The Relationship Between Employee Engagement and a Workplace Culture of Excellence & Ethics

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Background

A study by the Gallup Management Journal (2006) found that when employees are engaged, they stay with their company longer than less engaged employees. They are also more productive, innovative, safe, employees and more invested in building strong relationships with their customers. The same study indicates that approximately 15% of workers that are 18 or older in the United States are disengaged workers. The authors estimate that disengaged workers costs the U.S. economy approximately $328 billion. According to Loehr and Schwartz (2003) in order for employees to be fully engaged in the workplace, they must look beyond their immediate needs and self interest and align themselves emotionally, physically, mentally and spiritually with a purpose greater than their everyday tasks.

According the United States Department of Labor (2012) there are 12.7 million unemployed workers in our country. Disengaged employees cost billions of dollars in our national economy. Reasonably, therefore, studying engagement in the workplace is a worthwhile endeavor.

The concept of employee engagement, however, is still relatively new and that academic researchers are starting to complete more research on the topic (Macey & Schneider 2008). Robinson et, al., (2004) content that there is very little academic research on employee engagement in academic literature or journals. The study of engagement is in its infancy and this topic would benefit from continued research and exploration.

Definitions of Engagement

Saks (2006) argues that while there are varied operational definitions of engagement presented in current research it is important to note that while related, engagement is different than other employee constructs such as organizational commitment, citizenship behavior and job
involvement. He suggests that engagement is the level when a person is attentive and absorbed in the performance of their roles and how they invest themselves in the performance of their jobs. Individuals must actively integrate their emotions and behaviors with their thinking. This alignment of cognitive and emotional elements provides an environment for people to be fully present and attentive to their work.

Kahn (1990) provides one of the most widely referenced operational definitions for personal engagement and personal disengagement. Each term denotes the personal behaviors that people demonstrate or omit in the workplace. Kahn defines personal engagement as “the harnessing of organization members’ selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances (1990, p. 694).” In contrast, when people withdraw themselves in the same engagement domains they are exhibiting personal disengagement.

Further, Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma & Bakker, (2001) define engagement as “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (p.74).” Vigor relates to energy level, mental resilience, investment and persistence. Dedication includes involvement, significance, enthusiasm, pride and challenge. Lastly, absorption is presented as being so involved in your work, time seems to slip by quickly and you have trouble disconnecting from the tasks at hand. This engagement model presented by Schaufeli et. al., served as the basis and operational definition of engagement for this study.

**Engagement and Culture**

In order for employees to successfully engage and feel challenged in their work and to exhibit behaviors such as enthusiasm, dedication, and resilience, we must consider the workplace culture that they are working in every day. Intentionally creating a positive workplace culture
provides the backdrop and environment for employees to be productive and satisfied with their work and those colleagues that they work with everyday.

Schein (1985) suggests that the culture of an organization is based on beliefs, values and basic assumptions that are common to people in that organization. Identifying core shared values and belief systems are critically important for an organization to build a strong workplace culture. Seijts and Crim (2006) support this notion by highlighting the importance of identifying a strategy that engages employees in the decision making process which, enables trust and creates a culture where employees want to take charge of the challenges presented to them and to find solutions. Furthermore, leaders in an organization must craft an environment that stimulates trust and collaboration.

As the professional workplace landscape changes over time, the shared values of an organization can impact the attraction and recruitment of employees. In one study, Catanzaro, Moore and Marshall (2010) researched men and women and their preference of working at an organization that was more competitive or on that offered a more supportive environment and culture. They found that when given a choice of working for an organization that was considered more competitive with more attractive salaries, benefits and advancement opportunities versus working for an organization that was more supportive with a strong emphasis on work-life balance, both men and women had a stronger preference for the supportive work culture. Participants in this study indicated that they were more interested in working in a supportive environment to allow a balance of personal and work life and the perception that the company was more friendly and supportive of the employees.

The notion of being happy and engaged in a supportive work environment and positive culture is supported by Csikszentmihalyi’s research and study of Flow (1990). The flow concept
is based on the idea of being happy and engaged in what you are doing so that you tend to loose
yourself in the activity and are in a state of enjoyment. This experience is what
csikszentmihalyi calls an *autotelic experience*; is something that humans strive for in both our
work and leisure time. According to Csikszentmihalyi, in order to obtain this level of flow and
engagement, your workplace culture must include a clear set of goals, knowledge of skills and
perceived challenges, rules as well as immediate feedback. The intrinsic motivation needed to
become engaged and lose oneself into their work is supported by what Pink (2010) describes as
Motivation 3.0. He contends that this paradigm shift is “needed to meet the new realities of how
we organize, think about, and do what we do (p. 77).” Pink makes the case that there are three
elements needed to be successful with his motivation theory. The three elements are Autonomy,
Mastery and Purpose (p. 80). He goes on to state “the science confirms that this sort of behavior
is essential to being human-and that now, in a rapidly changing economy, it is also critical for
professional, personal and organizational success of any kind (p. 81).”

**The Culture of Excellence and Ethics**

The Culture of Excellence and Ethics (CEE) framework presented by Davidson,
Khmelkov, & Baker (2011) from the Institute for Excellence and Ethics is a character
development-based approach to achieving success and building positive culture in school or the
workplace. The authors build on the work of Lickona and Davidson (2005) that further defines
character in two key elements, performance character and moral character. Performance
character is a mastery orientation that includes values such as diligence, work ethic, positive
attitude and perseverance. Moral character is relational in nature and includes values such as
integrity, justice, caring, responsibility, etc., skills that are needed for interpersonal relationships
and ethical behavior. Striking a balance of both the moral and performance character values provides a strong foundation for a positive culture in any organization.

The Excellence and Ethics approach originates from research conducted in schools across the country. Davidson and his colleagues have recently evolved their framework into professional workplace applications. The extensive research-based teaching tools and strategies found in the CEE resources (Davidson & Khmelkov, 2011) are now being implemented in collegiate athletic departments, non-profit organizations, colleges and universities and numerous industries including health care, manufacturing, insurance and finance. In addition, they have recently created the Culture of Excellence and Ethics Assessment – Workplace (CEEA-W). The CEEA-W has grown out of their nationally recognized character and culture assessment instruments. Components of the CEEA-W were used to capture data for this research project.

The Culture of Excellence and Ethics framework is designed to intentionally teach individuals and organizations to reach excellence through the development of both moral and performance character skills based on eight focus areas (2011, p. 37), which include the following categories:

1) Developing positive and productive relationships
2) Communicating and collaborating with efficiency and effectiveness
3) Managing priorities and reducing stress
4) Committing to high standards and continuous improvement
5) Demonstrating emotional intelligence, integrity, and responsibility
6) Exhibiting creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving
7) Leading and serving others
8) Living a balanced, purposeful, and healthy life
These eight focus areas are not designed to be specific outcomes but a grouping of topical areas. They are based on applied research and the identified areas are often found in policies and strategic initiatives that organizations implement systemically to ensure a positive organizational culture (Davidson et al., 2011).

**Problem Statement**

The purpose of this research study is to examine the impact of a positive workplace culture, specifically promoting excellence and ethics and employee engagement.

This project sought to investigate the correlation between five of the eight focus areas presented in the culture of excellence and ethics framework (Davidson et al., 2011) which includes; Developing positive and productive relationships, Communicating and collaborating with efficiency and effectiveness, Managing priorities and reducing stress, Committing to high standards and continuous improvement and finally leading and serving others. These five CEE focus areas were identified as the ones potentially best aligned with the three components of engagement; vigor, dedication and absorption defined by Schaufeli et al., (2001).

**Research Methods**

This was a cross-sectional quantitative study. The data were collected from the online social network community of human resources professionals Linked: HR (www.linkedhr.com) via an anonymous survey. Linked: HR had approximately 680,000 members across the globe at the time the survey was administered in late February 2012.

**Research Variables**

This study investigated the relationship among the following variables:
• The dependent variable in this study was employee engagement, defined by Schaufeli et al., (2001) as “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (p.74).”

• The independent variable was workplace culture. For the purpose of the study I used five of the eight culture of excellence and ethics focus areas presented by Davidson, et al., (2011). These focus areas are values based topical areas derived from a character development foundation identifying the skills needed to build a strong organizational culture. This character-based approach is further defined in two distinct parts: (1) moral character, those skills that help us develop our best ethical self and (2) performance character, the skills needed to develop excellence in order to perform our best work.

**Research Question**

This study was guided by the following question: What is the strength and direction of the relationships between employee engagement and workplace culture of excellence and ethics. Five of the eight focus areas presented by Davidson et. al., (2011) were used for this correlation and analysis.

**Instrumentation**

This project utilized two assessments to gather data. The assessment tools used for this project include questions from the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) that includes 17 questions developed by Schaufeli and Bakker (2003) to measure engagement which is further defined as vigor, dedication and absorption. The questions are further delineated by six questions related to vigor, 5 questions related to dedication and 6 questions for absorption. Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) demonstrate that there has been numerous validity studies have been completed on the UWES. The authors note “validity studies have been carried out with the UWES show
that work engagement is indeed negatively associated with burnout, albeit that the relationship between vigor and exhaustion and between dedication and cynicism is somewhat less strong than was expected. Further more, engagement can be discriminated from workaholism (p.11).”

Through additional reliability studies, he UWES also shows internal consistencies of the scales of the various versions of the instrument (p. 20).

The Culture of Excellence & Ethics Assessment – Workplace (CEEA-W) was used to seek perceptions regarding the culture and competencies of excellence and ethics (2011) in the workplace environment. For the purpose of this study, questions were selected from five of the eight focus areas found in the CEEA-W for a total of thirty-five questions. Since the CEEA-W used in this study is a relatively new assessment tool, validity and reliability studies have not been completed at the time of this research project. However, the instrument is built upon the constructs of the original Culture of Excellence and Ethics Assessment (CEEA) that have demonstrated research on validity and reliability (Khmelkov & Davidson 2010).

Both survey instruments were used with permission for non-commercial scientific research. They were combined into one survey and delivered through Qualtrics (www.Qualtrics.com) an online data collection system.

**Data Analysis**

The survey yielded 521 responses, the data were analyzed via the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 20 (SPSS 2011). First the data was cleaned and visually inspected for missing data and as a result 260 responses were removed due to missing answers. Two outliers for engagement were removed and three outliers for high standards focus area were removed to prevent skewed data. Finally, the data was verified that everything was normal. The remaining sample included 281 responses.
The sample demographics included 67% female and 33% male respondents. Table 1 shows the gender and age range cross tabulation.

Table 1

*Gender and age range cross tabulation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>20-30 yrs</th>
<th>31-40 yrs</th>
<th>41-50 yrs</th>
<th>51-60 yrs</th>
<th>61+ yrs</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>281</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Results**

I ran a Pearson Correlation analysis between the five selected areas of the culture of excellence and ethics focus areas and engagement of all the participants in the combined UWES and CEEA-W surveys. The means and standard deviations scores for each of the culture of excellence and ethics focus areas and engagement are listed below on Table 2. Table 3 summarizes the Pearson Correlation results.

Table 2

*Descriptive Statistics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>4.0008</td>
<td>0.99256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive &amp; Productive Relationships</td>
<td>3.5662</td>
<td>0.84588</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication &amp; Collaboration</td>
<td>3.4384</td>
<td>0.81658</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing Priorities</td>
<td>3.2316</td>
<td>0.74186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Standards</td>
<td>3.4899</td>
<td>0.76226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leading Others</td>
<td>3.4931</td>
<td>0.85175</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3

Pearson Correlation Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>E</th>
<th>PPR</th>
<th>CC</th>
<th>MP</th>
<th>HS</th>
<th>LO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PPR</td>
<td>.488**</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CC</td>
<td>.472**</td>
<td>.757**</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MP</td>
<td>.441**</td>
<td>.665**</td>
<td>.733**</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS</td>
<td>.411**</td>
<td>.674**</td>
<td>.771**</td>
<td>.839**</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LO</td>
<td>.443**</td>
<td>.656**</td>
<td>.747**</td>
<td>.757**</td>
<td>.808**</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Note. N=281 for all Traits

E=Engagement, R = Positive & Productive Relationships, CC=Communication & Collaboration, MP= Managing Priorities, HS = High Standards, L = Leading Others

Results indicated that

1. There was a positive correlation between positive and productive relationship and engagement, r = .488, n = 281, p < .01.
2. There was a positive correlation between communication and engagement, r = .472, n = 281, p < .01.
3. There is a significant relationship between managing priorities and engagement, r = .441, n = 281, p < .01.
4. There is a significant relationship between high standards and engagement, r = .411, n=281, p < .01.
5. There is a significant relationship between leading others and engagement, r = .443, n = 281, p < .01.
Discussion

Employers want results. This study was designed and built on the growing body of research of employee engagement and positive workplace culture referenced throughout this article. The results of this study show that when employees are provided with a workplace culture that promotes excellence (our best work performance including; persistence, resilience, goal setting, high setting high standards and managing priorities) and ethics (our best moral self including, positive and productive relationships, good communication, collaboration skills and leading others) they are more engaged in their work. However, it should be noted that this study does not indicate the direction of the relationship between a positive culture and engagement. While engagement is related to the culture variables presented in this study, the study does not show, which comes first, a positive culture or engagement.

Schaufeli et al., (2009) argue that one of the factors in workplace engagement is a motivational process that is based on the availability of job resources. These authors contend that job resources help to nurture growth, learning and development, which in turn are key to the achievement of work goals. With this approach, they have found that workplace cultures that provide many resources encourage employees to dedicate their effort and skills set to the tasks at hand. They specifically note, “Supportive colleagues and performance feedback increase the likelihood of being successful in achieving one’s work goals (p. 895).”

Schaufeli et al.’s findings supports and align with the work of Davidson et al., (2011) and their character-based approach categorized in their eight excellence and ethics focus areas. For example, the first focus area used in this research study was developing positive and productive relationships, which would produce supportive colleagues. Additionally, focus area five is based on setting high standards which includes goal setting and continuous improvement process, my
findings present a significant correlation between these two focus areas one being relationship-driven and the other anchored in goal setting and process improvement. These findings are supported by the motivational process that factors into workplace engagement that was identified by the research of Schaufeli et al., (2009).

These examples remind us that those seemingly basic skills such as building positive relationship with your employees is a key strategy to increased employee engagement in the workplace.

Kahn (1990) suggests that there are three psychological conditions that influence their level of engagement; they are meaningfulness, safety and availability. Meaningfulness is considered the self-perception that a person feels that an experience is worthwhile and valuable. Psychological safety allowed people to be engaged in tasks without feeling that their self-image, status or career were in jeopardy. Finally, availability refers to a state of readiness to engage in the tasks ahead of them factoring in the everyday diversions that everyone experiences. When connecting these psychological conditions to the variables used in this study, it is possible to see why there may have been correlations among them. For example, a person searching for meaningfulness in their work would likely be invested in the CEE focus areas used in this study that is most closely aligned with developing positive and productive relationships and leading and serving others. If in their workplace culture, people feel that they have meaningful relationships and are helping others achieve their own professional goals, it is worth their time and emotional investment to develop positive and productive relationships with others. The CEE categories of committing to high standards and continuous improvement and managing priorities and reducing stress are in alignment with the psychologically available condition. The ability
and personal drive to be engaged with work will be enhanced with setting of goals, increased time management skills and committing oneself to an ongoing improvement process.

According to his research, Kahn (1990) suggests people determine if they are going to engage or disengage themselves in a given task by reflecting on the following three questions (p. 703): (1) How meaningful is it for me to bring myself into this performance? (2) How safe is it to do so? and (3) How available am I do so? These same three questions could be applied to the process of building and actively participating in an intentional positive workplace culture.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This survey was administered on the Internet. Respondents to this web-based survey were limited to those with online access and members of the Linked: HR community. The results of the survey were based on human resource professionals who had a certain level of interest in the topics of employee engagement and workplace culture. Future research could be completed by applying this survey to a more generalized audience for a broader sample of professionals or conversely, a specific company or department within a company.

At the time of the survey deployment the Culture of Excellence and Ethics Assessment – Workplace (CEEA-W) was in its infancy in a field research phase and was not considered a valid and reliable instrument. However, it should be noted that the CEEA-W was based on the same constructs and design of the Culture of Excellence and Ethics (CEEA) survey that is valid and reliable and meets rigorous requirements for the Federal Department of Education’s national Safe and Supportive Schools (2011) initiative which measures engagement, safety and environment in K-12 schools across the country. Further field-testing of the CEEA-W and confirmation of validity and reliability are recommended for future research. The Institute for Excellence and Ethics has developed numerous research-based tools for teaching and learning
based on their eight-focus area approach. These tools implemented in a workplace environment could also be studied to measure their impact on workplace culture and corresponding impact on engagement.

Further, only five of the eight topical focus areas presented by the Institute for Excellence and Ethics (IEE) approach were used in this survey. Additional research topics could integrate the remaining focus areas, which include; demonstrating emotional intelligence, integrity and responsibility, exhibiting creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving and living a balanced, purposeful, and healthy life.

Additional topics of research and analysis to consider would be the correlation of the excellence and ethics focus areas presented in this project to the more specifically defining characteristics of engagement (Schaufeli et al., 2001) that includes vigor, dedication and absorption. This project focused on the broader topic of engagement, however further analysis of each of these supporting categories of engagement would provide an even more in depth cross-correlation and further align with the focus areas presented by IEE. This may prove beneficial when identifying specific areas of improvement and developing strategies to increase engagement and building an intentional positive workplace culture. I would also suggest additional qualitative research studies to better understand the roots of the identified correlations in this study.

Finally, further research on engagement strategies as they relate to employee turnover rates and linkage the national unemployment numbers could prove to be an interesting macro study of our nation’s economy. This type of study could include the financial impact of a disengaged workforce.
Conclusion

The Wall Street Journal (Feb 7, 2012) posted an online article on engagement and workplace cultures. The article points out that the top two types of engaging workplace cultures are enterprising and social corporate cultures. According to the article, the enterprising culture, which had the highest engagement score, there was a feel of competition to spur increased productivity and creativity among employees. In a close second, was a social corporate culture, where value is placed on collaboration, relationships and a relaxed working atmosphere. This article supports my findings of the importance of instilling the skills of collaboration, developing positive and productive relationships as well as committing to high standards and managing priorities. The article also suggests that further research could be conducted on the impact of creativity and engagement. This is notable because the Culture of Excellence and Ethics framework and assessment tools used in this study includes a section on creativity and innovation. However that selection of questions was not included in this research study.

In a recent journal article Davidson (2012) referred to a famous quote by Aristotle, “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then is not an act, but a habit.” Davidson contends that in order to create a culture of excellence in the workplace we must be intentional. He states, “We cannot leave any aspect of the work experience too unstructured or allow for unintentional norms, norms that simply emerge (p. 53).” If organizations desire an actively engaged workforce it is imperative that they recognize that it doesn’t just happen naturally. We must provide intentional strategies and structures so that our employees will strive for high standards of success both for themselves and their employer. Investing time and resources in the strengthening of an organizations culture will provide an avenue for employees to develop to
their fullest potential while demonstrating both excellence and ethics while building an engaged workforce.

Companies and organizations that are people-focused should be prepared and committed to invest in the time and resources needed to instill a positive work culture that could correspondingly increase the engagement of their employees. When it comes to the engagement of employees in the workplace, this study suggests that employers should consider a three-tiered approach when seeking an engaged workforce and a positive workplace culture. First, they should assess the three psychological conditions for engagement identified by Kahn (1990): meaningfulness, safety and availability. With those key elements in place to satisfy the psychological needs of employees, next the organization can employ strategies to build an intentional positive workplace culture. The CEE model that is based on the work of Davidson et al., (2011) delivers an approach that is focused on pursuing a positive culture based on both excellence (best work) and ethics (best self). Finally, building on the alignment with the first two suggested tiers, employers could start to see that their employees are increasing their levels of engagement through observation and assessment of the tenants of engagement; vigor, dedication and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2001).
References


SPSS Inc. (2011). Chicago, IL.

