The potential role of mindsets in unleashing employee engagement☆

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ABSTRACT

Engaged employees work vigorously, feeling dedicated and mentally absorbed in their work. Much is known about the kinds of jobs and work environments that stimulate employee engagement, yet levels of disengagement remain high in many organizations. To provide fresh insights into how to increase engagement, we draw on theory and research in social, educational, and organizational psychology to illuminate how mindsets are a personal resource that may influence employees' engagement via their enthusiasm for development, construal of effort, focus of attention, perception of setbacks, and interpersonal interactions. We outline several avenues for future research, as well as practical implications for organizational, managerial, and individual-level initiatives for increasing engagement via supporting employees in adopting and sustaining a growth mindset with regard to the challenges they encounter at work.

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> (No) company, small or large, can win over the long run without energized employees … That is why you need to (be concerned with) levels of employee engagement.
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> [- Welch and Welch (2006, p. 126)]

1. Introduction

According to Gallup's, 2013 142-country study on the *State of the Global Workplace*, only 13% of employees worldwide report that they are engaged at work. In contrast, 63% of employees are not engaged and another 24% are actively disengaged. While some (e.g., Zenger, 2013) question the massive prevalence of disengagement reported by Gallup, given that engaged employees are a key ingredient for a productive workforce (Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011; Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002), fresh avenues for understanding and increasing engagement are a topic of enduring interest to human resource management scholars and practitioners alike.

Engagement is a fulfilling psychological state characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption in one's work[1] (Macey & Schneider, 2008; Schaufeli et al., 2002). When employees are engaged, they experience their work as something to which they really

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[1] Engagement has also been conceptualized as both a trait and a behavior (Macey & Schneider, 2008). Given that state engagement is thought to precede behavioral engagement (Macey & Schneider, 2008) and can better explain within-person fluctuations in engagement than a dispositional approach (Dalal, Brummel, Wee, & Thomas, 2008), numerous leading scholars (Griffin, Parker, & Neal, 2008; Harter & Schmidt, 2008; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002) have argued that engagement is most usefully and appropriately conceptualized as a state. This paper thus focuses on the potential role of mindsets in state engagement.

want to devote time and vigorous effort; as a significant and meaningful pursuit to which they feel genuinely dedicated; and as sufficiently absorbing to concentrate their full attention. Engaged employees harness themselves to what they are doing by fully investing their heads, hearts, and hands in performing their role (Rich, Lepine, & Crawford, 2010).

In his pioneering statement about the nature of engagement, Kahn (1990) suggested that people are emotionally and cognitively engaged when they know what is expected of them, have what they need to do their work, have opportunities to feel an impact and fulfillment in their work, perceive that they are part of something significant with coworkers whom they trust, and have chances to improve and develop themselves and others. Disengaged employees just go through the motions. Uninspired role performances result from individuals withholding their full effort, attention, and emotional investment in their work. Distractions reduce mental and behavioral focus. By acting in a perfunctory manner, people's true identities, thoughts, and feelings are not manifest in their work. Emotional connections with others (e.g., customers, clients, colleagues) are diluted or severed in the process (Kahn, 1990). Alternatively, when employees are engaged, resulting motivation, proactivity, and empathy – manifest through both in-role and extra-role performance (Salanova & Schaufeli, 2008) – can yield improvements in learning, profits, sales, customer ratings, accidents, and turnover (Christian et al., 2011; Harter et al., 2002; Salanova, Agut, & Peiró, 2005).

Following the seminal work of Kahn (1990) and Schaufeli et al. (2002), a substantial literature has evolved regarding the antecedents of engagement. To complement this literature, this paper aims to explain how employees' engagement may also depend upon their mindsets about the plasticity of the abilities required for the task at hand (Dweck, 1986, 1999, 2006).

We begin by briefly reviewing the hallmarks and antecedents of employee engagement, before outlining the nature and sources of mindsets. Next we illuminate how employees' mindsets may affect whether they approach their work with energy and focus that signifies engagement, or with the ambivalence, anxiety, and risk avoidance indicative of disengagement (Kahn, 1990). We then suggest a range of avenues for future research regarding how mindsets may interact with other antecedents of engagement. We conclude by responding to the call by leading human resource management scholars (e.g., Cascio, 2008; Latham, 2012; Rynes, Giluk, & Brown, 2007) for concrete statements about precisely how basic research findings might be applied to address important practical challenges within the workplace. Specifically, we show how organizations, managers, and employees can foster the type of mindset that likely facilitates employee engagement.

2. Hallmarks of employee engagement

Grounded theorizing by Kahn (1990) revealed that moments of personal engagement stem from work contexts viewed as psychologically meaningful and safe, as well as those that enable psychological availability (see also May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004). *Psychological meaningfulness* is experienced when people feel worthwhile, useful, and valuable. Such feelings result from jobs involving challenge, variety, creativity and autonomy, work roles that provide people with attractive identities and status, as well as interpersonal interactions that promote dignity, self-appreciation, and a sense of making a positive difference (cf. Grant, 2007).

Psychological safety is marked by people sensing that they can express and devote themselves without fear of negative consequences to their self-image, status, or career (Kahn, 1990). Psychological safety results from trusting relationships (especially with superiors), well-defined roles and expectations that clarify the bounds for safely expressing oneself, and sensing that failed initiatives are more likely to be occasions for learning than strife. In lieu of such protective boundaries, people can feel unsafe and thus guard themselves by withdrawing rather than whole-heartedly investing themselves in their work (cf. Edmondson, 1999).

Psychological availability is the "sense of having the physical, emotional, or psychological resources to personally engage during a particular moment" (Kahn, 1990, p. 714). It is a crucial psychological condition for full engagement with one's work, as being available requires security in one's abilities and status that enables "a focus on tasks rather than anxieties" (Kahn, 1990, p. 716).

3. Antecedents of employee engagement

Perhaps the most widely applied framework for studying engagement is the job demands–resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker, Demerouti, & Verbeke, 2004; cf. Saks & Gruman, 2014). According to this model, high job *demands* (e.g., work overload, job insecurity, role ambiguity, time pressure, and role conflict) undermine engagement by exhausting employees' mental, emotional, and physical resources. On the other hand, job *resources* help individuals to achieve their work goals and reduce job demands. Job resources may emanate from the organization (e.g., pay, career opportunities, job security), interpersonal relations (e.g., with one's supervisor and/or coworkers), the organization of work (e.g., role clarity and participation in decision making), and from the task itself (e.g., via skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, performance feedback). Bakker and Demerouti (2007) proposed that job resources increase employee engagement by building both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, as well as by buffering the potentially exhausting impact of job demands.

Consistent with the JD-R model, a meta-analysis by Christian et al. (2011) found that job characteristics such as autonomy, task variety, task significance and feedback function as resources that increase engagement, as do problem solving, job complexity and social support. Christian et al. (2011) also reported that engagement is reduced by high physical demands (i.e., the amount of physical effort necessary for a job) and harsh working conditions (e.g., health hazards, temperature, and noise).

Other resources that foster employee engagement include transformational leadership and leader–member exchange (Christian et al., 2011), having a manager who is engaged and appreciative (May et al., 2004), anti-sexual harassment practices (Jiang et al., 2015), and a work environment in which employees are consulted, appreciated, and have a best friend (Harter et al., 2002). Engagement is also higher when employees have adequate restorative non-work recovery (i.e., rest; Sonnentag, Mojza, Demerouti, & Bakker,