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13

Employee Engagement Interventions: HRD, Groups and Teams

Claire Valentin

Introduction

In the 20 or so years since the term employee engagement (EE) was first introduced (Kahn, 1990) there has been a burgeoning interest in the concept. EE is commonly described as a combination of commitment to the organization and its values, a willingness to help out colleagues, motivation, job satisfaction and discretionary effort by employees (CIPD, 2008). There is still considerable debate around EE; for example, is it a vital new concept for the future of business, or simply a reworking of familiar concepts such as commitment and motivation? One school of thought suggests that it is poorly conceptualized and has gained popularity with little empirical evidence of its validity. Despite its popular adoption, human resource development (HRD) theorists have been slow to mount the EE bandwagon (Shuck and Wollard, 2010); however there is now an emerging interest in EE from an HRD perspective.

This chapter will critically explore the rise of the concept in management thinking, and discuss its significance for HRD, and for working with groups and teams. Most writing on EE focuses on the experience of the individual employee and their relationship with the organization. There has been little research to date that specifically focuses on the significance of EE in the context of work groups and teams, and the role of co-workers and work groups/teams in facilitating engagement, although this does feature implicitly in much EE thinking. Recent work (CIPD, 2011) suggests that there can be a variety of ‘loci’ for engagement, including the task, work colleagues and the organization. Given the significance of team working in organizations, HRD’s experience of team learning and development may provide a useful focus for its contribution to this emerging area of practice and research.

The chapter will draw on emerging literature on EE, and unlike some earlier work from an HRD perspective, e.g. Shuck and Wollard (2010), will draw on research into

‘work engagement’ and on related aspects such as motivation, commitment, leadership and team development. The chapter first looks at how engagement is described and the arguments as to its significance for organizations, and examines common practices that claim to facilitate engagement, drawing out a number of controversies from research in business, management and psychology. The chapter goes on to discuss EE and HRD, arguing that HRD may be an inherent ‘driver’ of engagement. It then examines some of the antecedent concepts such as motivation and commitment, suggesting that there is much in research in these areas that has not been surpassed by more recent claims for EE. The chapter goes on to discuss work on the ‘locus of engagement’, examining evidence that people may be more engaged with their work group than with the organization as a whole, and the implications particularly for HRD.

The chapter concludes that EE is a construct that should not be adopted uncritically by the HRD field. There is much of interest in research but there are also considerable areas of debate. Commonly used engagement measures are often used without consideration of context or their limitations. Measures may focus on a general level and say little about the different experiences of individuals, and the nuances of factors that impact upon engagement may be ignored. The final section examines a range of debates and draws a number of conclusions concerning EE and HRD.

Origins and definitions of and claims for the employee engagement construct

The term EE was coined by William Kahn in 1990 in a paper in the *Academy of Management Journal* entitled ‘Conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work’. Kahn took an ethnographic approach in his studies of summer camp counsellors and staff in an architecture firm. His specific concern was in exploring the experience of the individual at work; what it means for a person to be ‘psychologically present’ during ‘work role performances’, and how they can be ‘disengaged’.

I define 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. I define personal disengagement as the uncoupling of selves

from work roles; in disengagement they will withdraw and defend themselves physically, cognitively, or emotionally during role performances. (Kahn, 1990, p. 694)

Other writers explore the idea of engagement and consider how organizations might be able to enhance EE towards achievement of organizational goals. As well as drawing on Kahn, work has drawn on research into related concepts such as motivation, burnout, commitment, empowerment and organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB), which includes discretionary or 'extra-role' behaviour. Studies have sought to demonstrate that EE is measurable; that it can be correlated with performance; that it varies between individuals; and that employers can impact on people's level of engagement, the latter being of particular relevance to HRD interventions (; Allen and Meyer, 1990; Macleod and Clarke, 2009).

In common with many such constructs, there is no one agreed definition of EE; during the course of a major review for the UK government, MacLeod and Clarke (2009) came across more than 50 definitions. Definitions of EE encompass attitudes, behaviours and outcomes; as in Kahn's work, elements of the experience of engagement can be emotional, cognitive and physical. Shuck and Wollard (2010) carried out a literature review to identify the seminal foundations of EE from the perspective of HRD. Their definition focuses on the individual employee and on the organizational interest: 'an individual employee's cognitive, emotional, and behavioural state directed towards desired organizational outcomes' (2010, p. 103). Others mention motivation and 'willing contribution of effort' (often cited as a willingness to 'go the extra mile' for the employer), positive emotions such as job satisfaction and feelings of empowerment, feelings of connection towards colleagues and to the organization, with a resulting positive impact upon performance (CIPD, 2008; Gatenby et al., 2009).

There is often an emphasis on the role of the organization in fostering engagement and specifying the desired outcome of engagement, suggesting a two-way relationship between employer and employee (Robinson et al., 2004). Engaged employees are said to feel commitment to organizational values and to be motivated to contribute to the success of the organization, whilst experiencing a sense of wellbeing. Macleod and Clarke (2009)

talk of a ‘virtuous circle’, where the preconditions trigger engagement and the results reinforce it:

Engaged organizations have strong and authentic values, with clear evidence of trust and fairness based on mutual respect, where two-way promises and commitments – between employers and staff – are understood and are fulfilled. (MacLeod and Clarke, 2009, p. 8)

In the psychological literature it is common to refer to ‘work engagement’ (WE), a more in-depth exploration of the individual experience than in some of the management literature, as might be expected. Three dimensions of the experience of WE have gained much attention. High levels of energy and mental resilience are referred to as *vigour*. A strong involvement in one’s work coupled with a sense of significance and pride is termed *dedication*. *Absorption* describes the experience of full concentration and being engrossed in work (Fairlie, 2011, p. 509). WE seeks to capture that workers should experience their work:

as stimulating and energetic and something to which they really want to devote time and effort (the *vigour* component); as a significant and meaningful pursuit (*dedication*); and as engrossing and something on which they are fully concentrated (*absorption*). (Bakker et al., 2011a, p. 5)

Although there are common elements to the definitions of EE (Brewster et al., 2007), and those of WE, they carry different emphases, underpinning assumptions and purposes, and tend to be largely from a normative perspective. Many are very broad, presenting overarching concepts and vision statements rather than being strictly definitions (Dicke, 2007).

Higher levels of EE have been associated with better financial performance in the private sector, better outcomes in the public sector and innovation. Engagement has been correlated with reduced sickness absence, reduced turnover, enhanced customer focus and advocacy for the organization. Brewster et al. (2007) conducted an extensive literature search and face-to-face interviews, looking at what outcomes organizations

were seeking from engagement. Findings included a desire to increase customer satisfaction and promote customer loyalty, improve customer service, facilitate change management, sustain growth and reduce turnover, to attract, retain and motivate staff.

Differences have been found in levels of engagement between types of work and workplaces, and differences in respect to levels of engagement. 4-Consulting (2007) found that the most engaged employees tend to be those in the youngest and oldest age groups, and that managers and professionals have greater levels of engagement than their colleagues in supporting roles. Robinson et al. (2007) also found that managers have higher levels of engagement than staff in operational, professional or support roles. Those in operational roles were found to have higher engagement levels than support staff. Perhaps surprisingly, professionals were found, overall, to have the lowest organizational engagement levels of all groups, in contrast to the findings by 4-Consulting.

Attridge (2009) identified a general pattern of distribution of engagement amongst employees, which fell into three basic groups. The top 20 per cent are highly engaged: such employees 'work with passion and feel a profound connection to their company' (Attridge, 2009, p. 387). Sixty per cent are moderately engaged. However, there is concern over the 20 per cent of employees who were found to be actively disengaged. It is claimed that these employees are not just unhappy in their work, but they undermine more engaged co-workers. Overall indicative figures suggest that levels of engagement in the UK are lower than they could be. Gallup suggests that in 2008 the cost of disengagement to the economy was between £59.4 billion and £64.7 billion (Robinson et al., 2007).

EE has become big business with large and small consultancies offering to enhance engagement. Governments have commissioned major studies and put significant resources into the issue. For example, a UK government website launched in 2010 to help leaders and senior managers across the public, private and third sectors 'reap the benefits of EE' claims that: 'In an era of constrained resources, where nearly every organization is seeking "more for less", there are few industries that can afford to ignore EE' (Macleod, 2010 online). Others argue that to compete effectively, companies must enable employees to apply their full capabilities to their work.

Contemporary organizations need employees who are psychologically connected to their work; who are willing and able to invest themselves fully in their roles; who are proactive and committed to high performance standards. (Bakker et al., 2011a, pp. 4–5)

Despite the widespread popularity of EE, there are competing interpretations in how it is defined and perceived, and there is still limited academic research to back up many claims made as to its worth. How engagement develops, how it is measured, and whether there are different types of engagement are all subject to debate. Some sources refer in general terms to engagement and its ‘presumed positive consequences’ (Macey and Schneider, 2008, pp. 3–4), whereas others identify different types of engagement, for example cognitive engagement, emotional engagement and behavioural engagement (Shuck and Wollard, 2010). Studies cover different sectors and use different methodologies, use a variety of definitions of engagement, focus on different elements of engagement, look at different performance outcomes, and at the contextual nature of engagement (Macleod and Clarke, 2009). Studies have been carried out by academics, consultancies and policymakers, each having potentially different interests and expectations. This clearly presents problems when reviewing findings.

Practitioner models of engagement (Zigarmi et al., 2009) tend to focus on the practicalities such as how to use the construct, and on outcomes. Research methodologies have been accused of being based in some cases ‘on anecdotal experience and good marketing’ (Shuck, 2011, p. 17). Engagement as a ‘folk’ term has been used to refer to a psychological state, a ‘performance constructed disposition’, or a combination of the two (Macey and Schneider, 2008). As a psychological construct it has been used to refer to both role performance and an affective state, including mood states and more temporary emotional states. It is also referred to as a disposition or trait, or the tendency to experience events, circumstances and situations more positively (Macey and Schneider, 2008, p. 11). Macey and Schneider (2008) present a useful conceptual framework, which distinguishes between trait engagement, state engagement and behavioural engagement. They suggest that engagement as ‘state’ has received more attention, either implicitly or explicitly, than other perspectives.

Practices to build an engaged workforce

Having introduced the concept of EE, this section looks at some of the common practices that organizations employ to attempt to increase engagement. As a starting point, engagement is typically measured by an employee attitude survey to assess how employees feel about issues in their work such as pay and benefits, communications, learning and development, line management and work–life balance (CIPD, 2008). There are a number of such surveys available. For example, one widely used measure of engagement is the Gallup Workplace Audit (Harter et al., 2002). This consists of 12 questions around the experience of work, including such things as being clear around expectations, having resources to complete work requirements, support and recognition from managers, opportunities for development, and social relationships. The ratings from all 12 of these questions are then combined into an index – being engaged, not engaged or disengaged.

The EE index developed by Robinson et al. (2004) also has 12 attitudinal statements. These are listed under the following categories: commitment to the organization and identification with its values; belief that the organization enables the individual to perform well; being a good organizational citizen, i.e. having a willingness to help others and be a good team player, to ‘go the extra mile’ and understand the wider context of the business. The indicator gives a score from one (highly disengaged) to five (highly engaged), with three as the neutral midpoint (Robinson et al., 2007, p. 3). Towers Perrin (2008) developed a four-category scale with questions under the categories of: think, feel, act – extra effort, act – stay.

The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2003) has 17 questions, and unusually is available freely online in over 20 languages (results contribute to ongoing research). It focuses on the individual’s feelings and experience, including such statements as ‘At my work, I feel bursting with energy’, and ‘I feel happy when I am working intensely’, which provides a focus more on the psychological experience of the employee. It measures three different forms of behaviour (proficiency, adaptivity and proactivity) and three levels at which role behaviours can contribute to effectiveness (individual, team, organization), giving rise to a matrix of nine subdimensions of performance (Parker and Griffin, 2011, p. 65).

There is not space here for an in-depth analysis and comparison of engagement surveys, other than to note that they exhibit some similar features but also some possibly quite significant differences, and that some have been subject to more research than others. Latham (2007), discussing work motivation, suggests that attitude surveys are a useful way to assess the current thinking and the ‘affect’ of employees. Others are critical of such surveys when applied to EE, especially those developed out of practice rather than for research. Measures of engagement are accused of being ‘composed of a potpourri of items representing one or more of the four different categories: job satisfaction, organizational commitment, psychological empowerment, and job involvement’ (Macey and Schneider, 2008, pp. 6–7). For example, the distinction between ‘engagement’ and ‘satisfaction’ is poorly conceptually clarified, and often there is simply a relabelling of measures used to assess job satisfaction (or climate or culture) as ‘engagement’. Measures of ‘conditions of engagement’ are labelled as measures of engagement itself (Macey and Schneider, 2008). There is neither any assessment of the *state* of engagement nor any indication of affect, energy or passion. As Macey and Schneider (2008, p. 8) note, this has conceptual limitations:

Although there may be room for satisfaction within the engagement construct, engagement connotes activation, where satisfaction connotes satiation ... ‘Satisfaction’ surveys might ask employees to describe their work conditions, and this may be relevant in assessing the conditions that *provide for* engagement (state and/or behavioural), they do not directly tap engagement. Such measures require an inferential leap to engagement rather than assessing engagement itself.

Generic measures of engagement do not highlight differences between groups of people: cultural, generational or related to the nature of the job. Definitions may therefore need to be more relevant to the organizational context (Brewster et al., 2007). Surveys that are tailor made for the organization may be more useful, developed on the basis of interviews with samples of employees or focus groups (Latham, 2007). The efficacy and limitations of assessments that intend to measure EE needs to be further explored (Fletcher, 2009).

This echoes some concerns over the construct validity of organization commitment questionnaires (Ashman, 2007).

Measuring engagement is usually a precursor to interventions to promote engagement, followed by a 'package' of measures aimed both at the level of the individual employee and the wider organizational level (Attridge, 2009). Factors that have been found to impact on engagement include leadership and management style; open, two-way communication; issues such as pay and benefits; fair and equal treatment; employing the 'right' workforce; career development and training; working hours; and health and safety (4-Consulting, 2007, p. 1). 'Drivers' of engagement are identified in 'clusters' – for example, the organization, management and leadership, and 'working life' (McBain, 2007). Robinson et al. (2007) distinguish between main drivers and subdrivers, arguing also that there is variability between and within organizations, and also individual differences. Bakker et al. (2011a) suggest that 'job resources' such as autonomy, social support from colleagues and skill variety can play both an intrinsic and extrinsic motivational role for the individual worker: 'Results show that increases in social support, autonomy, opportunities to learn and to develop, and performance feedback were positive predictors of ... work engagement' (p. 6).

The role of managers, and in particular the line manager, has emerged as a key factor in enabling and building engagement. Alimo-Metcalfe et al. (2008) carried out a three-year longitudinal study of 46 mental health teams working in the UK National Health Service (NHS). The study identified three dimensions to the leadership culture that supported engagement: engaging with others, visionary leadership and leadership capabilities. Employee engagement requires clear systems, processes and guidelines; a culture of engaging with staff, the antithesis of the 'blame culture'; and support for adaptability, experimentation, learning and innovation (Alimo-Metcalfe et al., 2008). The notion of 'engaging leadership' includes involving staff in developing a shared vision, being loyal to them, supporting them through coaching and mentoring, to help develop positive attitudes to work and a sense of wellbeing. Others argue that 'engaging managers' should facilitate and empower rather than control or restrict their staff; they should listen, provide feedback, and offer support and recognition for effort (Macleod and Clarke, 2009).

HRD and employee engagement

Despite the burgeoning popularity of EE, most of the research and writing has emanated from the HR or wider business literature. Shuck and Wollard (2010) and Shuck (2011) produced some of the first papers to consider EE from a purely HRD perspective. However, HRD is embedded in EE practices and theorizing. HRD processes and practices are inherent within most discussions on EE, and form a key part of practices claimed to facilitate engagement. There are references to training and development, learning processes, and specific interventions such as coaching and mentoring. There may be a general statement, along the lines that ‘training and development opportunities’ have been shown to contribute to engagement, or a more specific reference to a range of training and development interventions.

Robinson et al. (2007), for example, developed an EE diagnostic tool, which includes training, employee development and career development, arguing that these are key factors in helping employees feel valued and involved, and are seen to be major drivers of engagement. Questions in their engagement survey specifically focusing on training, employee development and career development included:

<list>

I am encouraged to learn new skills.

My line manager takes employees’ development seriously.

I am able to take time off work for training.

I have many opportunities for training.

I am given adequate training to do my current job.

My training needs are regularly discussed.

I feel I have equal access to training and development opportunities.

This organization actively supports my continuing professional development.

</list>

They note that: ‘In general, receiving training during the previous 12 months had a positive impact on engagement levels’ (Robinson et al., 2007, p. x). Engagement scores were higher for those who had received one or two days’ training, rising for those with three to five days, and six to ten days. Interestingly, those with over ten days’ training

showed a drop in engagement scores. They speculate that high levels of training might indicate for some respondents a performance problem that needs to be tackled.

They also ask about less formal development opportunities, such as secondments, coaching, multidisciplinary working and special projects. They found a direct relationship between respondents' views of development opportunities and their engagement levels: '40 per cent of those who thought that their development opportunities were good or excellent were highly engaged. Only 2 per cent of those who thought their development opportunities were good or excellent were disengaged' (Robinson et al., 2007, p. xi).

Having an appraisal or performance review within the past 12 months has been linked to engagement, as has possession of a personal development plan (PDP), having a good induction programme with training (Robinson et al., 2007), and career development opportunities and/or planning (Seijts and Crim, 2006). Kontakos sums this up:

An Employee Development Programme (EDP) designed for engagement aligns and monitors employees' job and career goals to the organizations' strategic goals. The development plan is customized for each employee, co-designed by the employee and fully supported by the line manager. Through the addition of accountability metrics, engaged employees recognize that their continuing value to the organization increasingly depends on achieving the goals of the plan. Subsequently, the organization secures the talent and skills necessary for operational excellence. (Kontakos, 2007, p. 76)

Relevant engagement practices range from supporting individual personal and professional development; support for staff to gain professional qualifications; skills development; management development programmes; induction programmes; work shadowing, job rotation and secondments; professional development portfolios and career planning; supporting communities of practice; formal training and on-the-job learning. An 'integrated HR offer' (Brewster et al., 2007) has familiar features associated with a strategic approach to HRD (Walton, 1999; McCracken and Wallace, 2000; Garavan, 2007).

Also of particular significance to HRD is the widely argued-for importance of both line managers and senior management support for EE. This indicates a further

management and leadership development role for HRD in order to develop both team leadership and management skills in general, and the particular skills needed to become 'engaging managers'.

Fairlie (2011) suggests that one way that HRD can address engagement is to promote 'human development'. He argues that meaningful work can be shown to link to engagement, as development is a core aspect of meaningful work. In a study involving 574 questionnaire recipients, he found that meaningful work characteristics were the strongest predictor of engagement: 'Given the development theme that is inherent in meaningful work (i.e. self-transcendence), the results would suggest a prominent role for HRD professionals in addressing these issues within organizations' (p. 517). He suggests that meaningful work should be audited on employee surveys, and makes a number of other suggestions as to how HRD professionals could communicate opportunities for meaningful work and enable the development of more opportunities.

Shuck and Wollard (2010) urge HRD to become more involved in the area of EE, arguing that:

There is a short window of opportunity for the HRD field to take a leading role in fostering EE and to do so, the concept needs to be clearly defined and structured in a way that helps practitioners, scholars, and researchers solve problems and offer solutions through a common language and understanding. (Shuck and Wollard, 2010 pp. 91–92)

One could agree that there is scope for HRD to become more involved in the whole issue of EE. However, achieving common understanding and reaching agreement on common definitions is more problematic. One could equally argue that what is required is more debate and widening of research rather than seeking more consensus on what is clearly a contested area.

One fruitful line of inquiry is to continue to interpret current models and approaches to EE from an HRD perspective, to establish the implications for HRD in terms of interventions. What might be the significance for HRD in each aspect of a model? For example, Saks' (2006) model examines the antecedents and consequences of EE. Antecedents include job characteristics, rewards and recognition, perceived

organization and supervisor support, and distributive and procedural justice. From an HRD perspective, one could assume that the role of training and development at all levels of the model, and recognition of development needs, could be incorporated in this.

Distributive and procedural justice should apply in how HRD opportunities are apportioned. And support from supervisors has implications for the training of managers, and links to the notion of ‘engaging managers’.

Motivation, commitment and employee engagement

Whilst there is not space to go into detail in this chapter, as employee motivation and commitment are important contributors to the concept of EE, some discussion is appropriate to inform our understanding. This section explores the link between EE and these earlier constructs. Meyer et al. (2004) note that the commitment and motivation literatures in organization psychology have evolved independently. Theories of work motivation have evolved out of general theories of motivation, whereas commitment study has its origins in sociology. Both concepts have been difficult to define. They argue that commitment and motivation, although related concepts, are distinguishable, and they suggest that commitment is one component of motivation. Latham (2007) suggests that there is no integrative overarching conceptual framework for motivation.

These points have significance for the study of EE. Commitment and motivation are intrinsic elements in the construct of EE, as well as being multidimensional constructs: so what complexities are added when one suggests that they are part of EE, itself a multidimensional construct? Added to this one needs to take account of the different emphases of research in disciplines such as psychology and sociology.

Organizational commitment describes the employee’s involvement and identification with their organization, and there are many similarities between EE and commitment. The concept of ‘perceived organizational support’ (POS) refers to how the employee views the degree that the organization is committed to them (Ferrer, 2005). Robinson (2003) distinguishes between five types of organizational commitment:

- Affiliative – compatible with organizations interests and values

- Associative – perception of belonging

- Moral – sense of mutual obligation

- Affective – job satisfaction

Structural – fair economic exchange. (Robinson, 2003, p. 12)

Meyer et al. (2004) develop an integrative model in which commitment is part of a more general motivational process, which also treats motivation as a multidimensional construct, and distinguishes between nondiscretionary and discretionary behaviour. Basic mechanisms are presumed to be involved in the development of commitment. Other factors (including human resource management practices and policies) serve as more ‘distal causes’ for motivation. This underlines the importance of not viewing motivation (and EE) as something that can be simply ‘switched on’ by appropriate HR/D policies and practices. Commitment is influenced by many factors, including ‘environmental factors’ such as ‘leadership, the social milieu, and the work itself’ (Meyer et al., 2004, p. 1002).

Meyer et al. (2004) also distinguish between three different elements to commitment; affective, normative and continuance: ‘affective attachment to the organisation, obligation to remain, and perceived cost of leaving’ (2004, p. 993). Research shows that affective commitment has the strongest positive correlation with job performance, organizational citizenship behaviour and attendance, followed by normative commitment. Continuance commitment tends to be unrelated, or even negatively related, to these factors (Meyer et al., 2004). Since EE surveys incorporate questions related to these aspects of commitment, for example asking if employees intend to stay working in their current organization, it can be seen that they draw selectively on research into organizational commitment. However, there is a danger that such surveys and their interpretations oversimplify complex human processes, and that theories of EE lack robust research of the kind that has been done into commitment and motivation.

Psychological wellbeing has been shown to be correlated with performance. Robertson and Cooper (2010) argue that the current focus of EE concentrates on the organizational benefits of employee commitment, attachment and citizenship, and not enough on employee psychological wellbeing. They suggest that this reflects a focus on ‘Narrow Engagement’, and argue for an integrated concept of ‘Full Engagement’, which pays equal attention to the wellbeing of individuals. To focus only on commitment and citizenship may risk employee’s psychological health (Robertson and Cooper, 2010).

Engagement also has a link to studies into the psychological contract, which refers to the perceptions of employee and employer of their mutual obligations to one another (Guest and Conway, 2002), and to literature on ‘psychological empowerment’ (Parker and Griffin, 2011). All the above suggests that we should not ignore research on motivation and commitment in favour of the ‘newer’ construct of EE.

Focusing on the issue of commitment from an HRD perspective, McCabe and Garavan (2008) suggest that organizational commitment is related to four factors: commitment to the organization, to top management, to immediate superiors and to workgroups (2008, pp. 533–534). In their study of nurses they noted a range of factors influencing commitment, including shared values; leadership, teamwork and support; training, development and career progression; valuing and staff recognition; professional, organizational commitment and involvement. These are very similar to some of the suggestions for EE. Chalofsky and Krishna’s (2009) reference to ‘meaningful work’ again echoes much in the EE literature. They identify three themes: sense of self, the work itself and sense of balance. They argue that ‘the primary drivers of commitment are identification with the organization’s goals and values, congruence between individual and organizational goals, and internalization of the organizational value and mission’ (p. 198).

Employee engagement and groups/teams

The focus of much discussion on EE tends to be on the individual’s engagement with the organization. However, employees may be engaged with aspects of their work, and not necessarily with the organization as a whole. Research into the ‘locus of engagement’ has found that employees identify with their team and business unit more strongly than with the wider organization (CIPD, 2011, p. 3). This can be explained by the fact that ‘people tend to be engaged with elements of their work environment which they encounter frequently, namely, their job and their immediate colleagues, including their line manager’ (CIPD, 2011, p. 19). However, there has been limited research to date into this aspect of EE. Since working in groups and teams is a significant factor in organizations, a useful focus is to locate the level of analysis of EE at the group level. This section examines some of the work in this area and draws out some implications for HRD.

A work team can be described as a group of individuals who work interdependently to solve problems or carry out work (Kirkman and Rosen, 1999, p. 58). There is much emphasis in engagement literature on the importance of the ‘engaging manager’, but might there also be a role for the ‘engaging co-worker’? A range of questions emerge: can teams/work groups contribute to individual EE? Can team management and development practices contribute to the engagement of individuals? Can engaged team members contribute to engagement of others in the team? Can a ‘team’ be ‘engaged’? Can we talk about ‘engaging’ team leadership and management?

Although there is little in the EE research to date to address these questions, we can draw on the extensive research on motivation and commitment in work groups and teams. Commitment theory recognizes that ‘commitment can be directed towards various targets, or foci, of relevance to workplace behaviour, including the organization, occupation, supervisor, team, program, customer, and union’ (Meyer et al., 2004, pp. 993–994). The team is an important source of organizational support, one that influences commitment (Bishop et al., 2000), and therefore engagement.

Meyer et al. (2004) introduce the term ‘commitment to social foci’ as distinct from ‘commitment to the goal’. This commitment may be affective, in which case the individual employee will tend to share the values of the particular target of commitment, and is likely to ‘experience self-set and assigned goals as autonomously regulated (integrated or identified regulation) and as ideals to be achieved (promotion focus)’ (Meyer et al., 2004, p. 1001). This suggests that the work group or team can act as a contributor to engagement.

A strong normative commitment, in contrast to affective commitment, means that individuals are likely to perceive goal acceptance as more of an externally regulated obligation. Normative commitment develops through cultural and organizational socialization and contributes to persistence in motivation (Meyer et al., 2004). This can also happen at the level of the team.

‘Perceived team support’ (PTS) has been related to job performance (Bishop et al., 2000, p. 1128). Support from the organization and support from the team may impact on employee commitment in different ways. Level of turnover, for example, seems to be more correlated with perceived support from the organization. Job performance,

however, seems to be more influenced by a supportive team environment, one that acknowledges and values individual members' contributions (Bishop et al., 2000). This suggests that the team can serve as a 'driver' of engagement. Commitment to organizational goals is mediated through commitment to a supervisor or team. Thus it is not only the action of managers that can support engagement, but also the role of the team.

Commitment may also be to a profession or to customers and client, with the same effect (Meyer et al., 2004). Research has explored the organizational commitment of professionals versus their commitment to their profession. Wallace (1995) in a study of lawyers working in large non-professional organizations found that organizational commitment was subject to a number of factors. These lawyers tended to create a subculture within the company, and shared a common culture of commitment to professional ideals and values. Commitment to the organization evolved through an adaptation of their professional ideology to incorporate the ideals and goals of the employing organization. Thus subgroups can contribute to aspects of engagement.

Exploring the issue of workplace motivation from an HRD perspective, Chalofsky and Krishna (2009) advocate a holistic approach that takes into account contextual and organizational factors. They argue that 'although motivation is an individual and personal process, it is also significantly influenced and shaped by the contextual and organizational factors' (p. 191). One of these is clearly the group/team. Again, as motivation is an aspect of engagement, this research is of interest.

There is evidence that factors associated with EE do focus at the level of work groups/teams. 'Job resources', including social support from colleagues and supervisors, have been positively associated with WE (Bakker and Demerouti, 2008). It has been argued that engaged workers perform better, and that the crossover of engagement among members of the same work team creates a positive team climate, and increases performance in others. Positive emotions experienced by engaged workers transfer engagement to others (Bakker and Demerouti, 2008; Bakker et al., 2006).

The study of motivation on team effectiveness has looked at the way that team members motivate or demotivate one another (Latham, 2007). Processes of 'social identification' occur and people tend to identify with a group that distinguishes them

from others. This occurs more with smaller rather than larger groups, as they are more inclusive: 'In larger groups, one's conception of self in relation to others is less informative since this is an identity that "everyone" shares' (Latham, 2007, p. 257). One could surmise an important role for the team as a locus of engagement.

As noted earlier, engagement interventions typically start with some sort of organization commitment survey, which assesses the level of engagement with 'the organization'. However, in the light of Latham's findings, it might be possible for an individual to demonstrate a lack of engagement with organization-level priorities, but to demonstrate engagement at the level of the team, and of the task. This suggests including more of a survey of 'team climate' or 'team commitment', contextualized at work group or team level. Rather than a generalized survey, this should be tied to the function and tasks of the teams being studied. It could focus on aspects such as quality or customer satisfaction, and be linked to methods such as the balanced scorecard approaches (Mathieu et al., 2008, p. 418). Engagement interventions might also usefully take place at the level of the team, in combination with the organizational or individual level. Teamwork competencies themselves can also be improved through training interventions (Mathieu et al., 2008), and this might in turn impact upon engagement.

As we have seen, a particular focus in EE is on the importance of taking an 'engaging' approach to management and leadership. Team leadership may be a useful focus for the study of EE, building on what is almost a century of previous research and theory into leadership research (Parker and Griffin, 2011). For example, transformational leadership behaviours have been positively related to perceived team effectiveness. Shared leadership suggests that leadership functions can be distributed across multiple team members rather than arising from a single formal leader (Mathieu et al., 2008, p. 450). Both these aspects have resonance with the argument around 'engaging managers'. Kirkman and Rosen (1999) looked at leader behaviours and team responsibility in 111 teams from four organizations. They found that external leaders' actions enhanced empowerment experiences. Empowered teams exhibited higher levels of productivity, customer service, job satisfaction, organizational and team commitment. Coaching has also been found to positively influence self-management, team-member relationship

Valentin, C. (2014) Employee Engagement Interventions: HRD, groups, and teams

quality, member satisfaction, team empowerment and psychological safety (Mathieu et al., 2008).

Srivastava, Bartol and Locke (2006) studied 'empowering leadership' in management teams and its effects on knowledge sharing, efficacy and performance. Although their study focuses on knowledge sharing, they make a number of useful observations relevant to this study. They defined empowering leadership as 'behaviours whereby power is shared with subordinates and that raise their level of intrinsic motivation' (p. 1240). Examples of empowering leader behaviour include: leading by example, participative decision-making, coaching, informing and showing concern. Clearly the notion of 'engaging leadership' has many similarities.

Kirkman and Rosen's (1999) work on team empowerment has resonance for EE. They define empowerment as 'increased task motivation resulting from an individual's positive orientation to his or her work role' (1999, p. 58). They see team empowerment as having four dimensions:

Potency – the collective belief of a team that it can be effective.

Meaningfulness – team's experiencing its tasks as important, valuable and worthwhile.

Autonomy – the degree to which team members experience substantial freedom, independence and discretion in their work.

Impact – when a team produces work that is significant and important for an organization (Kirkman and Rosen, 1999, p. 59).

This notion of empowerment goes beyond the idea of 'engaging leaders' to suggest a significant role for the team itself in facilitating engagement.

As teams become established and legitimate, they participate in networks and gain access to strategic organizational information, and have a greater sense of their impact on overall organization performance (Kirkman and Rosen, 1999). Team empowerment can be impacted from four areas – external leader behaviour, production/service responsibilities,

team-based human resource policies and social structure (Kirkman and Rosen, 1999). 'Empowering leaders' are seen to exhibit similar behaviour to the 'engaging leaders' of EE. This includes 'delegation of responsibility to the team, soliciting team input into decision-making, seeking to enhance the sense of personal control of individual team members, encouraging team goal-setting and self-evaluation, and setting high team expectations' (Kirkman and Rosen, 1999, p. 60). Potential problems with multiple loci of engagement need also to be considered. For example, members of teams may experience greater loyalty to the team than to the organization, which may hinder overall performance (CIPD, 2011).

Employee engagement – an emerging construct

It seems that EE is here to stay, at least for the present. It is a concept that has evolved in popularity in practice, and for which there is an increasing amount of research being undertaken. Engagement has been heavily marketed by consultancy companies, appears to have a resonance with practitioners and policymakers, and taps into ideas about the meaning of work (Parker and Griffin, 2011). There are questions around whether it really is adding something new, given that definitions and meanings of engagement in the practitioner literature often overlap with other earlier constructs. It is, however, presented as a more distinct construct in the academic literature. Following an extensive critique, Macey and Schneider (2008) conclude that the concept of engagement does have distinctive characteristics, as an integrated set of constructs, interrelated and with relationships to a common outcome. Saks (2006) concurs that it is distinguishable from related constructs such as organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behaviour and job involvement.

However, it is important to recognize the contested nature of much of what passes for research and practice in EE. If it is to be a useful construct then it needs to be regarded as one that is complex and multi-faceted. We need to draw on the research being done in the various relevant domains within management studies and work psychology. In the urge to discover something new, we should not dismiss the huge body of research and theory in contributory areas such as commitment and motivation.

A special issue of the *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, online in August 2010, was dedicated to a review of the concept of work engagement

(WE). One overall conclusion was that there is sufficient theory demonstrating that engagement is a motivational construct, but no overall agreement on how it is conceptualized, echoing discussion on EE. WE is variously defined as organizational commitment, especially affective commitment, as emotional attachment to the organization and desire to stay in the organization, and with respect to extra-role behaviour (discretionary behaviour) (Bakker et al., 2011a). Two core dimensions of WE seemed to attract most agreement – energy and involvement/identification, which are both included in the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES).

There is also debate around whether EE is best conceptualized as a broad, generalizable construct (organizational climate) or a more specifically focused construct (service climate), climate for innovation (Bakker et al., 2011b). These different conceptualizations might suggest different levels and foci for engagement interventions. Another question is whether engagement is a stable state, or if there are fluctuations in engagement across the working day. Many studies appear to assume that engagement is expected to be relatively constant, given the presence of specific job and organizational factors. But this simplifies the possibility of engagement as a more temporal ebb and flow (Macey and Schneider, 2008, p. 11).

How engagement develops is another aspect of interest. Shuck and Wollard (2010) propose that cognitive engagement occurs before emotional and behavioural engagement. Cognitive engagement cannot be measured as it is not yet behaviourally manifested. It is a catalyst to the next two levels. A more sophisticated understanding of engagement suggests that prescriptions for organizational efforts to promote engagement may need to be revised.

The costs of driving up EE have received limited consideration, in contrast to attempts to quantify the benefits. For example, over-engagement may have potential unintended consequences. If a worker gets overly involved in work activities, they may experience work/ family conflict, and other negative consequences (Brewster et al., 2007). Possible dangers of over-engagement could also include becoming too internally focused and overreliant on current organizational arrangements, leading to difficulties in coping with major change and contributing to stresses within teams (4-Consulting, 2007).

In Kahn's (1990) research, three psychological conditions necessary for individual engagement emerge: meaningfulness, safety and availability, and he explores each of these aspects further. For example, he suggests that psychological meaningfulness is influenced by three factors: task characteristics, role characteristics and work interactions. Kahn also notes that work behaviours include both rational and unconscious elements, which are influenced by individual, social and contextual sources, including interpersonal, group, inter-group and organizational factors (Kahn, 1990). The implications here are that engagement is not simply something that occurs uniformly under specific conditions, but is more personal and subject to a potentially wide range of contextual factors.

Engagement has been conceptualized as implying 'discretionary effort', defined as extra time, brainpower and energy; something special, extra, or at least atypical. However, 'effort' requires clear definition. Equally, if we define engagement solely in terms of extra effort, this suggests 'just doing more of what is usual. It might equally involve doing something *different* and not just something *more*' (Macey and Schneider, 2008, p. 40).

There is scope for a great deal more focus on HRD and EE. EE also has potential to provide a vehicle for HRD practice to achieve a higher prominence in organizations, and provide a focus for HRD to make a more strategic contribution. There is significant evidence that HRD interventions contribute to EE as part of a package of measures. However, there is less evidence on specific HRD interventions and their contribution to EE, pointing to the need for further research. Research from an HRD perspective could examine specific HRD interventions, and their impact on engagement. Indeed, given the prominence of HRD interventions within current EE practices, perhaps HRD is an intrinsic contributor to engagement? Research into the theme of 'locus of engagement' is still in its infancy, and there is scope at different levels to explore HRD's contribution to engagement through working with teams.

The area of groups and teams and EE is of particular interest to HRD, and provides opportunities for research and practice interventions. These could focus on the HRD role in driving and supporting engaged team working, and training and development for team leadership and management.

Evaluation is another area for fruitful research. Developments in HRD theory on evaluation have to a large extent failed to be taken up fully by practitioners, evidenced by the continuing popularity of simplistic evaluation measures. Perhaps evaluation could be viewed more favourably in some instances if it is equated with ‘measuring engagement’. There is also scope for cross-cultural studies, which has not really been touched on in this chapter. EE is presented as a universalist conception, and there is little examination of culture. But, as Flesher notes: ‘a Western definition of a leadership value/competence may not only have no direct language translations into Japanese, it may also have no conceptual translation’ (Flesher, 2009, p. 257).

Generally, EE as a construct will continue to encourage further theoretical and empirical research. Whilst it has gained significant popularity, it is ill-defined and conceptually problematic. Yet boundary setting is equally problematic for terms like this that seem to take on a life of their own. Perhaps, as Lee (2001) states for HRD, particular definitions of EE are only valid for particular times and places. EE is indefinable because it is in a continual state of *becoming*, and we can seek to influence this, but it is not helpful or appropriate to seek to finalize a definition.

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