing into the hallways. Organizations everywhere began to replace their existing employee surveys with 'engagement surveys.' There continues to be interest in employee engagement today (it continues to be a popular internet search term), but the last few conferences I attended had fewer sessions on engagement and the overflow crowds have disappeared. Discussions with HR professionals provide subtle hints that engagement might be reaching its 'best before date.' Hence the questions posed in the title of this article.

The subtle hints I described above suggest that the answer to the first question, 'has engagement had its day,' might be a qualified 'yes' (I will elaborate on the qualification later). Unfortunately, it is too early to answer the 'what's next' question. There are suggestions that it might be 'passion' or perhaps one of the concepts being popularized by the positive psychology and positive organization scholarship movements such as 'thriving' or 'flourishing.' It is the third question, 'does it matter,' that I will make the main focus of this article. As a starting point, I will look back briefly to the state of affairs that existed before engagement took the spotlight. By considering how and why attention shifted in the past from one key concept to another we get some insight into what might happen if and when the next big shift takes place.

A BIT OF HISTORY

This special issue of *Organizational Dynamics* is about employee engagement, but it is interesting to speculate on what it would have been in days gone by. For example, were it the 1930s or 40s at the height of the Human Relations Movement, the focus might have been on *job satisfaction* and the discussion would have centered on the benefits of monitoring and managing employees' satisfaction, or morale, with the belief that 'happy workers are productive workers.' In the 1970s and 80s, the attention would have shifted to *organizational commitment* and its role in winning the 'war for talent.' The shift in focus from job satisfaction to organizational commitment was prompted in part by somewhat disappointing research findings regarding the strength of the relation between job satisfaction and performance, but also by recognition that it is organizations that employees leave, possibly to do the same job with a competitor.

In the new millennium, the focus shifted again, this time to employee engagement. Among the reasons for this latest shift was concern about the relevance of commitment in an era of continuous change. Organizations, recognizing their need to be adaptable, placed less emphasis on establishing long-term relationships with employees and more emphasis on productivity and efficiency. At the same time, the nature of work was changing, requiring higher levels of knowledge, skill, and education, and the employees qualified to do this work were also changing. Among other things, they were demanding higher quality jobs that afforded opportunities for the growth and development needed to self-manage their careers and enhance their employability. Under such conditions, having employees who are engaged in their work while they are there is arguably more important than establishing a long-term commitment.

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As this brief history illustrates, there were certainly reasons for the transitions from a focus on job satisfaction to organizational commitment to employee engagement. However, there are also similarities in the concepts, including the fact that each reflects a general positive orientation to work that is likely to have benefits for employee well-being and their contributions to organizational effectiveness. So in some ways the concepts, and the interest in them, are different, but in other ways they are the same. To address these similarities and differences, and whether they matter, I will focus primarily on two concepts, *organizational commitment* and *work engagement*; I will continue to include *job satisfaction* in later discussion where relevant, but in the interest of space I will not elaborate here on what it is and why it is important.

WHAT IS ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

As noted earlier, interest in employees' commitment to their organizations (referred to as organizational commitment) was stimulated in the 1970s and 80s primarily by its implications for retention. Employees might be satisfied with their jobs, but are they 'committed' to doing those jobs with their current employer? Interest in commitment at the time was not restricted to organizational scientists; rather it was being investigated in a variety of contexts by scholars in various disciplines (for example, philosophy, sociology, social psychology). Not surprisingly, there were many different opinions about what commitment meant and why it might be important. Indeed, when my doctoral student and now colleague, Natalie Allen, and I first began to study commitment in the 1980s, we were struck by the many different applications of the term, not only in academic circles, but in everyday life. Politicians make commitments to voters, marketers make commitments to consumers, and people make commitments to one another, often through the bonds of matrimony. Taking the latter as just one example, many individuals commit to their partners out of love and the desire to remain together 'until death do us part.'

However, others may commit to a relationship (or become committed over time) out of social or religious obligation or to obtain/retain the benefits associated with that relationship (e.g., social status; economic security). What is common to these commitments is the implied continuation of the relationship, and this is true of all commitments, including organizational commitment. The reason that commitments are important is because they make the future more predictable. We presumably want commitment from our partners if we are going to make personal investments in our relationships. Similarly, organizations want commitment from their employees if they are going to make investments in their training and development. Consequently, it is not surprising that when retention became a key issue in the 1970s and 80s, commitment was seen as a potential solution.

Of course organizations want more than retention, they also want their employees to perform effectively and be good corporate citizens, and this is where the different motives underlying a commitment become important. In our *Three Component Model* (TCM) of commitment, Natalie Allen and I noted that commitment to any entity or course of

action can be accompanied by three distinct mindsets: desire, obligation, or cost. That is, individuals can remain in a relationship or persist in a course of action because they *want to*, feel they *ought to*, or believe they *have to*. Importantly, mindset matters! As most readers would expect, and as the data show, the quality of the relationship or behaviors accompanying a commitment are greater when based on desire than on obligation or cost. In research pertaining to organizational commitment, commitment based on a desire to remain is typically referred to as affective, or emotional, commitment. *Affective organizational commitment* has consistently been found to relate positively with retention, job performance, citizenship behavior and employee health and well-being.

Of the remaining mindsets, cost-based commitment has been associated with the least desirable, and sometimes detrimental, outcomes. Employees who are committed to remain primarily to avoid the cost of leaving tend to do what is required of them, but little more. They also experience greater stress, perhaps due in part to the loss of control they experience in their work lives. It is worth noting, however, that some recent research suggests that the most positive outcomes, for both employers and their employees, derive from commitments reflecting the combination of desire, obligation, and cost. In this case, employees want to do what they believe to be the right thing and recognize that there may be undesirable costs associated with failing to follow through ("I love my spouse (this organization) and see it as my duty to meet his/her (its) needs because the consequences of failing to do so would be detrimental to us both"). Nevertheless, because affective organizational commitment has received the most attention to date, and has been implicated most often in the comparison with engagement, I will make it the focus in much of the following discussion.

Although concerns about organizational commitment began to wane in the 1990s as trends toward downsizing, outsourcing, and contract work made employer/employee relationships more tenuous, it did not disappear. Indeed, organizations continue to compete for talent and, once attracted, want to retain the best and brightest. Moreover, even if they do not want, or cannot expect, employees to commit to a long-term relationship, they still want commitment to policies, projects, and goals that are essential to their effectiveness. There is a large body of evidence demonstrating that affective commitments to supervisors, teams, customers, projects, change initiatives, and goals are positively associated with desirable outcomes. So employee commitment, including commitment to the organization, is still relevant, even if it has been replaced by engagement as the primary tool in the HR consultant's toolbox. Interestingly, it is also one of the key concepts addressed by engagement scholars in their efforts to demonstrate the uniqueness, and unique contributions, of work engagement. I will return to the issue of uniqueness later, after a brief discussion of the meaning of engagement.

WHAT IS ENGAGEMENT AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Like commitment, engagement has been defined and measured in a variety of ways. Not only is there little consensus

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