



Disengaged or Highly Engaged Employees: Who are the True Lawbreaker?

KEYWORDS

Disengagement, Employee Engagement, Leadership, Personal Engagement

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ABSTRACT *The velocity of the word “employee engagement” has altered the entire HR professional as well as HR consultancies to dig, know and learn more about it. It is very vivid and obvious from previous surveys and studies that employee engagement yields many numerous advantages both for employer and employees. But is there any border line how much level of engagement is valuable and how much is not? Therefore, the present research paper finds the real lawbreaker of the company i.e. the highly engaged one who are very passionate about their job or disengaged ones who tends to emphasize duty rather than objectives. The qualitative method is used explore the answers. Conclusion of the study divulges that it is liability of leader to recognize the limitations of employee engagement level which will either facilitate or frustrate their performance on work.*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Employee Engagement

To set a background, on the word engagement it is essential to inaugurate in what way and where it was originated. In an early discussion of the term, Watson and Tellengen (1985) conferred “engagement and disengagement as mood states and this mood incorporates ideas of arousal, astonishment and surprise in engagement whereas quiescent, quiet and still includes in disengagement”. Later in 1990 Kahn officially familiarized two terms in his prominent paper “personal engagement” and “personal disengagement” in “Psychological Conditions of Personal Engagement and Disengagement at Work”. After two years he coined “personal engagement” from theory driven from an ethnographic approach and underpinnings the thoughts and theory from the classic sociology work of Goffman (1959). The roles occupied by employees during work headed him in introducing this concept.

Moreover, the word “employee engagement” turned out to be an instant invention in the professional world after the distinct book in 1999 by Buckingham and Coffman “First Break All the Rules-What the World’s Greatest Managers Do Differently”. A different group of researchers from social sciences field, assumed employee engaged as job flow where flow means it as “multidimensional construct which include skill, enjoyment, challenge and time” Csikszentmihalyi (1975, p.57). Maslach and Leiter (1997) psychological researchers say that engagement is contradictory of burnout. Burnout is the state when employee is no more connected with job and collapse from commitment. Management practitioners focused on verve part more, say according to Towers Perrin (2003) employee engagement is “unrestricted or discretionary effort defined as extra time, brainpower and energy”.

With reference to social sciences literature, the concept of engagement is nearly related with two concepts; Job involvement and flow. Job involvement was developed by Brown (1996) who mentioned it “as extent to which the job conditions are crucial to the employee and his or her self”. Another related concept is flow proposed by Csikszentmihalyi (1975). Flow is regarded “as multi-dimensional construct which include skill, enjoyment, challenge and time” (p.57). Figure 1.1 displays a comprehensive develop-

ment of employee engagement.

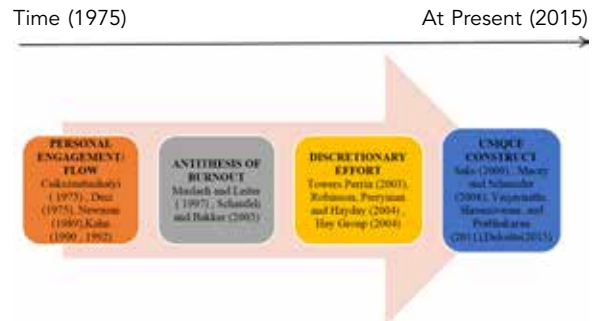


Figure 1.1: The Development of Employee Engagement

Management practitioner defined employee engagement by focusing on unrestricted effort by employees. This “unrestricted or discretionary effort defined as extra time, brainpower and energy” by Towers Perrin (2003). The most eloquent explanation is propounded by Robinson, Perryman and Hayday (2004, p.9) which as follows:

A positive attitude held by the employee towards the organization and its values. An engaged employee is aware of business context, and works with colleagues to improve performance within the job for the benefit of the organization. The organization must work to nurture, maintain and grow the engagement, which requires a two-way relationship between employer and employee.

Authors gives most significant drivers of engagement that instigated by any organization initiatives such as communication, training and development of employees, fair treatment, equal opportunities, career development, performance assessment, pay and benefit and many more. This also again depends upon the employee and what organizational initiatives they particularly lack.

1.2 Types of Engaged Employees

The Gallup Organization (2006) categorized three types of engaged employees:

Engaged: They are also known as “builders” of the organization. Employees desire to know the anticipated expectations from organization so that they can reach and beat them. They are steadily and regularly give high performers, dedicated, reliable to the organization. They developed strong connections with organization. They are the source of creativity.

Non-engaged: Employees are called as “checked out” from the company. Employees who are non-engaged towards their job tend to emphasize more on duty than on objectives. They are not necessarily negative attitude but they do not have positive approach either. They wanted to be supervised and stay buoyant. Probability of tardiness, complications in work, absenteeism and leaving the company is higher in employees. They may perhaps industrious but are not emotionally coupled to the organization.

Actively Disengaged: The “cave dwellers” come under this category. Tend to challenge the endeavours of peers especially those made by engaged employees. They show apathetic, unhappiness, and unemotional behaviour at work. Instead of welcoming and grasping opportunities they thwart them. Their physical presence is not equivalent to their psychological presence. These three types of employees exist in every organization regardless of nature and size.

Therefore, how people look their job and behaviour in the course of work makes either employee engaged or disengaged or entirely disengaged. On the contrary, Maylett (2014) disagree on the binary nature of employee engagement. According to author, “it is a continuum spectrum of many levels that changes over time”. Decision Wise employee engagement survey was based on over 14 million responses globally and break levels of engagement into four parts which changes with time and depend upon careers, incentives, work life balance and surrounding settings. Only 4% of total employees are disengaged, 24 % come under opportunity group, 49% are the major key contributors of the company and rest of the 23 % are fully engaged in their work. Therefore, these opportunities seekers and contributors could give better results if leader or manager provides all available resources and guidance. Leaders could motivate these workers by setting up employee engagement culture, short and precise follow up, incentives and word of appreciation.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Therefore, the limitless desire of researchers for redefining and reframing the definition of employee engagement arises the next big question of the time i.e. who is more worthy an engaged employee or disengaged employee (which could be shifted into engaged category by right leversages). Or who is possibly more detrimental an engaged employee or disengaged employee. This is principally main factor that steered to conduct this research. Furthermore, can ever engaged employees move into next category? If so, then what would be the likely way for leaders to put on?

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of the study were following:

1. To examine the prominence of engaged and disengaged employees.
2. To study the role of leader in keeping employees engaged.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study tried to ascertain the facts behind problem area by examining secondary data such as journals, research articles, past surveys, e-newsletters and websites. Therefore, the present study is explorative in nature.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

It is cleared from Kahn (1990) definition of engagement that personal engagement is associated with both state and trait which is related to job performance rather than a way to look the job or organization. However, recent study by Schaufeli and Salanova (2007) engagement is a relatively stable within individual but varies between individuals. Many studies have addressed that engagement is subject to changes according to internal and external resources. Kahn (1990) hypothesized the work engagement as “ebbs and flows” in nature i.e. a condition that may possibly vary between and within employees. Therefore, it is clear that any person who is engaged in one particular time may move into another category of engagement. Macey and Schneider (2008) propose that in any form of organisation there is limited quantity of resources and oomph factor or vigour and constantly using them to continue a high degree of engagement may bear out challenging in the long term (as cited by Halbesleben, Harvey & Bolino, 2009). As engagement also depends upon individuals cognitively part, it is highly individual wish to allocate their energy and resources.

Engaged Employees are known for their commitment and positive attitude. But sometimes these high clout based employees may turn into destructive part of the company. According to Blessing White (2010) article which put a very interesting side of employee engagement “the Ugly” side which utters that “surveying engagement level solely damage levels of engagement and increases distrust among employees and the employer” (para.1). The study was based on more than 10, 000 survey from North American pre and post-recession results. According to the results approximately 47 % (Survey plus follow up) of all employees were engaged and agreed the actions, money and investment taken by their organization to engaged employees; 24 % (Survey plus no follow up) of them were not sure about the current HR metrics and actions but engaged. The most backfire point is 19% are fully engaged who replied that managers fail to follow their promises. Therefore, this is creating a huge gap between the actions and dialogue.

Premuzic (2014) argued the dark side of engaged employees by pointing three arguments; first he focused on premise that exist in any company. The surroundings, culture, employer settings are very important to create engagement. Secondly engagement is best when exist in mediocre rather than excess. For example, too much engaged won't experience a sense of urgency at work. Disengaged peoples do better job than moderately engaged. At least prefer to quit rather than doing work incomplete. Lastly that get-up-and-go engaged employee is time. Lack of time degrades engagement. Time is needed to develop bidirectional relationship between engagement and performance; it is leader's responsibility to push employees to perform best that certainly hike engagement level in them. Therefore, align between leader and employees affects performance via engagement, it affects engagement mostly via performance. Baldoni (2013) claimed that disengaged employees may perform better and engaged one the worst. Surprisingly, but his conclusion reveals that 42 % of total cases, low performers are more engaged than high

performers.

Now, the question of state is how these low performers or so called disengaged ones perform better than engaged one. To support this statement Murphy (2013), CEO of Leadership IQ says that “low performers act as hamsters on a wheel, spinning fast, do efforts, more engaged, but at the same time they are unaccountable for poor work and unproductive whereas high performers are like swans on a pond, just gliding, no efforts because it’s below the water, less engaged, but at the same time they do all work because leader assigned them only” (para.4). Author suggests that leader should make open and clear expectation from good to poor from each category of employees so that practice of engagement and their performances would be differentiating and accountable. Additionally, he also suggests that a monthly meeting with top management aids more clear, active and liable employees.

Britt (2009), professor of Clemson University, cautions the role of leader in limiting the bad side of engaged employees, he claimed that “resources like lack of budget, equipment support, work overload, unclear objectives/goals, information and training-work mismatch” would ruined the worthy output of engaged employees because they are tending to be highly attuned towards their job and lack of such things will lead to dissatisfaction, frustration and job insecurities. These negative emotions ultimately down the performance of engaged employees. Similarly, when workforce is less and more output is needed, it is leader’s responsibility to engaged employees and lessen their thwarting. In the time of recession, only good leadership and proper engagement programs would work.

Coffman (2002), co-author of Book “Follow This Path: How The World’s Greatest Organizations Drive Growth by Unleashing Human Potential” interviewed Sanford in their Gallup Journal in 2003 that most of the employees joined organization as an engaged employee, they are naturally talented and passionate for their work, but on the same it is manager’s duty to keep them engaged by communicating them regularly rather than keeping them alone. Great managers charge them, coaches them and sustain their potentially. If he neglects to do so, relationship between leader and employee begins to weaken, ultimately he or she fails to use of their full talents and energy.

Deloitte (2015) derived a new model of engagement; “Becoming Irresistible” uncovered five major elements that drive engagement and their core strategies. These elements fit together to held the culture of engagement by meaningful work for employees, hands-on management, positive work environment, growth opportunity and trust in leadership certainly create a culture of sustainable engagement.

Table 1 Becoming Irresistible: A new model for employee engagement

Meaningful Work	Hands-on management	Positive work environment	Growth opportunity	Trust in leadership
Autonomy	Clear, transparent goals	Flexible work environment	Training and support on the job	Mission and purpose
Select to fit	Coaching	Humanistic workplace	Facilitated talent mobility	Continuous investment in people

Small, empowered teams	Invest in management development	Culture of recognition	Self-directed, dynamic learning	Transparency and honesty
Time for slack	Modern performance management	Inclusive, diverse work environment	High-impact learning culture	Inspiration
A focus on Simplicity				

Source: Deloitte (2015).Becoming irresistible: A new model for employee engagement, Deloitte Review, Issue 16, p.150

All these elements come together with main focus on simplicity. Here simplicity refers to effortless, clear, concise and feasible management procedures and guidelines. Simplicity is very important to conduct real engagement. Keegan (2015) state in his book “The 5 New Rules of Employee Engagement” that every employee engagement survey is different to another, don’t acquire same tool for every organization. Healthy engagement really depends on ones’ own environment and purpose.

6. CONCLUSION

Therefore, are engaged employees are real wrongdoer of the firm or disengaged employees? The observable answer is that neither engaged employees are bad nor disengaged are bad, it’s depend upon many other factors such as leader perception towards both categories of employees; how manager disburse jobs to them, time and employer setting along with specific antecedents of work engagement. Furthermore, Millard (2015) in her article on The Business Journal says that high or low employee engagement is not as bad as treated or perceived. According to her, firstly difference between number of engaged employee depends upon the type of survey used, the definition used by them, time and manager who do it. So, regardless of antecedents and consequences of employee engagement the way of it presence also matters.

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