

RESPONSE

Engaged in Engagement: We Are Delighted We Did It

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Abstract

We emphasize that science and practice issues are equally salient when pursuing thinking and research on employee engagement. We agree with much of what the commentaries have to say, especially that organizational competitive advantage is the relevant focus of engagement research and practice and that engagement is not a new construct but one that required clarification vis-a-vis existing constructs. We also agree that state engagement can be highly variable, that disengagement needs study, that negative situations can induce engagement behaviors, that engagement surveys should yield actionable data, and that people can be hired who are more likely to be engaged. We disagree with the idea that all employee attitudes are essentially equal and that existing conceptualizations of performance make engagement behavior a nonuseful construct.

We eagerly anticipated the commentaries, and as we expected, we have now seen a diverse set of ideas, some building on what we provided, others seeking to clarify, and yet others taking positions quite different from our own. To all of those, we say “yes!” Yes to those who say engagement is behavior, yes to those who say engagement is state, and yes to those who say the focus should be on trait individual differences. It would not be possible for us to reconcile these commentaries; rather, we simply agree that engagement is all of those things and emphasize our position that engagement is an inclusive multidimensional construct.

We feel it necessary to repeat that we wrote our paper to bridge science and practice by (a) noting how survey practice includes much of what we think of as engagement but does so in inconsistent and sporadic ways and (b) identifying the facets of existing scholarly constructs (involvement, satisfaction, and commitment) that tap the construct as we define it. To that point, the commentaries prove that scholars and practitioners think and speak about engagement in different ways. Interestingly, 10 of the 13 commentaries are written by scholars in academic settings; 1 of the 3 remaining (Harter & Schmidt) arguably was prepared from a nonpractitioner point of view. We do not find that troublesome as much as indicative of the size of the gap between what scholars and practitioners see as relevant and important vis-a-vis the usefulness of the engagement construct. As a result, much of our reply is directed (appropriately for some audiences) at framing the

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nuances important for scientific purposes so that they are useful in practice-science. That is, because we wrote our focal article in an attempt to bridge the practitioner–science gap, and the arguments presented in the commentaries are largely focused on the science side of the issues, the balance of our reply will be to “interpret” what we have learned from the academic commentaries for the practitioner audience.

In what follows, we have clustered the various commentaries into four clusters. The first cluster concerns the issue of organizational effectiveness because we believe this is where thinking about everything related to engagement needs to be. The second cluster addresses in some detail issues having to do with operationalization of the engagement construct. The third cluster is a series of issues raised appropriately by commentators that are important for consideration as part of the engagement construct space. The fourth and last cluster questions whether we even need the engagement construct given all of the work on job attitudes that already exists. By putting this issue last, readers can see we think it is not correct in its assumptions.

Engagement and Organizational Effectiveness

The intended focus of our article was on organizational effectiveness. Graen (2008) reminds us of that, and we concur with his view that we need methods for facilitating successful change in organizations and that having an engaged employee base can facilitate such change when needed. Pugh and Dietz (2008) are also concerned with organizational effectiveness and the ways by which the engagement construct can be studied at different levels of analysis. A very nice part of their contribution is the thought that the organization is an appropriate unit of analysis not only for behavioral engagement but also for state and trait engagement as well. That is an important contribution, for it highlights what our sponsors pay for; that is, they pay us for improvements in organizational effectiveness, and all facets of the engagement construct can be studied at that

level. Executives care about creating competitive advantage for their organizations so they sponsor employee survey research programs to drive organizational change. The kind of research paradigm implemented by researchers at Gallup (Harter & Schmidt, 2008), for example, illustrates that point. Their intra- and intercompany linkage research implicitly recognizes that what matters to the sponsor is creating a difference at the unit and organizational levels and that survey data need to be actionable in order to achieve that. In a real sense, they argue, what you call “it” is not relevant. What is relevant, they might continue, is that “it” works, and the fact that management has adopted a new label for “it” is only important because “it” is a new way to sell old wine.

In our own work, we also stress the importance of using survey results to drive organizational effectiveness, but we believe that our sponsors deserve more specific ways to think about and measure engagement. To make our case about employee engagement, we both focus on helping them think about what engagement means and then focus on organizational criteria that matter. With regard to what engagement means, we do not agree with Newman and Harrison (2008) that it does not matter what you call it or how you measure it because it is all the same thing. Our sponsors understand the difference between satiation (satisfaction) and vigor (energy) and are interested for different reasons in both; we say more about this later.

With regard to organizational criteria that matter, examples of the kinds of criteria that we think are important include (a) organization-level customer satisfaction data, as they are known indicators of cash flow and brand equity; (b) return on assets; (c) profits; and (d) shareholder value once corrected for the replacement cost of assets. These criteria speak directly to competitive advantage, and their relevance is unquestioned. And we have evidence that both state and behavioral engagement at the company level of analysis (as Pugh and Dietz suggest) relate significantly to these competitive advantage outcomes (Schneider, Macey, Young, & Lee, 2007).

The question of how individual engagement feelings and behaviors emerge to create organizational success is complex, and we are in need of models that help us to describe that phenomenon. Griffin, Parker, and Neal (2008) make an important point in this regard. As they indicate, what we would call engagement behavior (and within their model are labeled proactivity and adaptivity) can have individual, team, and organizational referents. We believe this is a most helpful and critical point because it establishes how engagement behaviors aggregate to create organizational effectiveness. To the scholar, this provides a way to discuss how different behaviors emerge at different levels of analysis. To the practitioner, it points a path to the kinds of interventions that can impact behavior that we call engagement while keeping a sharp focus on organizational effectiveness as the criterion. We think that is a powerful contribution on both fronts.

When we talk about employee survey data to our clients, we point out that our focus is not individual feelings and behaviors (and survey results) but the aggregate results for a work group, a larger unit of focus within the company, or the whole company. An important point worth making here is that our reference point for thinking about what is positive with regard to levels of engagement changes as we consider different levels of analysis within an organization. The unit manager responsible for a work group of 10 frontline employees thinks very differently about the meaning of 8 out of 10 people being engaged than does a division manager who thinks about 8,000 out of 10,000; these are the same proportion with very different implications for the kinds of interventions they think about and the likely consequences of their change efforts.

In summary, we think it essential that researchers and practitioners have company competitive advantage as their starting point when thinking about employee engagement and that research should operate at that level of analysis or, at a minimum, at the unit level of analysis. We firmly believe that studies around individual variability may be alright

for academic pursuits but they are not useful when it comes to corporate competitive advantage. Evidence is beginning to accumulate that research under the engagement rubric or allied concepts reveals significant effects on important organizational outcomes. Thus, work on organizational energy (Bruch, Cole, Vogel, & Menges, *in press*) and positive organizational behavior (Luthans & Youssef, 2007), as well as our own work on engagement (Schneider et al., 2007), is encouraging.

Operationalization Issues

Meyer and Gagné (2008) remind us that there is no consensus on how to measure engagement, a point made in detail by Newman and Harrison (2008) in their comparison of the Utrecht engagement items typically found in the measurement of the overlapping psychological constructs we identified. Their table on this comparison makes the following point perfectly: The typical employee opinion survey contains items that tap the engagement construct space as we define it, but they are spread out among large numbers of items that are not specifically relevant to engagement, and they are not scored as engagement. We made no claims to have invented a new construct; we claimed that it existed but had not been well defined.

In fact, in current survey practice, the most common operationalization of engagement includes questions that relate to organizational loyalty (or the "intent to stay with the organization"), pride (or the "willingness to recommend the company to a friend"), and overall satisfaction with the company. Indeed, it is the latter mix of typical survey questions ostensibly defining engagement that prompted our original concern over the meaning of engagement when we set out to draw the distinctions between the various psychological constructs that overlap with the meaning of state engagement.

Pugh and Dietz (2008) make the point that questions tapping behavioral engagement should be written at the unit level. We agree, and in our own work ask

respondents to describe what they see in the behavior of others within their work unit (persistence, adaptability, and taking initiative). Our approach extends the earlier work of Schneider and colleagues (Schneider, White, & Paul, 1998) on organizational climate, and our engagement behavior results can be interpreted in terms of a "climate for engagement."

On a related point, we agree with Saks (2006) that it is important to distinguish among work roles in our survey questions. We made the point in our manuscript that different psychological constructs that overlap with engagement differ in terms of the organizational and job referent. That referent is often explicit, but we agree that the interpretation of job and organizational referents is often ignored in practice (the same is true for global measures of "satisfaction"). However, we disagree with the approach of crafting items that use forms of the word *engagement* as either a state or a verb in the wording, such as in "I am highly engaged in this organization" or "I am highly engaged in this job" (Saks, 2006). To extend Griffin et al.'s (2008) point, there is a need to craft survey items that address the form of behavior that we would call "engagement." When that form is clear, the link to organizational effectiveness is clear by design. In an earlier manuscript (Macey & Schneider, 2006), we show how the differences suggested by Griffin et al. in the behavioral focus of items (in that case organizational citizenship behavior [OCB] items) yield very different relationships with strategically specific organizational criteria (in that case, customer satisfaction).

Harter and Schmidt (2008) correctly indicate that we position engagement differently than they do and suggest measuring it differently. As we stated in our focal article (Macey and Schneider, 2008), engagement is not measured by indicators of the work environment. It is important to understand that Harter and Schmidt present their model of engagement in *formative* terms. That is, they measure engagement in a model where 12 individual components are formed in composite as *causes* of engagement, not *reflec-*

tive indicators of engagement. As noted by MacKenzie, Podsakoff, and Jarvis (2005, p. 712), the "full meaning of the composite latent construct is derived from its measures." A nontrivial point is that any other meaning of *engagement* not measured is not part of the *engagement* definition. In this context, Harter and Schmidt's causes of engagement completely define the construct, nothing less and nothing more.

We do not disagree with the choice to develop a formative model of engagement. Also, we absolutely agree that employee surveys should measure important actionable aspects of the work environment that lead to employee engagement, and we think that the kinds of conditions represented in the Q12[®] are important to measure in that regard. However, in Harter and Schmidt's (2008) words, the "Q12[®] measure comprises 'engagement conditions,' each of which is a causal contributor" (p. 38). However, given the nature of the formative model, that means that saying engagement occurs when "individuals are emotionally connected and cognitively vigilant" (p. 38) simply is not allowable as it requires an inference not supported by the nature of the model. Therefore, we do not understand how measures of the causes of engagement can be extended to embrace a definition of a psychological state outside the formative indicators used to define the latent construct. So, we agree that certain measures of the work environment are causes of engagement; we reiterate the point that measures of work environment characteristics are not measures of engagement.

Newman and Harrison (2008) suggest that any measure of state engagement is simply redundant with what already exists. They further suggest that their attitudinal–engagement model fully captures the measures of behavioral engagement and that they are likely to be colinear with measures of state engagement. Building on their earlier work (Harrison, Newman, & Roth, 2006), they suggest that engagement is a broad behavioral construct embracing the entire domain of in-role, extra-role, and withdrawal behaviors. We do not argue with their data. We simply argue with its relevance.

Newman and Harrison (2008) argue that we have relabeled reshuffled items. The point we made in our propositions was that items that capture the energetic and affective components of existing constructs overlap with the conceptual domain of engagement. We do not claim that the notion of engagement captured by these items is simply another manifestation of the same latent general job attitudinal construct. We would expect that a measure embracing the kinds of questions tapping the energetic and affective components—the very kinds of questions that are represented in the Utrecht scale—would correlate more highly with the kind of criteria we believe we should be predicting than would, for example, the Faces scale. We agree that this is an empirical proposition, but from a practical standpoint, it begs the issue of what engagement is; we tried to show what it is and how it is related to what already exists.

The criterion we have in mind when we think about engagement is not a general behavioral criterion such as Newman and Harrison (2008) have in mind. It is helpful to remember that Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) made the point that it is the match in specificity between criterion and attitudinal measure that matters. This is confirmed by Harrison et al. (2006). Elsewhere, we (Macey & Schneider, 2006) have emphasized the importance of defining behavioral engagement in a way that has strategic relevance, a point expressed by Griffin et al., (2008) as we noted earlier, who suggest that we consider the form of behavior that is organizationally relevant. Executives would say this is a matter of alignment. We argue and demonstrate (Macey & Schneider, 2006) how competitive advantage is best attained through engagement behavior aligned with organizational goals. Engagement conceived of as a notion that encompasses all forms of in-role, extra-role, and withdrawal behavior misses the target of strategic relevance.

We again emphasize our point of agreement with Harter and Schmidt (2008) that it is critical that survey data be actionable. There is no practical value in a measurement

program that has as a single measure general employee attitudes toward work. What matters is in the details. Employee surveys are valuable tools only when they lead to action with the intent to improve organizational effectiveness. Our goal as practitioners is not to establish a single measure most predictive of a general criterion but to build models for communicating survey results that can be used to foster lasting and relevant change.

In summary, we have clearly not solved the problem of operationalizing engagement. What the commentaries have done is permit us to further illuminate (a) the issues we see as in the engagement construct space and those that are formative of it, (b) the fact that engagement is not just another manifestation of a generic job attitude, and (c) the importance of designing employee surveys that are actionable.

Some Things We Wished We Said

On state engagement and intraindividual variability. We agree with Dalal, Brummel, Wee, and Thomas (2008) that consideration of intraindividual variance in state engagement is important. This is the issue of whether or not state engagement is stable over time for people or has variability. In the article, we noted that executives are concerned with moving the needle in the aggregate, that is, across people, but we did not focus on the variability itself. An extension of the issue Dalal et al. raise is to ask the following question: Do we as practitioners have a responsibility to figure out how to change the relative frequency of engaging moments in ways that avoid burnout? That is, people cannot expend their energy at the highest levels all the time—there is a need for recovery to ensure continued employee well-being. We wish we had explored that issue more fully because a persistent state of engagement could be too much of a good thing.

Interventions to enhance engagement do not need to focus exclusively on the work environment. Burke (2008) shows us that the kinds of behaviors that management

wants to see happen can be influenced greatly through interventions focused on skill-based learning and not just on factors influencing the immediate work environment. We clearly missed this point. As Burke also points out, engagement is important not just in role performance but in the learning environment. Both have implications for organizational success. Burke also noted that the engagement construct is not all that new because it has been used in other social science disciplines; we should have also noted that.

Engagement matters most under conditions of uncertainty. Griffin et al. (2008) remind us that engagement kinds of behavior (proactivity and adaptivity), whether at the individual, team, or organizational level, can be best understood as a result of and in a context of uncertainty. Indeed, the idea that engagement is a most relevant construct in today's changing world of uncertainty was also effectively made by many people, including Graen (2008); Vosburgh (2008); Masson, Royal, Agnew, and Fine (2008); and Frese (2008). This point reminds us as well of the position that an effective approach to organizational strategy is to build an organization designed to be adaptable (Courtney, 2001).

Disengagement deserves attention. Although we specifically chose to not address the opposites of engagement, we agree with Masson et al. (2008) that it is important to understand the continuum of engagement. There is much interesting work along these lines by Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) that speaks to what the opposites of engagement might be. As food for thought, it is helpful to consider that *disengagement* can have different meanings. For one, it can be considered a passive response. However, it can also have a more toxic meaning, as implied by Masson et al. when they refer to "active disengagement." To the scholar, there are significant opportunities for fleshing out the structure of engagement and its opposite(s) as well as the relevant moderators. For the practitioner,

it means there is no panacea of an engagement solution and that boundary conditions exist on the likely effectiveness of interventions to promote engagement or remedy disengagement, perhaps including burnout. We would also add that we need to be very careful in romancing the notion of engagement when it embraces behaviors more closely aligned with workaholic tendencies that are dysfunctional to the individual and eventually to the organization.

What can pass as engagement is often caused by negative situations. Frese (2008) focuses our attention on the fact that certain behaviors that we would nominally identify as engagement are often the result of something other than being positively engaged in work. We agree that certain behaviors that we would consider adaptive responses to the work environment can be driven by states of dissatisfaction and/or alienation from the work itself. This is a critical point not just because it speaks to how different states can drive behavior, as Griffin et al. (2008) also note, but because it highlights the importance of what organizations do to sustain engagement. Although we agree with Frese, we would also submit that the kinds of behaviors that are specifically aligned with organizational goals are more likely to be determined by positive mind-sets than negative psychological states.

We can hire people disposed to engage. Although we noted the importance of trait engagement and spoke to it briefly, Vosburgh (2008) identifies the significant opportunity for industrial-organizational (I-O) psychologists by telling us exactly what organizations need: people who are predisposed to be engaged. It is critical to note his second point: After hiring such people, you must then create the work environment to ensure that the individual energy employees bring to the job can become manifest and is then sustained.

Hirschfield and Thomas (2008) add significantly to this perspective by addressing how the construct of agency can be used to represent trait engagement and thereby

show the path to addressing Vosburgh's (2008) need. The various constructs that are captured within the agentic orientation include achievement striving, the proactive personality, intrinsic motivation orientation, as well as trait positive affectivity. From the vantage point of last to speak, we would add that measures of core self-efficacy could hold significant promise for those looking to that specific predictive measure. Hirschfeld and Thomas also suggest that measures of work centrality would complement such measures. For the practitioner, there is a clear suggestion of the viability of biodata-based measures for predicting engagement behavior. Of course, we do need to emphasize Vosburgh's point that it is essential to provide a work environment that permits this agentic or engagement orientation to flourish.

Is Engagement a Necessary Construct at All?

We remind the reader that we did not invent the term *engagement*. Rather, we have responded to the use of the term by trying to carefully articulate how engagement can be understood in terms of many well-researched constructs in the I–O literature. Readers of this journal may very well take a different position but that will not change in any way the use of the term in the human resources and management communities. We believe I–O psychologists are better served by considering how they address those communities in terms of our science. To that end, the polemic of what engagement is and how it can be reasonably communicated is vitally important to the visibility and practice of our profession.

Arguably, the debate on these pages illustrates what is called by management scholars the “research–practice gap” (also called evidence-based management; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). The significance of this gap is evidenced by the fact that much of a current issue of the *Academy of Management Journal* (Rynes, 2007) is devoted to this topic, as is much of the *Academy of Management Learning and Education* (Ashkanasy, 2007).

We will not speculate here on why this gap exists, but we were certainly surprised by the balance of the commentaries and specifically by their seemingly exclusive research-focused nature, with little apparent empathy for what practitioners struggle with when dealing with their clients and potential sponsors. The notion, for example, that all job attitudes are the same thing simply does not square with the experiences of managers—and does not square with our experiences either. It does not square with managers or with us because the implications for interventions are so different as a function of the items used in the surveys on which action might be based.

Conclusion

We began our exploration of the conceptual space of the engagement construct from a practice perspective: What is this construct every practitioner and consulting firm is talking about? We discovered that the construct was being used in many different ways by many different people and we decided to clarify what it means. That is, if we were going to have a measure, we wanted to be clear about the conceptual space the measure would occupy. Much to our delight, the search produced a paper that has resulted in some excellent minds presenting their own perspectives on what we wrote and what they have written. We have learned much from the commentaries and could not be more enthused about the viability of the engagement construct!

We hope that the focal article and the commentaries help scholars locate interesting questions for further research. We also obviously hope that the article and the commentaries produce for practitioners increasing insights into what engagement is, how it can be measured, and the potential positive organizational competitive advantages lurking with effective measurement and change efforts.

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