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Commentary on focal article by Macey & Schneider: The meaning of employee engagement

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Commentary on Macey and Schneider: The meaning of employee engagement (Industrial and Organizational Psychology: An Exchange of Perspectives on Science and Practice)

The word is out: We need an active performance concept for modern work places

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It is high time that somebody summarizes and evaluates the research on engagement to which a number of authors have contributed under different labels. In the following, I shall not differentiate much between engagement, personal initiative, proactivity, taking charge, and voice, because these are very similar concepts. The definition that Macey and Schneider tend to agree with – engagement being relating to vigor, dedication, and absorption (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001) – is similar to other concepts developed in the general domain of active performance. I shall discuss two issues: The necessity of developing an active performance concept of which engagement is one and the function of positive affectivity for engagement.

The importance of the concept of engagement as a new performance concept

There are good reasons, why scientists, management, and professionals have caught on to the importance of an active performance concept even though both practice and “normal science” have been slow to recognize the phenomenon of active performance (by the way, I tend to disagree with Macey and Schneider’s suggestion that science was tardy while practice was way ahead in acknowledging the phenomenon of engagement –after all, science was able to present models and research results in the early 90s, e.g., (Ashford & Black, 1996; Bateman & Crant, 1993; Frese, Kring, Soose, & Zempel, 1996; Kahn, 1990). However, both practice and science tend to stick to their traditional models of performance. Traditional performance models assume that employees ought to follow instructions, task descriptions, and orders – the better they do that, the better is performance, for example, as judged by

supervisors. Such a performance model may have been adequate in the analysis of traditional jobs. However, modern work more fast paced in terms of changes, with lower supervision, with higher interweaving of technology into the fabric of daily work, with more vertical integration and the need for more communication between workers and more team work, with higher pressure on individuals to up-dating their own skills (Bridges, 1995; Ilgen & Pulakos, 1999). I agree with Bridges (1995) that the traditional job concept is a result of a social construction and was adequate for classical production-dominated industry. Reasons for an epochal shift in the job concept are related among others to organizations' difficulties when dealing with those fast changes resulting from globalization and increased customer demands. Therefore, a performance model needs to understand ephemeral concepts as customer orientation, adjustment to change, developing new ideas for production and services, and doing the right things when needed. "Employees do not just let life happen to them. Rather, they try to affect, shape, curtail, expand, and temper what happens in their lives." (Grant & Ashford, 2007 in press) p. 3). Therefore, science and practitioners have reacted with a flurry of new concepts that describe these "new behaviors" (of course, there was all of this behavior even in traditional jobs, but there were less important than today; also traditional models do not become completely invalid but need to be complemented by an active performance model).

There is at least partial evidence to support the claim that proactive personality and personal initiative behavior improve organizational performance (Baer & Frese, 2003; Crant, 1995; Koop, De Reu, & Frese, 2000; Krauss, Frese, Friedrich, & Unger, 2005; Miron, Erez, & Naveh, 2004; Utsch & Rauch, 2000). Much of this evidence is based on business owners (in small companies, trait and state engagement of the owner probably has a strong effect on company performance) or on showing a correlation between economic outcomes and climate for initiative (Baer & Frese, 2003; Miron et al., 2004).

Once the need for such an active performance concept is accepted, the question arises, which terminology and which concepts are used. I happen to be biased towards the concept of personal initiative – but I am well aware of others’ preferences for such concepts as proactive behavior, taking charge, voice, adaptive performance, and, of course, engagement. Conceptual issues need to be decided on the basis of empirical evidence – thus, new empirical studies should help us to make decisions which terminology to use. We need an empirically driven taxonomy of these concepts and differential validity approaches. At this moment, I tend to think that Griffin et al. (Griffin, Neal, & Parker, 2007)p. 330 have best advanced such a modern performance concept with three independent factors – proficiency (“fulfils the prescribed or predictable requirements of the role), adaptivity (“copes with, responds to, and supports change”), and proactivity (“initiates change, is self-starting, and future-directed”) – the latter overlaps considerably with engagement.

Positive affectivity and its function for engagement

I agree with Macey and Schneider’s argument that job satisfaction should not be equated with engagement. “...feelings of persistence, vigor, energy, dedication, absorption, enthusiasm, alertness and pride occupy a central position in the conceptualization and measurement of state engagement” (Macey & Schneider, 2007, p. 20xxx) and job satisfaction does not necessarily connote these feelings. On the other hand, the concept of positive affect seems to be central for Macey and Schneider’s concept of engagement: “We would argue that measures of state engagement that are devoid of direct and explicit indicants of the PA (=positive affect, M.F.) and energetic feelings are not measures of state engagement.” (Macey and Schneider, 2007, p. 21).

I suggest that this needs to be qualified. Frequently, people show a high degree of state and behavioral engagement and personal initiative precisely because they are not satisfied and because people are negatively affected by conditions. In other words, negative feelings often lead us to wanting to change things. Of course, Macey and Schneider are correct that you

have to show a high degree of vigor to be engaged. However, vigor may often be increased when we find a situation not adequate and not satisfactory. Research shows that stressors (such as time pressure) may lead to higher personal initiative in spite of the fact that these stressors typically lead to job dissatisfaction (Fay & Sonnentag, 2002). This proves that engagement as behavior (maybe, in contrast to state and trait engagement) is often shown when it is needed and those situations are not necessarily pleasant. Necessities of life often produce extra effort, new vigor, and new and creative procedures.

Concluding comment. This discussion suggests that the engagement behavior is often shown in negative situations (with low positive state affect). Obviously, the situation cannot be completely negative. Macey and Schneider are right that one has to be positively committed to the organization enough to care to change something and to trust that one's input of energy will not backfire. In this way, a certain amount of basic trust in the organization has to exist to show engagement behavior. Moreover, self-efficacy needs to be high; that is people have to be sure that effort actually leads to positive effects in the organization. Finally, aspiration levels have to be high – we have to be able to conceptualize that positive effects can be achieved (counterfactual thinking).

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