



Engagement and Wellbeing: An Integrated Model

Interim Report

Chris Burton and Linda Buchan, 2015

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'Engagement' is without doubt the flavour of the decade for organisational development and HR practitioners. With an estimated global cost of dis-engagement reaching a staggering £450 Billion per annum, amounting to £29 Billion in the UK alone, it's no wonder that it represents the holy grail of performance opportunity for organisations of all shapes and sizes.

This has in turn led to an exponential growth in "engagement consultants" keen to exploit the wave of new and innovative research in this field, all desperate to demonstrate the tangible returns on investment which have so far eluded scientific scrutiny. Whilst there may be an abundance of empirical and anecdotal evidence linking engagement with positive outcomes for both organisations (improved performance, reduced turnover, greater creativity, better commitment, enhanced customer experience etc.) and individuals (raised motivation, improved sense of fulfilment, greater happiness, positive challenge etc.) the lack of a single consistent definition of "engagement" means that many of the interventions which claim to drive improvements are not supported by measurable results.

So what do we mean by 'engagement'?



"A DISTINCT AND UNIQUE CONSTRUCT
CONSISTING OF COGNITIVE, EMOTIONAL
AND BEHAVIOURAL
COMPONENTS...ASSOCIATED WITH
INDIVIDUAL ROLE PERFORMANCE"

Saks (2006)

Whilst there is currently no globally recognised definition of engagement, there is increasing acceptance in the academic community that engagement is a psychological state and is "*a distinct and unique construct consisting of cognitive, emotional and behavioural components...associated with individual job performance*" (Saks, 2006).

This definition helps to establish two important principles:

- That engagement is *individual and personal* – we're not arguing that a group can't be engaged, but we are suggesting that each individual within the group might be engaged with different things, or for different reasons. This is important as it establishes that organisations cannot build engagement at a group level, interventions must rather be focused on engaging every individual within the group.
- That engaged people make an *emotional, cognitive and physical commitment to their work* – in other words they commit to their work on more than one level.

This definition also implies that, through association with individual job performance, engagement should have specific benefits to organisational interests. Therefore, we will argue that although people may be engaged with (or committed to) something, unless the focus of that engagement is

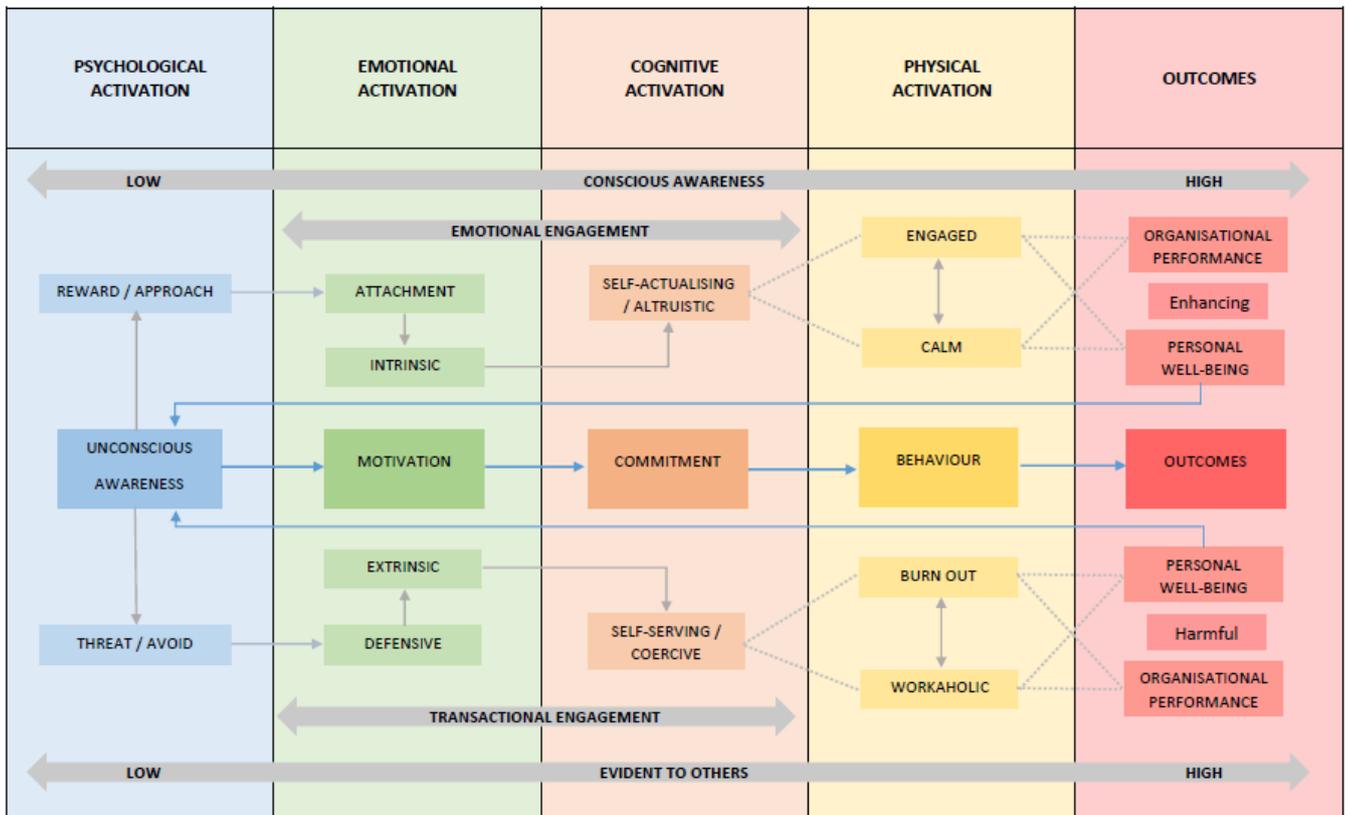
aligned with organisational intent and adds value as such, then some engagement (or commitment) may actually be detrimental to organisational interests. We believe that more than representing a psychological state in its own right, engagement depends on a positive psychological activation as an antecedent to the emotional, cognitive and behavioural processes which follow. Therefore, without the psychological activation a state of ‘full engagement’ (Robertson and Cooper, 2009) is unlikely.

Additionally, we believe that the drivers of engagement are perfectly aligned with, and support, a conceptual framework for psychological and physical well-being in the workplace and that one cannot therefore be addressed without the other. In other words, engagement contributes to well-being and vice versa.

Finally, we propose an extended model of ‘locus of engagement’ which shows that individuals can be engaged with (or committed to) different things at different times (we identify six discrete loci of engagement) and that not all engagement (or commitment) is necessarily beneficial to the organisation.

Based on the above principles, this paper proposes an integrated model which considers the state of engagement as a multi-faceted progressive process beginning in an individual’s unconscious state. This leads to the conclusion that the current efforts to build engagement may start from the wrong place; current interventions typically address motivational or behavioural states whereas evidence arising from recent advances in neuro science suggest the seeds of engagement (and therefore well-being) are sown at a much deeper and earlier state of consciousness.

INTEGRATED MODEL FOR ENGAGEMENT AND WELL-BEING



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Psychological Activation

Neuroscientist Evian Gordon proposes that perhaps the most fundamental organising principle of the brain is to minimise threat and maximise reward; the same principle which initiates our 'fight or flight' response (Gordon 2008). This deep-rooted psychological survival mechanism is described by David Rock as an 'approach/avoid' response i.e. we will approach anything that our brain perceives as a reward and avoid anything which presents a perceived threat. To our unconscious, the perceived threats encountered in a modern organisation are no less real than the threat of a sabre-tooth tiger was to our prehistoric ancestors. And we react accordingly.

Rock summarises a wide range of neuroscience findings to identify five domains which trigger our approach / avoid response, often at an unconscious level:

Status – our perceived relative importance to others

Certainty – being able to predict the future (even the immediate future)

Autonomy – our personal sense of control over events

Relatedness – the sense of safety we get from being with familiar people (people like 'us')

Fairness – our perception of fair exchanges between ourselves and others

In his 2008 article, Rock suggests that the unconscious neural response to threat and reward influences the extent to which we will engage with (or avoid) the external stimulus. Furthermore, the chemicals released by our brain when we experience reward (dopamine, oxytocin, serotonin) provoke feelings of happiness, well-being and a willingness to cooperate with others whilst the chemicals associated with threat (cortisol and adrenaline) may protect our immediate survival but have a long-lasting and significantly damaging effect on our health and longevity. Researcher Michael Marmot has gone so far as to suggest that status is the most significant single determinant of human longevity and health, even when controlling for education and income. This finding is supported by Sapolski's work with primates (Sapolski, 2002) which found that in primate communities, higher status monkeys have lower baseline levels of cortisol, live longer and remain healthier.

It therefore follows that for organisations to build engagement they must activate the reward circuitry in the brain to create a positive psychological state which will form the basis for motivated, engaged individuals who choose to contribute positively to organisational performance. It also follows that any activation of the threat circuitry will result in a psychological state which inhibits any likelihood of engagement.

Whilst much of the approach/avoid response functions at a purely unconscious level, our emotional reaction follows almost immediately and can be felt consciously. An example of this would be the discomfort we might experience walking alone down a dark lane, late at night. We may find difficulty in describing exactly what's activating our threat response (lack of 'certainty' expressed as a fear of the unknown perhaps) but the emotion it provokes, 'fear', is very real to us.



“WE PROPOSE THAT ENGAGED EMPLOYEES ARE EXPERIENCING HIGH LEVELS OF POSITIVE REWARDS IN THE SCARF DOMAINS, AND DISENGAGED EMPLOYEES ARE EXPERIENCING HIGH LEVELS OF THREATS IN THE SCARF DOMAINS”

Rock, D. and Tang, Y. (2009)
The Neuroscience of Engagement

Emotional Activation

According to the much cited work on Emotional Intelligence by Daniel Goleman, there are eight basic emotions (the prime colours of the emotional landscape): Five defensive emotions of **fear, anger, disgust, shame and sadness**, two positive, attachment emotions of **joy/excitement and trust/love** and one 'potentiator', **surprise** which can trigger a switch from the survival to the attachment emotions or vice versa.

Research has shown that the positive psychological state activated by an approach response, as described above, will lead to one of the attachment emotions whilst not surprisingly the defensive emotions are activated by our threat response. A state of intrinsic motivation (Deci 1995) is dependent on a positive emotional state; we will be intrinsically motivated to engage with something which activates our internal reward mechanism. In order to engage with something once our threat response has been activated, we'll require an extrinsic motivator to provide the 'push' needed to overcome the fight or flight response.

The most common extrinsic motivator in an organisational context is of course money which is often used to encourage people to do things they aren't otherwise inclined towards. When intrinsic motivation is missing, money is also the reason many people give for their dis-satisfaction e.g. "I'm not being paid enough for this..." The extrinsic motivation is transactional by nature; i.e. the motivating effect lasts only as long as the motivator is in place whilst intrinsic motivation forms the basis of long term positive emotional engagement.

This concept of transactional and emotional engagement was introduced and discussed in the CIPD Research Insight; ***Emotional or Transactional Engagement – does it matter?*** (May 2012).

There is growing evidence that all emotions are evolutionarily adaptive; i.e. they have a role in natural selection and survival. It was originally believed that only negative emotions (fear, anger, disgust etc.) had specific action tendencies associated with them (Frijda, 1986); e.g. fear is linked with the urge to escape, anger with the urge to fight and disgust with the urge to expel.

A State of Flow

Positive emotions contribute to achieving a state of "flow" (Csikszentmihayli 1990) where an individual is fully absorbed in their work and perceives a task as being intrinsically motivating, aligning perfectly with our earlier definition of engagement.

The 'happy' chemicals released by the brain enhance our feelings of well-being. For example; the emotion of trust causes a release of oxytocin which causes us to feel positive resulting on more open, collaborative behaviour.

Distrust on the other hand results in a threat response which causes the release of cortisol, reducing blood flow to the higher executive brain functions, making us feel stressed and suppressing our immune system.

When these emotions are experienced the body reacts by mobilising the autonomic support necessary for the most appropriate action; increased blood flow to muscles, increased heart-rate, increased adrenaline and cortisol. Exposure to these emotions has been shown to inhibit cognitive process and narrow behavioural options as well as being detrimental to health in the long term.

More recently, it has been proposed that positive emotions such as joy, interest, pride and love also have associated specific action tendencies (Fredrickson, 2001) and that they all share the ability to broaden people's momentary thought-action repertoires and build their enduring personal resources, ranging from physical and intellectual resources to social and psychological resources. In other words, the brain's response to positive emotions is to broaden our thinking, bringing more options to mind and extending the range of our behavioural response – we become more creative, more curious, more collaborative, better at solving problems and generally more successful. We are more inclined to 'engage' with the stimulus creating the emotion in the first place.



THE BROADEN AND BUILD THEORY OF POSITIVE EMOTIONS

THE THEORY SUGGESTS THAT POSITIVE EMOTIONS, ALTHOUGH FLEETING ALSO HAVE MORE LONG LASTING CONSEQUENCES... POSITIVE EMOTIONS ARE VEHICLES FOR INDIVIDUAL GROWTH AND SOCIAL CONNECTION: BY BUILDING PEOPLE'S PERSONAL AND SOCIAL RESOURCES POSITIVE EMOTIONS TRANSFORM PEOPLE FOR THE BETTER, BUILDING PSYCHOLOGICAL RESILIENCE AND GIVING THEM BETTER LIVES IN THE FUTURE.

Fredrickson, 2001

So far we've shown that a positive psychological state is a pre-cursor to a positive emotional state leading in turn to intrinsic motivation (the brain's way of encouraging us to do more of something because it makes us feel good). Conversely, a negative psychological state will provoke one of the defence emotions under which state we will require a strong extrinsic motivator in order to push us to behave in a way that is naturally less rewarding (or punishing). It is the rationalisation of these emotional states (how we make sense of our feelings) that then encourages us to behave in a particular way.

Cognitive Activation

Although we may not always be fully aware of it, our decisions and actions are determined by the way in which we interpret, or make sense of, how we feel about things. Let's look at that in action:

If I'm given a task which activates my brain's reward mechanism (for example by enhancing my perception of my status), I feel instantly more emotionally positive and naturally drawn (intrinsically motivated) to the work. The internal rationalisation (if I was aware of it) would go something like – "I feel really good about this; it makes me feel important and the more I do the better I feel. I should do more..." If however I'm given a task that activates my brain's threat response (for example I might believe the objectives aren't clear which might make success uncertain), I'll experience one of the defence emotions (I may be angry or fearful at the lack of clarity) and my behaviour would be based on my instinct for survival. If however I'm paid a large sum of money to complete the task the rationalisation might go something like – "I don't really like this, it feels very risky but hey, I'm being paid a load of cash to do it so I might as well give it a go".

Under these circumstances my survival instinct is still primed; I'm on the lookout for danger and I'll proceed cautiously. I'm not really committed to the task, so I'll only do what has to be done in order to earn the money which is the only thing motivating me to continue. Remove the money and you remove my commitment... I may of course have other non-financial reasons for committing to something in an otherwise threatening environment, but these are likely to be **self-serving** rather than **self-actualising**. (Corbetta & Salvato, 2004).

So cognitive activation is the point at which an individual makes a (usually) conscious decision to behave in a particular way; they make the choice whether to engage or disengage with something. If they're in a positive state, intrinsically motivated by their work then that's what they'll engage with however if they're in a negative state extrinsically motivated by money (for example), then it's really the money they're committing to or engaging with.

Locus of Engagement

Our own research in this area has caused us to conclude that, assuming a positive psychological and emotional state, there are six things that an individual can engage with (or commit to) each of which represents a separate 'locus' of engagement:

1. Their **Job** – this is the focus of much of the research into engagement.
2. Their **Colleagues**
3. **External Agencies** – this could include partners, clients, customers, suppliers etc.
4. A **Greater Cause** or 'meaning' or 'purpose'
5. Their **Line Manager**
6. The **Organisation** as a whole and includes senior leadership, vision, values and purpose etc.

In the ideal situation, the organisation benefits most when commitment (or engagement) is balanced across all six loci; in such circumstances an individual thinks and feels positively about each separate locus and makes a conscious decision to engage or commit openly with each.

Our research has shown however that under certain circumstances an imbalance across these six loci, or an overemphasis on a single locus can actually be detrimental to the organisation, even although it may appear (using traditional measures) that individuals are still 'engaged'.

Physical Activation

Whilst engagement, or commitment (to something) is a cognitive, internal and personal decision, it is manifested in the workplace through behaviour. So the conscious decision of an individual to engage, be neutral or to actively dis-engage from work is played out through their consequent behaviour which can be either beneficial, or harmful, to the organisation. Individual behaviour is determined by the psychological, emotional and cognitive states which precede action, and by the locus of any commitment arising from these states. Where the preceding states are positive and balanced across a number of loci this is likely to lead to engagement beneficial to both the organisation and the individual concerned. Where the preceding states are negative however, or where the locus of engagement is imbalanced, we are likely to see behaviours which are detrimental to the organisation. In such circumstances the outcomes are also far less predictable.

For example, imagine a charity or voluntary organisation where the focus of an individual employee's commitment is to a 'greater cause'. Such people are driven by strong value systems and the organisation is often no more than an instrument through which they can serve the purpose they believe in. As long as they perceive the organisation's purpose as being aligned with their own, they will appear committed to the organisation which employs them. However, if at any time they perceive the organisation to be in conflict with their own commitment, then they are likely to (consciously or unconsciously) work against the organisation's intent. This has been felt by many so called third sector organisations since the financial crisis of 2008 drove an increased need for commercialisation of operations. The need to operate as a 'business' conflicts with individual beliefs about how to best serve the 'greater cause' resulting in a resistance to the changes that need to be made, even though not making those changes threatens the very existence of the organisation.

Another example might be where an employee receives their psychological and emotional nourishment (and therefore their intrinsic motivation) from a source outside their own organisation (an External Agency). This is not uncommon with sales staff or more senior Account Directors who spend more time with their client than they do with their own employer. If the commitment to the external agency is sufficiently strong, then there is a likelihood that the individual will weigh decisions in favour of the external agency, to the detriment of their own organisation. Such people are often said to have 'gone native'.

Fire & Rescue Service Case Study

In 2015 we completed a study with one of the UK's Fire and Rescue Services where we also witnessed this effect in action.

Data collected through survey, focus groups and interviews showed a high level of individual commitment to both Greater Cause (keeping people safe and putting out fires) and to Colleagues (people like me; in this case my immediate team).

The result was a culture which felt almost tribal in nature with relatively small groups working closely and extremely effectively together; strong bonds built on high levels of trust, all focused around a common sense of purpose. Any attempt by the organisation to restructure the teams or re-define job role was perceived as a threat and was resisted both overtly but also in more subtle ways.

The consequence was an apparent resistance to change which undermined the organisation's strategic objectives and which frustrated senior leaders. By traditional measures, people appeared 'engaged' however their behaviour demonstrated a reluctance to work in the organisation's best interests.

Time and again we've witnessed this 'dark side' of engagement play out in reality; where there is an over focus on one particular locus and where that focus reaches a tipping point, it can very quickly shift any benefits away from the organisation in favour of something else, possibly to the significant detriment of the parent organisation.

What we're describing in the above sections is a fairly logical progression down a positive or negative sequence of psychological triggers, emotional responses, cognitive processes and subsequent action. Where the progression is positive then behaviours associated with 'engagement' naturally follow and this is likely to be in the best interests of the organisation and the individual. However, the opposite is also true; dis-engagement is predicated on triggers which initiate a defensive, extrinsically motivated response. It's easy to see how the resulting behaviour can detrimentally affect not only the performance of the organisation, but may also have a real and lasting impact on both the psychological and physical well-being of the individual.

Outcomes

An interesting and relatively recent development has been the increase in focus directed at improving employee well-being rather than trying to build engagement; there appears to have been a recognition that many of the organisational benefits associated with engagement actually arise from the personal benefits to individual health and well-being (reduced absence, greater resilience, improved health and lower stress). There is however increasing evidence which demonstrates there's no need to consider the two outcomes independently of each other (engagement and well-being), indeed it is probably detrimental to do so.

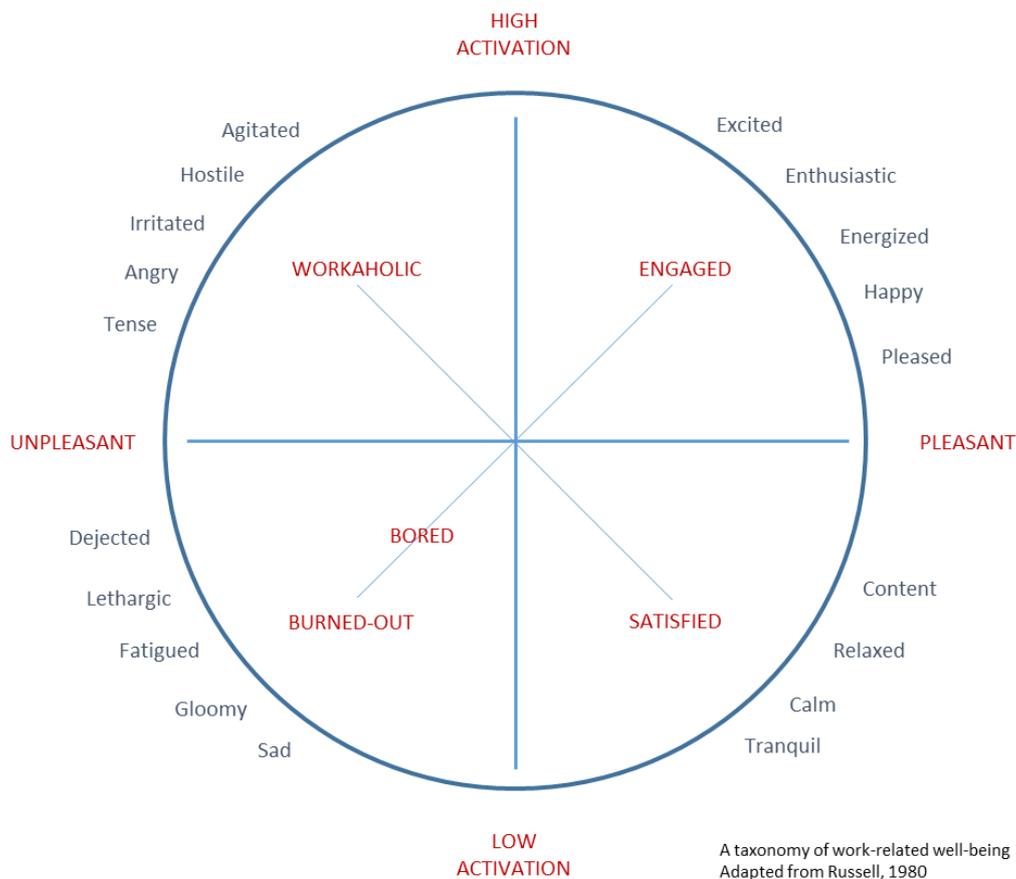


“THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EMPLOYEE HEALTH AND EMPLOYEE COMMITMENT AND ENGAGEMENT IS MULTI-FACETED. INDEED THERE IS RESEARCH EVIDENCE THAT SUGGESTS A TWO WAY, POSSIBLY SELF-REINFORCING RELATIONSHIP; HEALTHY EMPLOYEES ARE MORE COMMITTED AND MORE COMMITTED EMPLOYEES ARE MORE HEALTHY”

Bevan 2010

Whilst we can state that the same psychological, emotional and cognitive antecedents which underpin engagement, also provide the basis for personal health and well-being, it is still important to remember that the outcomes are different. Healthy employees are undoubtedly good for an organisations performance but some of the behaviours associated with engagement do not arise from good health alone (e.g. creativity and collaboration). In other words, whilst the foundations of engagement and well-being are the same, additional consideration must be given in order to achieve the full benefits associated with engagement. I can be healthy, but not engaged.

In *A Circumplex Model of Affect*, Russell (1980) defines a bi-polar taxonomy of emotional states which has more recently been applied to the working environment to describe the full extent of work-related well-being (Schaufeli, 2014). The model helps to explain why positive emotions lead to engagement whilst negative emotions lead to workaholism and burn-out. The actual behaviours presented by someone who's engaged versus someone who is a workaholic might at first glance appear similar (they both appear committed and hard-working) however the motivations and outcomes will be very different. In the case of engagement, motivation will always be intrinsic and based on the psychological positivity necessary for health and well-being, whilst a workaholic will be extrinsically motivated and coping with negative (defence) emotions and psychological threats.



*“The growing currency of engagement has generated a large number of studies from academics, consultancies, and organisations that look at the impact of high levels of engagement on outcomes for the business or organisation. This research, together with anecdotal evidence, exists across a wide range of industries and suggests there is a strong story to be told about the link between employee engagement and positive outcomes. In particular, there are a number of studies that demonstrate that private sector organisations with higher levels of employee engagement have **better financial performance**, and high levels of engagement are associated with **better outcomes in the public sector.**”* Engaging for Success (The MacLeod Report), 2009

Positive Outcomes arising from a state of Engagement

In the table below we've listed some of the more commonly quoted positive organisational outcomes arising from high levels of engagement. These are based on scientific and empirical studies, many of which have been independently carried out over a significant time-period. We've also listed in the same table the personal outcomes associated with the psychological and emotional states necessary for engagement to exist.

Organisational Performance	Personal Well-being
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lower absenteeism • Higher employee retention • Improved quality and reduced errors • Increased employee effort and productivity • Increased sales • Higher profitability, earning per share and shareholder returns • Enhanced customer satisfaction and loyalty • Faster business growth • Greater flexibility and adaptability • Greater organisational resilience • Higher levels of safety • Better collaboration • Higher levels of commitment • Improved creativity and innovation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lower stress • Greater personal resilience • Job satisfaction • Greater sense of happiness • Contentment • Better psychological and physical health • Healthier / less illness • Longer life • Improved family and social context

CIPD guidance suggests that *“engagement is important for performance but that it unlikely to be sustainable unless it goes hand in hand with well-being”*.

In our integrated model the link between engagement and well-being is rooted in a positive psychological state; there is now a significant body of evidence suggesting that this is the only state in which real engagement can exist, and that it is also critical to psychological and physical well-being. It is no longer sufficient to view engagement as **being** a positive psychological state, it must be preceded by events or circumstances which initiate the reward circuitry in the brain encouraging the “approach” response which leads ultimately to full engagement. Although this positive psychological state may at first be unconscious, it provokes a range of positive “attachment” emotions which broaden both cognitive and behavioural options and which are critical for engagement.

We also now understand that people can engage with different things and for different reasons leading us to conclude that traditional methods of building engagement will ultimately fail to deliver their promised results. You may already have experienced this in your own organisation; an engagement “programme” initiated for all the right reasons and which seems to be doing all the right things, fails to deliver the expected outcomes. We're not arguing that some of the interventions associated with 'engagement programmes' won't have value in their own right, however they won't necessarily build the levels of engagement that they set out to achieve, or do so in a sustainable manner.

Implications for organisations

So what does this mean in practice? Our initial observations across several organisations suggest four clear implications:

1. ***The drivers of positive engagement begin earlier than current models and interventions account for.*** This has serious implications for both how we measure engagement and how we set about building it. Traditional models largely ignore the psychological activation and therefore don't address issues which might be inhibiting engagement further down the line. You can do many things to improve job design and physical working conditions but if psychological threat mechanisms are being activated in some way (even unconsciously), it's highly unlikely that they'll help to build sustainable improvements in positive engagement. It will therefore be necessary for organisations to find a way of measuring and addressing the psychological drivers of engagement as well as the more traditional drivers.
2. ***Engagement is both personal and individual.*** This requires organisations to understand and accept that engagement "programmes" are unlikely to succeed in delivering the highest levels of engagement; they might be successful in situations where there is very low engagement initially or where there are endemic problems effecting the whole workforce, but once these have been addressed and resolved improvements will only be made by understanding and improving engagement at an individual level.
3. ***Different people can be engaged with different things at different times.*** As we've discussed throughout this paper, the accepted definition of engagement is increasingly associated with task, work, or job as this is when it has most measurable benefit to the organisation. But our own research has shown that people can be engaged (or committed) to other things; we've identified six clear loci of engagement which traditional measures of engagement tend not to differentiate between; people are either engaged or dis-engaged. Only by understanding what people are actually engaged with can organisations make changes and influence behaviour in a way that has positive outcomes for both the organisation and the individuals concerned.
4. ***Not all "engagement" is necessarily good for the organisation in the long term.*** Whilst engagement with something other than task, work or job might produce benefits for the individual we've found that an imbalance across several loci of engagement can create tensions which result in behaviour detrimental to organisational interests. This may not be a result of a conscious choice; it may be an unconscious "defence" of whatever we're engaged with most. For example, if people are more engaged with their team rather than their work, then attempts at re-structuring may be resisted. This has consequences for how organisations approach change and further supports the need to understand where people are deriving their positive activation (their locus of engagement).

To discuss what these implications might mean for your organisation or to participate in the ongoing research programme please contact the authors at info@designed4success.co.uk

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