

Engaging leadership

What kind of leadership behaviors can promote work engagement?

Andy Weeger

February 14, 2024

Introduction

One of the principal responsibilities of leaders is to motivate their followers so that they will perform well. *Schaufeli (2021)*

Work engagement

Definition

Work engagement refers to “a positive, fulfilling, work related state of mind that is characterized by *vigor*, *dedication*, and *absorption*” (Schaufeli et al., 2002, p. 74)

- Vigor refers to high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in one’s work, and persistence even in the face of difficulties
- Dedication refers to being strongly involved in one’s work, and experiencing a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge
- Absorption refers to being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one’s work, whereby time passes quickly and one has difficulties with detaching oneself from work

Work engagement differs from work addiction. Workaholics are driven by an irresistible inner need to work, and when they don’t, they feel useless, nervous, uneasy, restless and guilty.

Taris et al. (2014) argue that engaged employees have a positive (approach) motivation and workaholics a negative (avoidance) motivation. The former are attracted by work because it is fun, whereas the latter are driven to work in an attempt to avoid the negative thoughts and feelings that are associated with not working.

Effects

Research shows that work engagement is good for employees as well as for the organizations they work for (Schaufeli, 2013).

- Engaged employees suffer less from all kinds of stress complaints (e.g., depression)
- They run a lower risk of cardiovascular disease and, hence, they show lower sickness absenteeism.

- Engaged employees also feel strongly committed to their organization and therefore show lower turnover intentions.
- They often show a growth mindset (e.g., like to learn and develop themselves, take personal initiative, and are innovative).
- Engaged employees perform better (e.g., make fewer mistakes).

Engaging leadership

| Engaging leadership is not another leadership concept *Schaufeli (2021)*

Instead of starting with leadership behavior and then examining its impact on employee motivation and performance, Schaufeli (2021) started with work engagement, asking: What kind of leadership behavior can promote employee work engagement?

Definition

Engaging leadership is defined as leadership behavior that facilitates, strengthens, connects and inspires employees in order to increase their work engagement (Schaufeli, 2021, p. 4)

- Facilitating team-members satisfies the need for *autonomy* by giving them the feeling that they are psychologically free to make their own decisions.
- Strengthening team-members satisfies the need for *competence*, e.g., by delegating tasks and responsibilities, giving them challenging jobs and stimulating their talents.
- Connecting team-members satisfies the need for *relatedness*, e.g., by encouraging collaboration and creating a good team spirit.
- Inspiring team-members satisfies the need for *meaning*, e.g., by enthusing them about a particular vision, mission, idea or plan and recognising their personal contribution to the overall goal of the team or organisation.

Effects

Engaging leadership is expected to lead to the satisfaction of basic psychological needs (e.g., autonomy, competence, relatedness, meaning) and improved work engagement and performance.

Satisfying basic psychological needs subsequently leads to

- strengthened personal job resources (e.g., autonomy, task variety, role clarity, social support),
- an increased effect of HR policies (e.g., regarding training and education) on well-being,
- an increase in work engagement of employees,
- decrease of boredom, and
- increase in individual performance and team performance.

Team effectiveness

Engaging leadership positively effects performance at the individual and team level (Schaufeli, 2021), thus increases team effectiveness.

According to Hill (2003), an effective team does not only involve team performance, but is characterized by three criteria:

1. The team *performs*: the output meets the standards of those who have to use it

2. The team members are *satisfied and learn* (i.e., the team experience contributes to each member's personal well-being and development)
3. The team *adapts and learns* (i.e., the team experience enhances the capability of members to work and learn together in the future)

In today's dynamic environment, engaging leadership should facilitate, strengthen, connect and inspire employees to improve on all three interrelated criteria.

Managing paradox

Committed leaders need to be aware of at least four contradictory forces in team work and deal with these paradoxes (Hill, 2003):

- Embrace individual differences ☐ Embrace collective identity and goals
- Foster support ☐ Foster confrontation
- Focus on performance ☐ Focus on learning and development
- Rely on managerial authority ☐ Rely on team members' discretion and autonomy

Consequently, engaging leadership requires behavioral complexity.

Disengaging leadership

According to Schaufeli (2021), engaging leadership can be contrasted with its opposite disengaging leadership.

Disengaging leadership is characterized by:

- Coercive behaviour, which refers to authoritarian behaviour that restricts and controls employees.
- Eroding behaviour that aims to hinder staff members' professional development and diminish their sense of competence
- Isolating behaviour that disconnects staff from the rest of the team and pits them against each other
- Demotivating behaviour that aims to create the impression that employees' work is meaningless and that their work does not contribute to anything important.

People that exhibit these behaviors thwart the basic needs for autonomy, competence, relatedness, and meaning.

Literature

Bibliography

- Hill, L. A. (2003). *Becoming a manager: How new managers master the challenges of leadership*. Harvard Business Press.
- Schaufeli, W., Salanova, M., Gonzalez-Roma, V., & Bakker, A. (2002). The measurement of engagement and burnout and: A confirmative analytic approach. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 3(1), 71–92.

- Schaufeli, W. (2021). Engaging leadership: How to promote work engagement?. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 754556.
- Schaufeli, W. B. (2013). What is engagement?. In *Employee engagement in theory and practice: Employee engagement in theory and practice* (pp. 29–49). Routledge.
- Taris, T., Beek, I. van, & Schaufeli, W. (2014). The beauty versus the beast: On the motives of engaged and workaholic employees. In *Heavy Work Investment: Heavy Work Investment* (pp. 159–177). Routledge.