

HOW LEADERS INFLUENCE THEIR FOLLOWERS' WORK ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract

Because of the worldwide economic crisis, an increasing number of organizations have to deal with financial problems. This has forced organizations to reorganise their structures and processes, and has led to a growing global competition. It seems evident that in such a situation employee work engagement is crucial. In this article, we address the role of leaders in inspiring their employees. We specifically focus on the impact of transformational leadership on employees' work environment and work engagement. Using specific examples, we provide leaders and coaches with tools to enhance employee work engagement within a short time period.

Work Engagement

Work engagement is a positive, work-related, motivational state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption (Bakker & Leiter, 2010; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Vigor refers to high energy levels during work, and the mental resilience to cope with difficult situations. Dedication refers to being enthusiastic about work; engaged employees are proud of their work and inspired by their daily tasks. Finally, absorption refers to concentration during work and immersion in work activities. Work engagement differs from job satisfaction, because the latter is a less active state. Satisfied employees are content with their situation and therefore do not feel the urge to act or change anything. In contrast, engaged employees are very active and take the initiative whenever necessary. This suggests that engagement may be of crucial importance for organizations in the current, turbulent economic times.

Importance of Work Engagement

There are several reasons why engaged employees are important for organizations. First, research has shown that engaged employees perform better compared to non-engaged employees. For example, a study by Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, and Schaufeli (2009)

showed that financial returns were higher on days that employees were more engaged. Second, engaged employees have better health; both mentally and physically. Research has shown that engaged employees less often have a cold and report fewer head- and back-aches compared to non-engaged employees (Demerouti, Bakker, De Jonge, Janssen, & Schaufeli, 2001). This means that engaged employees can use all their energy during their work. Third, engaged employees are less often absent and are more committed to the organization (Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2008; Schaufeli, Bakker, & Van Rhenen, 2009). Finally, work engagement is of high importance to organizations because engaged employees influence the work atmosphere in a positive way – engagement is contagious. Engaged employees transfer their enthusiasm to others; causing colleagues to become engaged as well and perform at a high level (Bakker & Xanthopoulou, 2009).

Transformational Leadership and Work Engagement

The leadership style used by leaders can have a profound influence on employee work engagement. Some leadership styles undermine employees' motivation and well-being, while other styles contribute to motivation and well-being (Einarsen, Aasland, & Skogstad, 2007). Here, we focus on transformational leadership, because this leadership style has the potential to influence employee work engagement. Transformational leadership consists of four dimensions: a) idealised influence; b) inspirational motivation; c) intellectual stimulation; and d) individual attention (Bass, 1985). Idealised influence means that leaders are role models/men-

tors to their employees and employees trust and respect their leaders. Inspirational motivation refers to leaders inspiring their employees with their vision of the future. Leaders are optimistic about the future and create a team spirit that transcends employees' self-interest. Idealised influence and inspirational motivation together are also called charisma. Leaders, who use intellectual stimulation, encourage their employees to approach existing problems in a different way and to come up with new ideas, even if these ideas differ from the leaders' ideas. This is also promoted by providing employees with individual attention and by delegating tasks that match employees' needs and abilities. Finally, transformational leaders acknowledge that every follower is unique, has specific needs, and needs attention. By using transformational leadership, leaders give meaning to the work and make employees feel that they contribute to the organization in an important and meaningful way by performing their work well. This ensures that employees are more dedicated to their work and perform their work with more energy and enthusiasm; in other words, they are more engaged. Furthermore, transformational leaders may influence their followers' work engagement because their own enthusiasm, optimism and positive attitude may cross over to the followers.

Research has shown that transformational leadership can be trained. In 1996, Barling, Weber, and Kelloway developed a transformational leadership training that consists of two phases. Phase 1 consists of a group session in which leaders are provided with information about transformational leadership and its consequenc-

es. This session is followed by phase two; which consists of four individual sessions. During these sessions, plans are developed to use the learned behaviours in real life; leaders receive feedback about their leadership style and their progress is monitored. An empirical evaluation of the training indicated that employees in the intervention group rated their leaders as more intellectually stimulating, charismatic and as providing more individual attention than employees in the control group (in which the leaders did not receive any training). Thus, leaders can be trained to show transformational leadership behaviour effectively and in a relatively short time period.

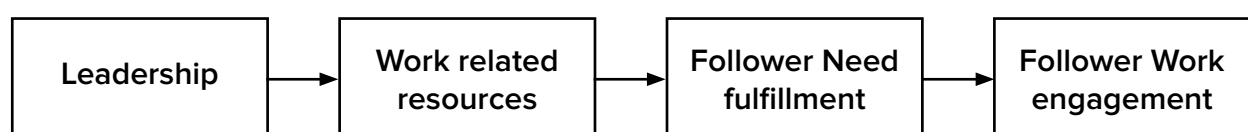
Leadership, Resources and Work Engagement

Besides the direct effect of transformational leadership on followers' work engagement, leaders may also influence their followers' work engagement through their impact on the work environment (see Figure 1). In their position of power and as role models, leaders have an important influence on the availability of resources at work. Job resources are all aspects of a job that: a) stimulate personal growth and development; b) contribute to the achievement of work goals; and/or c) reduce the unfavorable impact of job demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2013). Examples of job resources are autonomy, opportunities for development, performance feedback, and

skill variety. Research has shown that such job resources promote followers' work engagement (e.g., Halbesleben, 2010). Job resources are intrinsically motivating because they stimulate employees' personal growth and development. In addition, job resources are extrinsically motivating because they contribute to the achievement of goals. Job resources seem to fulfill important psychological needs. Research has shown that people have three basic needs that, when fulfilled, positively affect motivation and well-being. These are: the need for autonomy, competence and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985). For example, employees' need for competence will be fulfilled when they are provided with challenging but feasible tasks that contribute to their development. Further, employees' need for relatedness will be fulfilled when they receive support from their supervisor or colleagues. Below, we give some examples of how leaders can stimulate the availability of specific job resources.

Leaders may influence the available job resources in the work environment in different ways. For example, leaders can provide their employees with social support by means of a weekly, informal meeting. For example, leaders free up one hour of their time for a meeting that is not obligatory and the topic of the meeting is not pre-determined. Everyone attending the meeting is allowed to discuss the problems they face in their work and ask for

Figure 1. Overview of the effects of leadership on follower work engagement



advice about how to cope with these problems. Leaders may also encourage their employees to work together to increase social support. For example, leaders may stimulate their followers to jointly divide the tasks that need to be performed each week. In this way, followers can divide the workload in such a way that those with a low workload can help their co-workers with a high workload. Not only does this increase social support between employees, it also creates an optimal workload. In a relatively simple way, social support can also be influenced by creating a place where colleagues can meet more privately to talk about the things that preoccupy them.

A way in which leaders may influence their followers' opportunities for development is by delegating tasks that match the needs and abilities of employees. Furthermore, leaders can use employees' potential for development by involving them in the decision-making process. Specific actions to contribute to followers' development can also be taken. For example, employees who want to practice their presentation skill can be provided with the opportunity to practice these skills. This can start with a presentation for one or two colleagues that give feedback afterwards, followed by a presentation for a small group of colleagues. Eventually, the leader may provide the follower with more responsibility and the opportunity to present in front of the entire team on a regular basis. Another example is that employees' organisational skills can be developed by having them organise a team-development day. Finally, leaders can present their followers with a problem and give them the opportunity to come up with and try different solutions to

this problem. Afterwards, followers report on and discuss the effectiveness of their solutions with the leader. Hereby, leaders stimulate their followers to think differently and to use a variety of skills.

Feedback provided to employees can be influenced by the leader by organising monthly meetings in which employees discuss what they have been doing, what went well and what could have gone better and what could be done differently in the future. This can be discussed with the leader, who may ask further questions and give advice. These meetings can also be held with the entire team, in which several cases are discussed. In this way, employees have to opportunity to learn from each other. What did someone else do differently and did it work? What were the results of this approach and what can I learn from it?

We have given an impression of what leaders can do to enhance their followers' work engagement and create a resourceful work environment. Importantly, every profession has its own specific job demands and resources. For example, social support may be much more important for a nurse working at the oncology department compared to a painter creating art. Depending on the importance of specific job resources for a certain profession, leaders can take several steps to promote these resources.

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