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## Work engagement as a key for unlocking performance

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## SUMMARY

Since people spend around one third of their day at work, the question of which factors enhance their well-being and their motivation at work is an important one. Moreover, organizations have to face several challenges, such as a quickly changing global economic market, digitalization, and continuous need for innovation (Cascio & Montealegre, 2016; Frese, 2008; Leibold & Voelpel, 2006). This means that employees are needed who want and can deploy their competences and capacities. Work engagement is a construct that is an asset for both employees and organizations. As such, it is related to several positive outcomes, such as employees' well-being (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010), commitment (Halbesleben, 2010), individual performance, and reduced turnover intentions (Gutermann, Lehmann-Willenbrock, Boer, Born, & Voelpel, 2017). Accordingly, work engagement is often regarded as a competitive advantage for organizations (Gruman & Saks, 2011), resulting in attention from both researchers and practitioners (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010). The question that arises is how work engagement can be fostered in organizations. Related to this question, this dissertation tackles four overarching scientific challenges: conceptualizing and analyzing work engagement at different organizational levels (challenge 1), accounting for the role of leadership as a driver for employee engagement (challenge 2), providing a measure of behavior-focused engagement that bridges scientific and practical needs (challenge 3), and illuminating causal relationships between work engagement and performance (challenge 4).

These challenges are addressed by means of four empirical field studies, most of which were conducted in close collaboration with organizational practice, using large-scale samples of up to  $n = 31,590$  employees. The studies span a range of analytical methods, including multilevel path modeling and cross-lagged panel analysis. Every study addresses one or more of the four challenges mentioned above. After a brief introduction which lays out

the research questions and theoretical challenges (chapter 1), chapters 2-5 present four empirical studies at different organizational levels, concluding with a general discussion in chapter 6.

In chapter 2, the role of toxic and ethical leadership on work engagement and exhaustion via leader-member exchange (LMX) is analyzed. Previous research mostly focused on positive leadership styles (e.g., Breevaart et al., 2014). This study expands this knowledge by investigating the effects of destructive leadership on employees' well-being. 311 employees working in different professions were surveyed and the data were analyzed by path analyses in MPlus. Following the idea that bad leadership might have stronger effects than good leadership, the study indeed revealed that the negative effect of toxic leadership on engagement is stronger than the positive effect of ethical leadership. Additionally, LMX, which describes the relationship between leader and employee, was uncovered as an underlying mediator of this relationship. Further, it was investigated which employee characteristics may buffer the negative effect of destructive leadership on LMX. Results showed that employees' need for autonomy moderates the relationship between toxic leadership and LMX in such a way that this relationship was less strong for employees with a high need for autonomy.

In chapter 3, the question was raised whether leaders' work engagement can be transferred to followers' work engagement via LMX and whether LMX is related to individual performance and reduced turnover intentions. Accordingly, 511 employees nested in 88 teams were surveyed using a multi-source data design. By applying multilevel path analyses in MPlus, it was found that leaders' work engagement was indeed positively related to followers' work engagement, highlighting LMX as an underlying process. Previous research had focused on crossover processes between spouses (e.g., Demerouti, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2005) and among team members (e.g., Bakker, Van Emmerik, & Euwema, 2006;

Lehmann-Willenbrock, Meyers, Kauffeld, Neining, & Henschel, 2011). The present study was able to extend these previous findings to engagement transference between leaders and followers.

In chapter 4, an assessment method to measure behavioral engagement is introduced, the Engagement-Index (ENG-I). The ENG-I aims to bridge scientific and practical needs. In the literature there are two prominent definitions of work engagement. One of this describes work engagement in a behavioral way (Kahn, 1990), whereas the other one focuses on work engagement as an attitude (Peccei, 2013; Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma, & Bakker, 2002). This dissertation applies both definitions. However, since especially for practitioners, behavioral engagement is regarded as more important for organizational functioning than is attitudinal engagement (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002; Peccei, 2013) the study addresses this concern by introducing the ENG-I. As such, the development and validation of the ENG-I is shown, using data from four samples of a German Service Organization at four measurement points ( $n = 1,432$ ;  $n = 31,590$ ;  $n = 30,956$ ;  $n = 29,917$ ). The ENG-I showed good psychometric properties.

In chapter 5, the term *organizational engagement* is introduced. This term describes collective engagement at the organizational level. Previous studies called for research that sheds light on the causal link between work engagement and performance at the organizational level (Barrick, Thurgood, Smith, & Courtright, 2015; Harter et al., 2002; Salanova, Agut, & Peiró, 2005). This study therefore addresses this call by testing causal relationships between organizational engagement and objective organizational performance measures by means of a time-lagged research design. To this end, data of 29,997 employees at time 1 and 27,472 employees at time 2 who worked for 156 organizations were analyzed. By applying cross-lagged path modeling in MPlus, it could be confirmed that organizational engagement indeed predicted organizational performance.

In all four empirical chapters, theoretical and practical implications are discussed. Additionally, the theoretical implications of the overarching four challenges are discussed in the general discussion in chapter 6. Finally, practical implications, possible limitations and future research directions that derive from my findings are presented.