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Gutermann, D.

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CHAPTER 6

GENERAL DISCUSSION

This dissertation had the aim to deepen the understanding of work engagement at different organizational levels. Additionally, it considered leadership as a lever (chapters 2 and 3) and work performance as an important outcome (chapters 3 and 5). Furthermore, in order to bridge researchers' and practitioners' demands concerning the assessment of work engagement, a behavioral engagement measure, the ENG-I, was developed and validated (chapter 4) that meets both scientific and practical needs. Whereas all four empirical studies presented in chapters 2-5 contribute to the overarching goals described above, they were presented separately. The following general discussion explains how these separate findings relate and integrate with one another.

OVERVIEW OF THE MAIN FINDINGS

First, by following the idea that when leadership functions as a lever, the effects of bad leadership are stronger than the effects of good leadership (see also Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001), our research indeed revealed that this was the case for work engagement and exhaustion (chapter 2). Whereas ethical leadership was positively related to work engagement and negatively related to exhaustion, our study showed a stronger negative effect of toxic leadership on work engagement. Furthermore, the study identified LMX as mediating these relationships. Moreover, it has been found that the mediation of the effect of toxic leadership on work engagement and exhaustion via LMX was stronger than the mediation of the effect of ethical leadership. Finally, employees' need for autonomy was able to buffer the effect of a toxic leader on LMX by moderating the relationship between toxic leadership and LMX. This moderation effect implied that the relationship between toxic leadership and LMX was less negative for employees who had a high need for autonomy.

Second, the relationship was investigated between leaders' work engagement and followers' work engagement, performance, and turnover intentions (chapter 3). Results showed that leaders' work engagement was positively related to followers' work engagement via LMX.

Hence, leaders who are highly engaged themselves can transfer this state of engagement to their followers via a good leader-follower relationship. Additionally, in line with previous research, employee engagement was positively related to individual work performance and negatively related to turnover intentions.

Third, chapter 4 presented the development and validation of the ENG-I. As a new engagement assessment that aims to measure behavioral engagement of employees in organizational settings, the ENG-I meets scientific and practitioners' demands. As such, ENG-I had a robust construct and convergent validity, good internal consistencies and test-retest reliabilities. Finally ENG-I had a good predictive validity, by predicting performance. Additionally, practical experience with the ENG-I in the collaborating organization to date is perceived to be good.

Finally, chapter 5 reports on a study about work engagement at the organizational level. To this end, the term of organizational engagement was introduced, which showed a relationship to organizational performance. Findings confirmed causal linkages such that organizational engagement predicts organizational performance and not the other way around.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Taken together, the four empirical chapters provide several theoretical contributions to the literature on work engagement.

First, the focus was on work engagement at different organizational levels. Therefore, the studies were based at the individual, team, and organizational level (chapters 2, 3, and 5). Second, calls were addressed for more research on the role of leadership for work engagement (Bakker, Albrecht, & Leiter, 2011). Accordingly, the role of ethical leadership, toxic leadership, LMX, and leaders' own work engagement as possible predictors for work engagement were studied (chapters 2 and 3). Third, this dissertation aimed to bridge the science-practice divide in

assessing organizational engagement and addressing calls for more research on behavioral engagement by developing and validating the Engagement-Index as a new measure for behavioral work engagement (chapter 4). Finally, the research focused on the causal link between work engagement and employee and organizational performance (chapters 3 and 5). In the following, these four theoretical implications are discussed in more detail.

Theoretical challenge 1: Work engagement at different organizational levels

To the best of our knowledge, there have been only a few studies that have studied work engagement at higher organizational levels than the level of individual employees, namely the team and the organizational level (e.g., Bakker, Van Emmerik, & Euwema, 2006; Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002; Salanova, Agut, & Peiró., 2005; Tuckey, Bakker, & Dollard, 2012). Addressing recent calls for research on work engagement at different organizational levels (e.g., Bakker & Demerouti, 2016), work engagement was investigated at the individual, team, and organizational level.

First, the finding that work engagement can be transferred from leaders to followers via LMX, which, in turn, is related to employee performance and turnover intentions (chapter 3) builds on and expands earlier research on contagion effects of work engagement among team members (e.g., Bakker et al., 2006). This study expands these findings by showing in chapter 3 that engagement *contagion* can also occur between leaders and followers. Additionally, this study highlighted LMX as a mediator in the relationship of leadership and work engagement. As such, these findings shed light on predictors of work engagement by expanding existing knowledge on job resources (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli., 2001) and transformational leadership (Breevaart et al. 2014) as engagement predictors at the team level.

Second, the same study (chapter 2) enlarged earlier findings by Tuckey and colleagues (2012), who found that empowering leadership was positively related to employees' work engagement in a sample of firefighters and their supervisors. Additionally, these authors uncovered that a good work environment is an important underlying process between

empowering leadership and work engagement (Tuckey et al., 2012). The study in chapter 2 expanded upon these findings by showing that leaders' own work engagement is related to employees' work engagement, and that this process can be explained by LMX.

Third, the research contributes to the existing research on work engagement at the organizational level by showing that organizational engagement leads causally to objective organizational performance measures (chapter 5). Whereas previous studies focused on work engagement within units (Harter et al., 2002; Salanova et al., 2005) or in organizational subsamples (Barrick, Thurgood, Smith, & Courtright, 2015), this study is - to the best of our knowledge - the first that investigated work engagement at the organizational level in a time-lagged design. By collecting data at two measurement points in a cross-lagged model, our research could consider causality issues. Our findings showed that organizational engagement leads to performance and not the other way around. This result thus addresses several calls to uncover such causal linkages (Barrick et al., 2015; Harter et al., 2002; Salanova et al., 2005).

Theoretical challenge 2: Leadership and work engagement

Most studies that have investigated the antecedents of work engagement have relied on the Job Demands-Resources model in order to explain the emergence of work engagement (e.g., Hakanen, Schaufeli, & Ahola, 2008). Yet, little research has explicitly investigated the relationship between leadership and work engagement. Most previous studies in this regard have focused on positive leadership styles, such as transformational leadership, because of the motivational potential of such styles for employees (e.g., Breevaart et al., 2014; Breevaart, Bakker, Demerouti, & Derks, 2016). By focusing on both positive and negative leadership styles, this dissertation contributes to the existing research body of leadership and work engagement.

First, the finding that negative or destructive - in our case toxic - leadership has a stronger negative effect on work engagement than does positive or constructive - in our case ethical - leadership (chapter 2) complements existing research on positive leadership styles and work

engagement. As an example of existing research, Breevaart and colleagues (2014) found that daily transformational leadership was positively related to employees' work engagement, and that this process was mediated by job resources, which finding indicates that transformational leaders create a positive work environment for their subordinates. Our study expanded this finding by confirming that positive (ethical) leadership is positively related to work engagement, whereas the opposite holds for toxic leadership.

Second, this dissertation expanded the knowledge on possible boundary conditions or moderators for the effects of specific leadership styles on employee engagement. Specifically, the finding that employees' need for autonomy can buffer the negative effect of toxic leadership on employee engagement adds to the existing research by showing that employee variables interact with a destructive leadership style in such a way that the negative relationship between toxic leadership and LMX is less strong for employees high in their need for autonomy. Similarly, previous research by De Vries, Roe, and Taillieu (2002) identified the need for leadership as a moderator between leadership and employee outcomes. As such, the finding that the need for autonomy of employees moderates the effect of leadership styles ties in with the findings by de Vries and colleagues (2002) and adds to this knowledge.

Third, two studies investigated whether LMX was a mechanism underlying the relationship between leadership and employee engagement (chapters 2 and 3). The finding that LMX mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and toxic leadership on the one hand, and employees' work engagement on the other hand, aligns with meta-analytic findings by Dulebohn, Bommer, Liden, Brouer, and Ferris (2012), who identified LMX as a mediator between leadership variables and employee outcomes. Furthermore, the findings build on previous work by Breevaart, Bakker, Demerouti, and Van den Heuvel (2015), who found that LMX was positively related to job resources, which, in turn, were related to work engagement. As such, our findings confirm the relationship between LMX and work engagement and add to

this research theme by showing that LMX works as a mediator between leadership variables and employees' work engagement.

Theoretical challenge 3: Bridging the science-practice divide in assessing organizational engagement

During the past 20 years, work engagement has received attention by many researchers and practitioners alike (Bailey, in press). However, there is a clear tendency that the foci of research and practice on engagement are moving away from one another (Wefald & Downey, 2009). Organizations often use their own engagement surveys which most of the time are not validated empirically. Furthermore, organizations often do not apply instruments based on empirical evidence in practice (Bailey, in press). By introducing the ENG-I as a psychometrically sound and simultaneously practice-approved measure, chapter 4 aimed to tackle this issue.

Peccei (2013) differentiates between behavioral and attitudinal engagement. The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES, Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma, Bakker, 2002) is a well-known instrument in academia that assesses attitudinal work engagement. Considering the fact that organizations are often interested in behavioral aspects of engagement while the scientific literature has less to offer for assessing such aspects, the ENG-I was intended to form an instrument that addresses this concern by considering both scientific standards and practical needs. Chapter 4 describes the research in which we attempted to operationalize work engagement in a way that fulfills scientific as well as practical requirements (Vance, 2006; Wefald & Downey, 2009). This study adds to findings from studies measuring work engagement in the following three ways.

First, chapter 4 focuses on behavioral components of work engagement (cf. Macey & Schneider, 2008; Peccei, 2013; Wefald & Downey, 2009). Behavioral aspects of work engagement may be more strongly related to organizational performance than attitudinal

engagement because attitudes lead to behavior which in turn lead to work performance (e.g., Cascio, 2007; Wefald & Downey, 2009). Items in the ENG-I such as “I actively participate in meetings,” or “I work on my tasks in a persistent and goal-oriented manner” align with the definition of behavioral engagement by Kahn (1990).

Second, the findings related to the ENG-I’s predictive validity for employee performance and turnover intentions showed that the ENG-I was positively related to employee performance, whereas the opposite was the case for turnover intentions. As organizations are interested in fostering employees’ motivation and well-being and improving their organizational performance based on measuring employees’ engagement, this finding is meaningful for theory and practice (Gruman & Saks, 2011, Vance, 2006; OECD, 2016).

Finally, the ENG-I is a measure that integrates scientific and practical requirements for engagement assessment. Organizations often have the aim to use an engagement measure that is accepted by their employees and executives. Unfortunately, organizations hardly apply measures that are offered in the academic literature (Bailey, in press). Instead, research and practice on engagement often seem to develop away from each other (e.g., Bailey, in press; Guest, 2014a; Wefald & Downey, 2009). However, an interview study by Bailey (in press) revealed that practitioners regard it as important to know academic approaches to work engagement in order to apply evidence-based human resources management. The ENG-I was developed in order to bridging this research practice divide, by means of meetings with an interdisciplinary focus group of scholars and practitioners. The ENG-I indeed appears to fulfill practical and scientific requirements, such as acceptability, applicability, and good psychometric properties.

Theoretical challenge 4: Engagement as a predictor for employee and organizational performance

Finally, the studies in this dissertation contribute to theoretical knowledge regarding the relationship between engagement and performance. The study reported in chapter 2 investigated

this relationship at the individual level (chapter 2) whereas the study reported in chapter 5 investigated it at the organizational level (chapter 5).

First, the findings confirmed the idea that employees' work engagement is related to individual work performance. This finding is in line with earlier findings in different organizational contexts (e.g., Bakker & Bal, 2010; Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2008).

Second, the result that organizational engagement predicts objective organizational performance expands research on engagement and performance (e.g., Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2008; Harter et al., 2002; Rich, Lepine, & Crawford, 2010; Salanova et al., 2005). Whereas previous studies on engagement beyond the individual level had investigated unit-level engagement (Harter et al., 2002; Salanova et al., 2005) or engagement in organizational subsamples (Barrick et al., 2015), the present findings showed that the engagement-performance link applies to the organization as a whole. Even though practitioners and consultants have labeled the relationship to organizational performance a core characteristic of work engagement, the empirical literature has had little to offer in this regard until now (Macey, Schneider, Barbera, & Young, 2009; Vance, 2006). The present findings address this research gap and emphasized the meaning of work engagement as a competitive advantage for organizations as a whole. This systemic perspective of engagement and its performance consequences as an organizational phenomenon constitutes an important conceptual advance beyond the individual-level roots of the engagement construct.

Third, the identified link between organization-wide engagement and performance was based on a cross-lagged design. This design and the corresponding findings speak to calls to answer causality issues concerning engagement and organizational performance (Barrick et al., 2015; Harter et al., 2002; Salanova et al., 2005).

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The studies reported in chapters 4 and 5 were executed in close collaboration with an organization. Moreover, chapters 2 and 3 were based on field data. Taken together, the empirical findings reported in these four chapters provide several managerial implications.

First, the insights from this dissertation offer knowledge about the antecedents and consequences of work engagement at different organizational levels. Specifically, the findings reveal that work engagement can be fostered at the individual and dyadic level by promoting positive leader behavior and leader engagement, and by promoting good relationships between leaders and employees. Moreover, the finding that organization-wide engagement is important for organizational performance suggests that organizations should approach enhancing engagement at different levels. Regular dialogues and dyadic feedback between supervisor and employee could be a starting point for increasing engagement at the individual level.

Additionally, the finding that constructive leadership styles predict engagement suggest that stimulating a culture of employee-oriented leadership is an important lever for promoting an engaged workforce, and that leaders' own work engagement can be a fruitful starting point. Organizations should strive to make engagement and employee-oriented leadership a core value of their leadership development efforts.

Second, the ENG-I forms an engagement measure that meets both scientific and practical requirements. The ENG-I has been applied in a nationwide network of service organizations since 2013, and has been described in best practice publications of the OECD (2016) and the European commission (2016). The instrument is currently being applied in a fixed rhythm followed by a continuous follow-up process to improve engagement in this organization. In this process, the respective organizational units discuss the results, identify strengths and weaknesses, conduct workshops to identify steps for improvements, and implement these improvements until the next ENG-I assessment. This organization-wide, systematic process

ensures that engagement is at the core of human resource management and development.

Moreover, it is possible to analyze the results of different groups, such as age or gender groups, and to use these results in order to implement differentiated HR instruments.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The studies reported upon in this dissertation have several strengths, including the use of field data, the consideration of engagement at multiple levels, the implementation of a research design that allows causal interpretations regarding the engagement-performance link at the organizational level, and the close collaboration with organizational practice. Yet, the cumulative findings still should be viewed in the light of their limitations and the associated need for future research.

First, most of the data for this dissertation were collected among white-collar workers in a German nonprofit service organization. Hence, the present findings do not necessarily generalize to different groups of employees (such as blue-collar workers) or different cultural settings. Accordingly, future research should focus on data from other industries and cultures. For example, the leader-follower transference of engagement (chapter 3), might be weaker in cultures that are more hierarchical, and stronger in cultures that are less hierarchical (such that followers may feel relatively close to their leaders).

Second, future research may integrate the focal variables of chapters 2 and 3 into one empirical study to be able to investigate followers' need for autonomy or personality traits as possible moderators of leader-follower engagement transference. Other relevant boundary conditions could include the amount of contact and interaction frequency between leaders and followers, and interdependent work, which might moderate the relationship. It may, for instance, be expected that a transference of work engagement might be stronger for leaders and followers who interact very frequently with one another.

Third, all studies in this dissertation assumed engagement to be an inherently positive construct. This approach aligns with the research stream of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Yet, there might also be “too much of a good thing”, namely a dark side of engagement (cf. Bakker et al., 2011; Maslach, 2011). Regarding other positive constructs, authors argued that too much commitment could lead to employees’ losing their critical thinking in organizations (Randall, 1987). Similarly, employees’ high self-esteem can lead to an underestimation of time that is needed to fulfill a task (Bakker et al., 2011; Buehler, Griffin, & Ross, 1994). Additionally, it has been shown that too much optimism can lead to insufficient preparation, underestimation of risks, and lower performance (Brown & Marshall, 2001; Grant & Schwartz, 2011). Accordingly, it is conceivable that there might be a dark side of engagement as well. As such, it may be that intensely engaged employees are excessively absorbed in their work, work overtime regularly, or take work home, which might undermine recovery and may lead to work-family conflict (e.g., Nohe, Meier, Sonntag, & Michel, 2015). Researchers similarly have pointed out that “in order to burn out, a person needs to have been on fire at one time” (Pines, Aronson, & Kafry, 1981, p. 4). Although work engagement is negatively related to burnout (e.g., Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001), there might be a curvilinear effect of engagement in such a way that too much engagement can lead to exhaustion and less performance. Future research could consider this idea by applying longitudinal research designs.

Fourth, although the ENG-I and the related findings focus on behavioral aspects of engagement, the study still relied on survey methodology to measure engagement. Hence, future research could apply actual behavioral measures, such as behavioral observations by experts, in order to validate the findings.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Work engagement is an asset for employees and organizations and can form an important competitive advantage. Therefore it is important to know the drivers and outcomes of

engagement and how engagement can be enhanced at different organizational levels, namely the individual, team, and organizational level. This dissertation addressed four challenges presented in four empirical chapters on how work engagement can be managed in organizations. By means of field data from research-practice collaborations, it was shown that leaders affect work engagement at the individual and team level. Furthermore, the studies reported upon showed how behavioral work engagement can be assessed in organizations, and how work engagement is causally related to work engagement at the organizational level. As such, this dissertation aimed to offer knowledge on drivers and outcomes of work engagement, which forms an asset for organizational success and for employees' well-being.

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