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Abstract

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Keywords

Transformational, leadership, workplace, engagement, mediating, influence, meaningful, work, Building, conceptual, framework

Disciplines

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**Transformational Leadership, Workplace Engagement and the Mediating Influence
of Meaningful Work: Building a Conceptual Framework**

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Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is to examine the nature of the relationship between transformational leadership, meaningful work and workplace engagement. Although there is consensus that better engaged employees help organizations to perform better, industry reports indicate that only one fifth of employees are engaged in their work. While there is some evidence in the literature to suggest a link between transformational leadership factors such as idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration, and the components of workplace engagement such as vigor, dedication and absorption, little is known about the nature of this relationship. This paper proposes a conceptual framework supporting an indirect relationship between transformational leadership and followers' workplace engagement, a relationship mediated by followers' perceptions of meaningful work. The paper provides insights into enhancing followers' workplace engagement via transformational leaders through their ability to create meaningful work. The proposed conceptual framework has implications for researchers examining the link between transformational leadership and work engagement, and for organizations keen to improve employee engagement levels through by leaders.*

Keywords: Transformational leadership, Workplace engagement, Perceived work characteristics.

PREFACE

Engagement as a broad psychological phenomena shares many characteristics with various workplace phenomena. By itself engagement might be examined as existing in a collection of different work related phenomena, which all describe in different but overlapping ways how people relate to work (Saks 2006). Some authors consider engagement as simply mix of various traditional concepts, such as job commitment, involvement, satisfaction, organizational citizenship behaviour (e.g. Ferguson 2005). Other authors consider engagement as unique and separate phenomenon that goes beyond these traditional concepts (e.g. Maslach and Leiter 2008).

Given the relationship between engagement and other well known psychological phenomena, the increasing interest on engagement comes from researchers' calls to deeply focus on unique workplace psychological phenomena, rather than negative terms in organizational behaviour research such as job stress and burnout. For example, Myers (2000) called for more research on positive states of individuals' health, since the "number of publications on negative states exceeds that on positive states by a ratio of 14:1" (cited in Bakker & Schaufeli 2008: 187). Interestingly, Schaufeli and Bakker (2003) added that about 95% of the articles that have been published in 2003 in the Journal of

Occupational Health Psychology deals with negative states of workers' health. Thus, the current conceptual paper draws attention to a positive workplace phenomena and how it relates to transformational leadership i.e. engagement.

BACKGROUND

While there is no one overarching explanation of engagement, what most scholars agree on is that engagement is a motivational notion which has been characterized as “a distinct and unique construct that consists of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural components . . . associated with individual role performance” (Saks 2005: 602). According to Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma and Bakker (2001), the feeling of engagement manifests when employees experience a more persistent and pervasive affective-cognitive state that is not focused on any particular object, event, individual, or behaviour. According to Schaufeli et al. (2001: 74), work engagement is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption.

Vigor is characterized by 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 is characterized by being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one's work, whereby time passes quickly and one has difficulties with detaching oneself from work. (2001: 74)

Engaged employees often display a deep, positive emotional connection with their work, are likely to exert extra effort and are willing to go the extra mile to achieve organizational accomplishments (Schaufeli et al. 2001; Saks 2006). The term workplace engagement has been identified as one of strongest predictors of organizational success (Attridge 2009; Richman 2006) because when it is understood and assessed well, it gives organizations a remarkable ability to influence various operational areas in the organization.

Although there is consensus that better engaged employees move organizations forward (Shuck & Wollard 2010), global consultancy firm reports show that only one fifth of employees are engaged in

their work, and that the engagement levels are steadily declining (e.g. Gallup 2009; Tower Perrin 2009). More critically, organizations are neglecting to assess the levels of employee engagement. According to Attridge (2009: 386), although there is an increasing desire to measure employee engagement, most companies are not measuring it. Thus due to this lack of knowledge about employee engagement, organizations are unaware of the critical strategies necessary to promote employee engagement (Czarnowsky 2008).

Reports have estimated that the percentage of engaged employees are declining and costing countries greatly in productivity losses. For instance, in Australia, figures show that disengaged employees¹ have increased to reach more than 82%, costing the Australian economy between A\$36.1- A\$45.4 billion annually in productivity losses (Gallup 2009). Studies estimate that these losses will increase to more than A\$100 billion annually (Smith 2009: 59). The negative impacts from disengaged employees are still evolving, a survey by Tower Perrin (2009) indicates that 80% of losses in any company are generated from disengaged employees.

Due to the negative impacts of disengaged employees, halting and reducing the increase in the disengagement levels should become a key research focus of work engagement scholars (Attridge 2009). Although several studies in organizational behaviour literature provide a better understanding of some of the key components of workplace engagement (e.g. Saks 2006), organizations need to constantly look for fresh ways to create and then sustain higher employee engagement levels. Working on the premise that organizational leaders could make a significant contribution towards this goal, a broad research question for this study would be: What are the main factors that help leaders to attain higher levels of employee engagement?

Given that workplace engagement is a state of being which often results from positive psychological traits (Macey & Schneider 2008; Kahn 1990; Shuck & Wollard 2010), this paper proposes a conceptual framework based on two positive factors, namely, transformational leadership as an antecedent and perceived meaningful work as the hypothesized mediator. The paper develops

¹ Disengaged employees are those who negatively influence customer loyalty, customer satisfaction, customer retention, efficiency, and productivity (Attridge, 2009).

conceptual arguments for a theorized relationship summarizing two specific questions: (1) what is the nature of the relationship between transformational leaders' behaviours and followers' levels of workplace engagement? (2) Does transformational leadership and work engagement mediated by followers' perceptions generate more meaningful work?

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERS AND WORKPLACE ENGAGEMENT

The Influence of Transformational leadership

Employees' levels of engagement increase when there is a positive relationship between employees and their direct supervisors (Bakker & Schaufeli 2008; Gopal 2006; May, Gilson & Harter 2004). Blizzard (2003, in Ferguson 2005: 9) reveals that engagement at work tends to be based on factors such as the relationship they have with their managers. Despite this assertion, employees claim that their direct supervisors do not have the essential skills or behaviours to make them better engaging leaders (Gagnon & Michael 2004). Figures show that only 28% of supervisors play a role in engaging subordinates and more than 74% of the employees say that being recognized by managers is a key component for engagement (Tasker 2004; BlessingWhite report 2008). These alarming levels represent a serious problem for organizations because workplace engagement cannot be achieved if leaders' lack skills and behaviours required to generate better levels of employee engagement at work.

A popular leadership style that has gained prominence in the behavioural leadership arena is transformational leadership (Judge & Piccolo 2004). Transformational leadership is one of the most dominant paradigms in the contemporary leadership literature due to its substantial motivational strengths for achieving number of employee outcomes such as well being (Nielsen, Yarker, Barnner, Randoll & Borg 2008; Nielsen, Randall, Yarker & Brenner 2006), self efficacy, job commitment (Rafferty & Griffin 2004) and job satisfaction (Nemanich & Keller 2007). According to Bass (1985), organizations increasingly utilize transformational leadership strategy to motivate and inspire employees, especially during times of rapid changes. Thus, linking the components of transformational leadership with workplace engagement will help to promote our conceptual understanding of this relationship.

Transformational leadership is “the process through which leaders and followers help each other to advance to a higher level of morality and motivation”, and transformational leaders “raise the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both the leader and led, and thus it has transforming effect on both” (Burns 1978: 20). The transformational leadership theory has evolved as a process of motivational effect. Such motivational effect appears when leaders create changes and develop followers’ personal and professional characteristics by exhibiting four types of behaviours (Yukl 2006). First is Idealized Influence, which is the degree of leaders’ ability to build loyalty and devotion without any consideration for their own self interests which helps followers to identify with the leaders. Second, Inspirational Motivation involves leaders’ ability to create a vision in a way that appeals to followers and makes them a significant part of the organization (Bass & Avolio 1994; Piccolo & Colquitt 2006). Third, Intellectual Stimulation involves leaders’ ability to stimulate followers’ efforts to be innovative and creative through questioning assumptions, taking calculated risks, and seeking the input of followers. Finally, Individualized Consideration is the extent to which leaders act as mentor or coach and pay special attention towards followers’ differences. These characteristics allow followers to have the basis to change, to unleash their potential, and diminish their negative behaviours that foster followers into more successful and productive individuals (Hay 1995; Bass & Riggio 2006; Bass 1985). Thus, it is likely that transformational leadership, as a motivational style of both the leader and the led can play a positive role in generating higher levels of vigor, dedication and absorption.

The Direct Relationship between transformational leadership and workplace engagement

Leaders, who exercise the above four behaviours, increase followers’ appealing of self-interests and emotional response by increasing their maturity, ideals, and personal identification (Bass 2008; Druskat 1994). Furthermore, by questioning followers’ beliefs, supervisors who engage in Intellectual Stimulating and Individualized Consideration behaviours are able to encourage followers to be more creative thinkers and innovators which will heighten their need to make significant contributions towards work. These contributions are likely to increase the intrinsic motivation of followers and involvement in the work. According to Harter, Schmidt & Hayes (2002, in Jones and Harter, 2005)

and Maslach, Schaufeli and Leiter (2001), in order to be engaged in work, employees must be involved, energetic and efficient in the face of difficulties, which might be created by transformational leaders intellectually stimulating and individually considerate behaviour. By showing humbleness, values, and concern for the well-being of others; followers are keen to show higher and new energies and enthusiasm in their work, i.e. vigor and dedication according to Schaufeli & Bakker (2004).

In further support of this claim, Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) suggest a positive link between supervisory coaching and feedback, which are key attributes of individualized consideration, and the components of workplace engagement (vigor, dedication and absorption). They agreed that when leaders act effectively as coaches, the leader-follower relationship affects employees positively as they feel empowered and proud. On the other hand, by supporting employees with effective feedback, transformational leaders generate positive leader-follower relations to satisfy employee needs, thus generating positive life outcomes such as higher wellbeing. Popper, Mayseless, and Castelnovo (2000: 269) claim that transformational leaders are more successful in motivating their followers to move beyond “Maslow’s (1954) need hierarchy from needs for safety and security to needs for achievement and self-actualization” (in Bass 1995: 467). Transformational leaders do this through improving followers’ self-efficacy (Pillai & Williams 2004), self-esteem (Shamir, House & Arthur 1993), sense of belonging to the organization (Sosik 2006) and optimism (Bass 2008; Medlin & Green 2009). These in turn will help employees to give extra effort in achieving work results. This aspect is similar to the scholarly views expressed in the extant literature on employees’ levels of vigor, dedication and absorption at work (Bakker & Demerouti 2008; Macey & Schneider 2008).

Finally, according to Schaufeli et al. (2001), engaged employees have higher levels of dedication and absorption in one’s work. Leaders who engage in Inspirational Motivation behaviour impart a sense of self significance to their followers (Bass & Riggio 2006). Transformational leaders have a positive influence on followers’ effort and performance levels, both of which could indicate high levels of absorption in one’s work. Supervisors who engage in Idealized Influence and Inspirational Motivation are often expected to depend on idealistic visions and persuasive communication to influence followers to immerse themselves in their work. Shamir, House and Arthur (1993, cited in

Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006: 329) found that supervisors who apply verbal persuasion, and clearly communicate the value of the organization's mission to develop a sense of followers' identification with their work unit and enjoyment in their task or role, which in turn, act as a powerful source for motivating followers' effort. This is likely to enhance the feelings of dedication and absorption (two of the components of engagement).

From the above, it is likely that transformational leaders engaging in the four specific behaviours develop a sense of a need in their followers to engage in work by being able to identify with the leaders. Therefore, the proposed overall relationship between transformational leadership and followers' workplace engagement can be hypothesized as follows:

Proposition 1: transformational leadership is positively related to followers' workplace engagement.

Transformational Leadership and Followers' Perceptions of Meaningful Work

Kular, Gatenby, Rees, Soane and Truss (2008) argue that organizations seeking to increase employee engagement should focus on employees' perceptions of work and the behaviours they experience towards work. Although there is strong evidence to support the influential role of transformational leadership, it is claimed that less is known about the mechanisms through which transformational leadership exerts its motivational effect (Arnold, Turner, Barling, Kelloway and McKee 2007). Yukl (1999) calls for more studies on possible mediators for the influential role of transformational leadership to explain the complete picture of the transformational leaders' influence. This conceptual paper aligns with this call and assumes that transformational leadership-workplace engagement is not a simple direct relationship, that it is indirect, and impacted through the mechanism of perceived meaningfulness of work.

Perceptions of workplace could play an influential role in mediating the relationship between transformational leadership and followers' levels of work engagement. Thus, transformational leaders could play a considerable mediating role to generate favourable employee outcomes such as, well being (Nielsen et al. 2008, 2006; Arnold et al. 2007), task performance and organizational citizenship behaviour (Piccolo & Colquitt 2006; Purvanova, Bono, & Dzieweczynski 2006; Piccolo, Greenbaum,

Den Hartog, & Folger 2010). Perceptions of work have a significant mediating role in such relations because employees take action on their perceptions and interpretations of the work situation, rather than on the work situation itself (Carr, Schmidt, Ford, & DeShon 2003). Transformational leaders, according to Nielsen et al. (2008: 17), motivates followers to perceive work characteristics positively since they provide personal attention to promoting development through individual consideration, enabling new ways of working, encouraging novel problem solving, and providing coaching and encouragement of specific behaviours in subordinates through intellectual stimulation.

When the mission of the organization and goals of the activities match with the employees' value system, they are likely to perceive work significant and meaningful (Quinn and Spreitzer 1997 in Zhu, Avolio & Walumbwa 2008: 66). Admittedly, employees naturally like to work with leaders whose behaviour create meaningful work. Transformational leaders have the ability to create meaningful work which generates in followers the need for a strong sense of purpose to be motivated to act (Burns 1978; Singer 1985; Bass 1985). To motivate followers, transformational leaders characterized by Inspirational Motivation create a shared sense of purpose through establishing clear shared visions and promoting group goals in their work. Bono and Judge (2003) claim that when there is a match between leaders' vision and followers' values, goals in hand are likely to be more meaningful. For example, inspirational and mentoring leaders are judged to articulate a compelling vision of the future, communicate optimism about future goals and provide followers with clear feedback about their achievements, which in turn increase followers' sense of value (Nemanich & Keller 2007; Nielsen et al. 2008: 467-468). Consequently, because transformational leaders enhance followers' personal values, personal identification, and self-worth (Kark & Shamir 2002, in Avolio & Yammarino 2002), followers' feelings are heightened to perceive work with more purpose, motivation and importance, which are integral to experience the meaningfulness at work.

Furthermore, transformational leaders characterized by Inspirational Motivation are likely to consider empowering in what is significant, and ignore others (Bass & Riggio 2006). Transformational leaders move followers out of their conceptual channels by reformulating the problems which need to be solved (Bass 2008). Supervisors who engage in Intellectual Stimulation, stimulate their followers'

efforts to be innovative and creative by questioning assumptions, reframing problems and approaching old situations in new ways (Bass & Riggio 2006: 7). Inspiring leaders on the other hand formulate a clear vision for their followers. According to Nielsen et al. (2008), transformational leaders provide clear feedback to the followers, and communicate with their followers providing them with knowledge and support to develop the skills that are required to analyse the information. With clearer and more effective communication from the leaders, more positive social relationships are likely to develop, resulting in more significant and meaningful work. Therefore, the proposed overall relationship between transformational leadership and followers' perceptions of meaningful work can be hypothesized as follows:

Proposition 2: transformational leadership positively relates to followers' perceptions of meaningful work.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK (THE INDIRECT RELATIONSHIP)

As highlighted earlier, supervisors who engage in the transformational leadership style tend to increase the value and significance of the work, and therefore satisfy the way that employees view their work. Hence, followers will be intrinsically motivated, increasing their feelings that they are more useful and personally worthwhile (Kahn 1990). When satisfying the higher order needs followers will be more self-efficacious, self determinant to act in the interest of the group and more likely to go beyond expectations to immerse themselves in their work (Lockwood 2007). Thereby, followers become more energetic, dedicated and absorbed (cognitive) in their work, having a higher sense for the three primary components of workplace engagement (Schaufeli & Bakker 2004; Macey & Schneider 2008).

Further support for this claim is based on the work of (Kahn 1990). Kahn's (1990) aim was to develop a theoretical framework explaining the psychological conditions that motivate people to engage in work roles. Kahn (1990) found that employees are more likely to perceive their work to be more interesting to engage when positive psychological conditions are available (i.e. psychological meaningfulness and psychological safety). He confirms that psychological meaningfulness is the strongest antecedent to be psychologically present in employees' role performance. Because our study

identifies the mediating role of followers' perception of meaningful work and there is evidence for a positive link between transformational leadership and meaningful work, this paper asserts that transformational leaders increase followers' perception of meaningful work, resulting in increased levels of engagement at the workplace.

The levels of a higher sense of engagement depend on the extent to which employees are prepared to offer discretionary effort (Medlin & Green 2009; Furness 2008; Lockwood 2007; Richman 2006; Lanphear 2004). Discretionary behaviour has been found to be an important outcome that is caused by engagement which involves mental and emotional commitment that employees have in exchange for benefits (Kular et al 2008; Macey, Schneider, Barbera, & Young 2009; Macey & Schneider 2008). Transformational leaders who are rated highly in the transforming style of leadership establish a positive connection with followers, thereby developing followers who are highly involved, committed and attached to their work. When followers believe in their organizations, they are likely to reflect that belief in their work outcomes. They will exert an extraordinary effort and go the extra mile in looking for creative solutions while taking intelligent risks (Wildermuth & Pauken 2008; Richman, 2006; Bass, 2008; Podsakoff, Mackenzie & Bommer, 1996; Shamir et al, 1993). Furthermore, leaders who articulate a shared vision and are stimulating create an optimal climate for work where followers can activate their lower order needs and also reach higher needs (self-actualization) (Bass 1985, 2008; Bass & Riggio 2006). Therefore, the proposed overall relationship between transformational leadership, followers' perceptions of meaningful work and followers' workplace engagement can be hypothesized as follows:

Proposition 3: perceptions of meaningful work positively mediate the relationship between transformational leadership and workplace engagement.

The above discussion is captured in Figure 1 below through a hypothesised process explaining the indirect relationship between transformational leaders and workplace engagement using significant and meaningful work as a mediator.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

In summary, we have argued that although there is evidence to suggest a relationship between transformational leadership factors such as idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration with the components of workplace engagement (vigor, dedication and absorption), little is known about the nature of this relationship. After reviewing the key literature addressing the nature of the relationship between transformational leadership and workplace engagement, we proposed a conceptual framework depicting an indirect relationship between transformational leadership and followers' workplace engagement mediated by the followers' perceptions of meaningful work.

IMPLICATIONS

The proposed conceptual framework (see Figure 1) has implications for organizations keen to improve employee engagement levels by developing transformational leaders. Several implications from this conceptual paper may be helpful for leaders and organizations in the development of workplace engagement. The conceptual framework of this paper will help human resource managers in designing the work more appropriately. Specifically, by providing work with socio-emotional, physical and economic resources, employees will increase their obligations and feelings of an elevated sense of belonging at work. Saks (2006) observes that employees are more likely to reciprocate with greater levels of engagement when they provided with suitable resources.

The conceptual framework of this paper recommends leaders to conduct surveys on employees' needs and concerns so they can collate critical information to set up interventions in workplace design. Regular interventions on workplace design will provide employees with more sense of significance in challenging circumstances. This would result in positive employee outcomes, thereby positively impacting on organization's competitiveness and profitability.

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Figure (1) Hypothesized framework explaining the indirect relation

