



Leadership & Organization Development Journal

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Article information:

To cite this document:

Jessica Xu Helena Cooper Thomas, (2011), "How can leaders achieve high employee engagement?", Leadership & Organization Development Journal, Vol. 32 Iss 4 pp. 399 - 416

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/01437731111134661>

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How can leaders achieve high employee engagement?

High employee
engagement

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399

Received December 2009

Revised June 2010

Accepted August 2010

Abstract

Purpose – Organizations aspire to have engaged employees, and spend considerable resources to measure and improve employee engagement. Theoretically, leadership is a key antecedent of engagement, yet there is no research directly linking leader behaviors and follower engagement. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the evidence for such a link.

Design/methodology/approach – Research was conducted with a large New Zealand insurance organization, using data from direct reports. A pilot study was first conducted ($n = 236$), in which the JRA 360-degree feedback instrument was factor analyzed. Subsequently, a linkage analysis ($n = 178$) was conducted to establish the relationship of the resultant leadership factors with JRA's employee engagement measure.

Findings – Three factors emerged from the JRA 360: supports team, performs effectively, and displays integrity. Correlation and regression results showed that supports team was the strongest predictor of engagement; semi-partial correlations showed that the three leadership factors overlapped in their relationships with engagement, with supports team predicting most unique variance.

Research limitations/ implications – Additional research is needed to assess the generalizability of the findings, and to establish causality.

Practical implications – The results demonstrate that there are multiple ways in which leadership behaviors are associated with employee engagement. The primacy of supports team suggests that leader behaviors in this domain should be a priority. Although our design does not establish causality, we suggest that leaders should capitalize on their strengths to improve engagement among their followers.

Originality/value – The design of this study is superior to previous research, in particular using a clear measure of employee engagement. The results suggest that team-oriented behaviors are the most important for leaders in achieving high employee engagement. Importantly, the results also indicate that other leadership behaviors – relating to effective performance and displaying integrity – may also facilitate employee engagement.

Keywords Employee behaviour, Employee attitudes, Feedback, 360-degree feedback, Motivation (psychology)

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

Employee engagement concerns the degree to which individuals make full use of their cognitive, emotional, and physical resources to perform role-related work (Kahn, 1990; May *et al.*, 2004). This fits with other recent psychological approaches that draw on positive psychology (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), and focus on making best use of individual strengths (Hatcher and Rogers, 2009; Luthans, 2002). Thus,

Leadership & Organization
Development Journal
Vol. 32 No. 4, 2011
pp. 399-416

© Emerald Group Publishing Limited
0143-7739

DOI 10.1108/01437731111134661

employees who are engaged in their work have an energetic, enjoyable, and effective connection with their work (Kahn, 1990; Macey and Schneider, 2008). In addition to humanistic reasons for pursuing engagement, there are commercial incentives also. Higher levels of employee engagement are associated with increased return on assets, higher earning per employee, higher performance, greater sales growth, and lower absenteeism (Banks, 2006; Harter *et al.*, 2002; JRA, 2007; Salanova *et al.*, 2005; Towers Perrin, 2003). Further, greater engagement is associated with decreased costs, including reduced turnover, lower cost of goods sold, and fewer quality errors (Banks, 2006; Harter *et al.*, 2002; JRA, 2007; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004; Towers Perrin, 2003). Moreover, a recent study shows that engagement is a conduit for the effects of broader individual and workplace factors on job performance (Rich *et al.*, in press).

Previous research has typically adopted one of two approaches to understanding antecedents of engagement. One approach is Kahn's (1990, 1992) psychological conditions of engagement, where the employee needs to have sufficiently meaningful work, have the personal resources available to do that work, and feel psychologically safe in investing themselves in that work in order to become engaged in their work (May *et al.*, 2004; Rich *et al.*, in press). A second approach is the job demands-resources model, in which the availability of constructive job resources leads to engagement (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Bakker *et al.*, 2007; Mauno *et al.*, 2007; Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2007). These resources can include organizational factors such as job security, interpersonal elements such as supervisor support, and also role and task features such as role conflict, and autonomy.

Although there is a growing body of literature investigating engagement, scholars have noted that academic research lags behind practitioner developments (Macey and Schneider, 2008; Robinson *et al.*, 2004). This is particularly notable with respect to the role of leadership in employee engagement. While there has been initial research on the relationship of leadership dimensions with engagement, this literature is limited in that measures of engagement have not been provided for scrutiny (Alban-Metcalfe and Alimo-Metcalfe, 2008; Papalexandris and Galanaki, 2009), or have assessed antecedents of engagement rather than engagement itself (Atwater and Brett, 2006). Aside from these, researchers have confirmed both indirect relations (Kahn, 1990; May *et al.*, 2004; Rich *et al.*, in press) and moderating effects of leadership on engagement (Bakker *et al.*, 2007). Yet there remains a lack of research looking at the direct effects of leadership, using a clear measure of engagement. Such a relationship looks likely given the wealth of evidence that good leadership is positively related to follower attitude and behavior concepts that overlap with engagement. Past research has shown that transformational leadership is positively associated with follower commitment (Lee, 2005), job satisfaction (Judge and Piccolo, 2004) and work motivation (Judge and Piccolo, 2004), and leader-member exchange is positively associated with organizational citizenship behaviors (Ilies *et al.*, 2007). Hence, the purpose of this paper is to investigate the direct relationship between leader behaviors and follower engagement.

What is employee engagement?

The concept of employee engagement was developed by Kahn (1990) in his ethnographic work on summer camp employees and also employees at an architecture firm. He defined employee 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” (Kahn, 1990, p. 694). Engaged employees are fully present, and draw on their whole selves in an integrated and focused manner to promote their role performance. They are willing to do this because three antecedent conditions are met: Employees feel psychologically safe in the presence of others to apply themselves in their role performances, they have sufficient personal resources available to devote to such performances, and their work is sufficiently meaningful that such personal investment is perceived as worthwhile (Kahn, 1990, 1992). These conditions are called psychological safety, psychological availability, and psychological meaningfulness, respectively.

The engagement concept put forward by Kahn (1990, 1992) is of an integrated, profound, and purposeful use of a person’s whole self in his or her role performance. This overlaps with other concepts that depict a cognitive, affective, and behavioral connection of the individual employee with the role and organization. Accordingly, some researchers propose that other psychological concepts that connect employees with their work are also part of engagement. These concepts include motivation (Salanova *et al.*, 2005), job involvement (Harter *et al.*, 2002; Salanova *et al.*, 2005), job satisfaction (Harter *et al.*, 2002), organizational commitment (Macey and Schneider, 2008), organizational identification (Gonzalez-Roma *et al.*, 2006), proactive behaviors (Macey and Schneider, 2008), and organizational citizenship behaviors (Macey and Schneider, 2008). Thus, in reviewing relevant literature, we include studies investigating these engagement-congruent concepts in relation to leadership.

Antecedents of employee engagement

It is understandable that organizations wish to increase employee engagement, given that engaged employees are willing to make use of their full selves in their work roles in a positive way (Kahn, 1990), have better wellbeing (Hallberg and Schaufeli, 2006), are more productive (Rich *et al.*, in press), and remain in their jobs for longer (Saks, 2006; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). The three antecedent conditions proposed by Kahn (1990), of psychological meaningfulness, availability, and safety, provide opportunities for intervention to increase levels of engagement. Psychological meaningfulness is influenced by work characteristics, such as challenge and autonomy (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). Psychological availability depends on individuals having sufficient psychological and physical resources, such as self-confidence, to invest in their role performances (Hallberg and Schaufeli, 2006). Psychological safety stems from organizational social systems, with consistent and supportive coworker interactions and organizational norms allowing for greater engagement (Bakker and Xanthopoulou, 2009). This third antecedent condition, psychological safety, offers the most potential for leadership to influence engagement. Specifically, leadership that provides a supportive, trusting environment allows employees to fully invest their energies into their work roles. Kahn (1990) established theoretical and initial empirical evidence for a link between supportive leadership and employee engagement. In the next section, we investigate subsequent theoretical and empirical evidence, first from a leadership theory perspective, and then from an employee engagement theory viewpoint.

The relationship between leader behavior and follower engagement

Evidence from leadership research

Theoretical work has suggested a key role for transformational leadership in engagement (Macey and Schneider, 2008, p. 6), and consequently we adopt it here as a framework for investigating the association of leader behaviors with engagement, although we note the overlap of transformational leadership with other neocharismatic conceptualizations of leadership (Bass, 1997; Howell and Shamir, 2005). The concept of transformational leadership has four components: Idealized influence, with followers trusting and identifying with their leader; inspirational motivation, by which leaders provide meaning and challenge in followers' work; intellectual stimulation, whereby leaders invigorate followers' adaptivity and creativity in a blame free context; and individualized consideration, in which leaders support followers' specific needs for achievement and growth (Bass, 1985; Bass *et al.*, 2003). These leadership behaviors have clear links with engagement constructs. Trust in the leader, support from the leader, and creating a blame-free environment are components of psychological safety which enable employee engagement (Kahn, 1990). The experience of meaningful work is an antecedent of engagement also, through psychological meaningfulness (Kahn, 1990). Further, adaptivity and proactivity, which are encouraged via intellectual stimulation, are elements of engagement (Macey and Schneider, 2008).

Leadership research shows consistent links between transformational leadership and constructs that are argued by some to be part of engagement, such as motivation, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, proactive behaviors, and organizational citizenship behaviors. In a meta-analysis, Judge and Piccolo (2004) showed that transformational leadership is strongly positively correlated with follower job satisfaction and follower motivation. Research has shown that transformational leadership is positively associated with organizational commitment (Erkutlu, 2008; Lee, 2005); that leader vision interacts with personal characteristics to positively predict follower adaptivity and proactivity (Griffin *et al.*, 2010); and that high quality leader-member exchange positively predicts organizational citizenship behaviors (Burton *et al.*, 2008). These studies provide evidence for a link between positive leader behaviors with follower attitudes and behaviors associated with engagement. Other research has aimed to provide direct evidence, and we review this next.

Evidence from engagement research

Three studies claim to have directly investigated the relationship between leadership behavior and employee engagement, although there are limitations to each, which we discuss below. Atwater and Brett (2006) looked at subordinate, peer, and supervisor multisource feedback and engagement over two measurements. Three leadership behaviors were extracted from the multisource feedback measure, namely employee development, consideration, and performance-orientation. The only information provided on these dimensions is that the first two are labeled relationship-oriented, and the third as task-oriented. Increases in direct reports' ratings of leaders on these three dimensions were positively associated with increases in engagement. However, the Gallup Workplace Audit was used to measure employee engagement in their study. This Audit measures engagement as aspects of the workplace that leaders may act on, such as showing that they care for the direct report, encouraging the direct report's development, and providing recognition for good work (Harter *et al.*, 2002). In line with

this, Atwater and Brett (2006, p. 582) state, “employee engagement includes facets of work on which leaders can take action”, including task and relationship components. The Audit items infer engagement through a range of potential antecedents of engagement rather than tapping into the construct of engagement itself (Macey and Schneider, 2008). Therefore, Atwater and Brett’s (2006) study links task- and relationship-oriented leadership behaviors measured by a 360 feedback instrument with a measure of mostly leadership-related antecedents of engagement. Their research does not address the relationship of leadership behaviors with actual engagement.

Two other recent studies are useful in linking leadership with engagement, but again, both used quasi-measures of engagement. Alban-Metcalfe and Alimo-Metcalfe (2008) present the ranges of positive correlations between the leadership scales of their (Engaging) Transformational Leadership Questionnaire with criterion variables that include job- and organizational commitment, motivation, and job satisfaction. Similarly, Papalexandris and Galanaki (2009, p. 369) present a combined engagement measure comprising subordinates’ commitment, effectiveness, motivation and satisfaction. They use the term engagement for “economy of space and in order to avoid repetition”. Since engagement comprises aspects of commitment, identification, satisfaction, and involvement, such measures appear acceptable. However, in both studies, the term engagement is used as a blanket term to cover a wide range of measures, with no information on the actual items or the weighting of different constructs in the final measure. As a first point, this contrasts with the considerable care that Human Resources consulting firms, client organizations, and academics take in defining engagement, and hence developing or choosing their measures (Rich *et al.*, in press; Macey and Schneider, 2008). Second, this clouds the interpretation of findings, since leadership behaviors are associated with a broad yet unknown measure of engagement.

In spite of these limitations, both studies contribute to our understanding of leadership and engagement. Alban-Metcalfe and Alimo-Metcalfe’s (2008) study shows that transformational leadership behaviors are associated with more positive attitudes from employees. The leadership scales in their research are predominantly relationship-oriented, for example showing genuine concern, and acting with integrity, although task-oriented behaviors are also present, such as resolving complex problems, and focusing effort. Their results suggest that various relationship- and task-oriented leader behaviors are associated with engagement. Papalexandris and Galanaki’s (2009) research is useful in identifying two factors that positively predict engagement: management and mentoring behaviors (e.g. follower confident, power sharing, communicator, role clarifying) and articulating a vision (e.g. inspirational, visionary, decisive, team oriented). The first set is task-oriented while the latter set is relationship-oriented, suggesting that engagement can be achieved using different leadership approaches. Three other sets of leadership behaviors (self-management and inner balance, collaboration with other people – sociability, and processes/bureaucratic inclinations) were not related to engagement. These results show that it is only certain leader behaviors that are associated with engagement, principally those that support follower performance (e.g. role clarifying) or connect followers with the organization’s goals (e.g. inspirational).

High employee
engagement

More general measures of supervisor support have also shown positive associations with engagement. In line with Kahn's (1990, 1992) research, May *et al.* (2004) showed that supportive supervisor relations were positively correlated with engagement, with this relationship mediated by psychological safety. Thus, supportive supervisor relationships, as well as coworker relations and coworker norms, contributed to an environment in which employees felt they could be themselves, and therefore were free to engage fully in their work. Saks (2006) found a positive association of supervisor support and engagement. Taking the job demands-resources approach (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007), Bakker *et al.* (2007) found supervisor support buffered the potential negative influence of job demands on engagement. Together, these studies show that higher levels of engagement are found for employees whose direct managers exhibit more relationship-oriented behaviors.

In summary, prior research suggests that both task-oriented and relationship-oriented behaviors should be positively associated with employee engagement. Further, it seems that leadership behaviors may overlap in their associations with engagement. Hence, we propose:

- H1. Relationship-oriented leadership behaviors will be positively related to engagement.
- H2. Task-oriented leadership behaviors will be positively related to engagement.
- RQ. To what extent do leadership behaviors overlap in their relationships with employee engagement?

The relationship between leadership position and engagement

Previous research has confirmed that certain job characteristics are associated with employee engagement. Specifically, employees with more autonomy and more control both report higher levels of engagement (Hallberg and Schaufeli, 2006; Salanova *et al.*, 2005). Those in more senior positions in organizations have greater autonomy over how they do their work, and are more likely to be in interesting roles that allow for cognitive, emotional, and physical engagement in work (Kahn, 1990). Being able to make greater contributions to organizational performance has also been argued to be associated with work engagement (Zhu *et al.*, 2009), with more senior employees/managers likely to occupy roles that allow this (Robinson *et al.*, 2004; Towers Perrin, 2003). In line with these findings, practitioner research by Towers Perrin shows the highest level of engagement for senior executives (53 percent highly engaged, 4 percent disengaged), next directors and managers (25 percent highly engaged, 10 percent disengaged), with the trend continuing down to hourly workers who have the lowest engagement levels (12 percent highly engaged, 25 percent disengaged). We anticipate the same trend in the current research.

- H3. Holding a leadership position will be positively related to engagement.

The relationship between tenure and engagement

There is some direct evidence from consultancy surveys that engagement is inversely related to tenure (Brim, 2002; Buckingham, 2001; Robinson *et al.*, 2004). In line with this, research on job attitudes has shown that these tend to decline over time, in a so-called "honeymoon-hangover" effect (Bentein *et al.*, 2005; Boswell *et al.*, 2005). This

echoes other literatures that examine employees' perceptions of their relationships with their employer, such as unmet expectations and psychological contract literatures. With increasing tenure, employees have more opportunities to experience disappointments and contract breaches, and these are associated with cognitive, emotional, and physical disengagement from work (Deery *et al.*, 2006; Montes and Irving, 2008; Premack and Wanous, 1985; Robinson and Rousseau, 1994). Accordingly, we expect a similar relationship for engagement:

H4. Tenure will be negatively related to engagement.

Method

Sample

Respondents were employees working at a large New Zealand-based insurance company. In April 2008, 261 direct reports (among other colleagues) were invited to provide ratings for their immediate managers (42 managers in total were rated) using the JRA 360-degree feedback measure. A total of 236 employees responded yielding a response rate of 90.4 percent. These data were used for the factor analysis of the 360-degree measure.

Three months later, employees from the largest section of the company were asked to respond to JRA's employee engagement measure ($n = 486$, response rate 90.0 percent). Overall, 178 employees could be matched across the two datasets, and their data were used for the linkage analysis. These comprise 16 percent managers/team leaders and 79 percent non-managerial staff, with 50 percent of these respondents having 1 to 6 years of tenure. In terms of role, 36 percent of the respondents were contact centre and support staff, and 62 percent of the respondents worked in claims and membership[1].

Procedure

For each survey, staff members received an internal email invitation to participate in the survey with a secure web link taking them to the online survey. All surveys were completed via the internet.

Measures

Leadership. Leader competencies were measured with JRA's 360-degree tool. This comprises 65 items structured around nine competencies: Leadership, communication, problem solving/decision making, quality/customer service, teamwork, planning/work allocation, coaching/training, relationship building, and personal effectiveness. Each item is phrased as a behavioral statement. Respondents are asked to indicate how much their manager displays the behavior on an eight-point Likert scale, ranging from "never like him/her" (0), to "exactly like him/her" (8). "Do not know" responses and skipped items were coded as missing values.

Following data screening, four cases and one item were removed due to substantial missing data. The remaining missing values appeared to be at random, and therefore missing values were replaced with maximum likelihood estimation (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2001), using expectation maximization imputation (Schafer, 1997). A further two cases were removed due to outliers. All 360-degree leadership items were significantly correlated and no substantial problems of singularity or non-linearity were observed.

To explore the data, we conducted principal component analysis with varimax rotation in an iterative manner. Items that did not load on any factor or that cross-loaded on multiple factors were removed at each step until a clean factor structure emerged. The initial run suggested five factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 (explaining 76.41 percent of the variance). A stringent cut-off point of 0.50 was used for screening factor loadings due to high correlations among the 360-degree leadership items. The final factor analysis was run with a total of 33 items and yielded three factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, explaining 74.10 percent of the variance.

The items and factor loadings are presented in Table I. The first factor relates to behaviors that maintain a high level of team performance and ongoing development, including helping team members develop their potential, promoting team pride, and encouraging a superior customer service role. Items in the second factor relate to leaders' effective problem solving, and good management of time and priorities. The third factor comprises behaviors that demonstrate high stands of ethics and honesty, as well as good interpersonal skills. The three factors were named supports team, performs effectively, and displays integrity respectively, with Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.91 to 0.99 (see Table II). Supports team and displays integrity are categorized as relationship-oriented, and performs effectively is categorized as task-oriented.

Employee engagement. This was measured using the JRA Employee Engagement scale, consisting of six items, with two items each for the cognitive, emotional and behavioral components of engagement respectively. These three components are consistent with Kahn's (1990) conceptualization of employee engagement and we note that this structure has been used in survey measures constructed by academics (May *et al.*, 2004; Rich *et al.*, in press) and other engagement survey providers (ISR, 2004).

The two emotional items are "Overall, I'm satisfied with my job" and "I feel a sense of commitment to this organization". The two cognitive items are "I take an active interest in what happens in this organization" and "Overall, I would recommend this organization as a great place to work". The two behavioral items are "I feel inspired to go the extra mile to help this organization succeed" and "I look for ways to do my job more effectively". These cover engagement towards work and the organization, and include the aspects of satisfaction, involvement and commitment, including extra-role or citizenship behaviors. Items are rated on a five-point Likert scale, from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5), with "neutral" being the mid-point and a "do not know" option also, which we coded as missing values. The Cronbach's alpha was 0.85.

Position. For position, respondents indicated whether their position involved managing others (senior executive, manager, or team leader), or whether they were a non-managerial employee.

Tenure. Tenure was measured using seven intervals, of 0 to six months, seven to 12 months, one to three years, four to six years, seven to ten years, 11-15 years, and 16 years or more.

Data analysis

The full sample of 236 responses was used in the exploratory factor analysis for the JRA 360-degree leadership measure. From this, 178 were matched with the subsequent engagement survey data. Subsequently, two cases were removed due to substantial missing values, with expectation maximization again used to estimate the remaining

				High employee engagement
360 items	Supports team	Factor loadings Performs effectively	Displays integrity	
Takes a genuine interest in the personal development of his/her team members	0.75			407
Helps his/her team members identify and develop their skills and potential	0.74			
Celebrates his/her team's successes	0.73			
Encourages commitment to organization objectives	0.70			
Ensures his/her team members are sufficiently trained to do their jobs	0.69			
Promotes a sense of loyalty and pride within his/her team	0.69			
Encourages other to deliver superior levels of customer service	0.68			
Approaches tasks with enthusiasm and energy	0.67			
Personally strives to excel in all activities	0.65			
Supports team decisions, even if they differ from his/ her own view	0.65			
Seeks opportunities to improve the quality of service to customers	0.61			
Builds positive, long-term internal working relationships	0.61			
Willingly shares own knowledge and ideas with others	0.61			
Demonstrates good presentation skills	0.59			
Makes timely decisions, without unnecessary delay or haste		0.85		
Provides timely responses to requests, phone calls, or problem situations		0.78		
Deals effectively with multiple demands and conflicting priorities		0.77		
Takes action without prompting		0.74		
Anticipates workload and plans accordingly		0.72		
Handles multiple demands effectively		0.72		
Proactively deals with problems		0.69		
Keeps promises made		0.67		
Keeps others well informed		0.61		
Is readily accessible to discuss progress or assist with delegated tasks		0.60		
Communicates clear performance expectations		0.51		
Demonstrates high ethical standards			0.77	
Can be trusted with confidential information			0.74	
Is honest in dealings with others			0.73	
Communicates openly and honestly – no hidden agendas			0.69	
Accepts feedback (and criticism) constructively			0.68	
Is a good listener when others are speaking			0.65	
Maintains appropriate self control			0.62	
Demonstrates flexibility and open-mindedness			0.58	
Cronbach's alpha	0.97	0.97	0.94	

Table I.
Factor loadings for the
final 33 items on the JRA
360-degree leadership
measure

Table II.
Means, standard
deviations, correlations
and partial correlations
for study variables

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	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Leadership position	0.17	0.38	—					
2. Tenure	3.87	1.39	0.32**	—				
3. Supports team	7.04	0.96	0.02	−0.03	0.97**			
4. Performs effectively	6.80	1.11	0.02	−0.01	0.89**	0.97**		
5. Displays integrity	6.97	1.02	−0.02	−0.01	0.87**	0.84**	0.94**	
6. Employee engagement	4.22	0.51	0.35**	0.06	0.48**	0.42**	0.38**	0.85
Engagement – semi-partial correlations	—	—	—	—	0.21*	0.03	−0.07	—

Notes: * $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.001$; correlation coefficients were Spearman's rho correlation coefficients, unless indicated otherwise. Each semi-partial correlation controls for the other two leadership factors

missing data. Three cases were removed due to substantial outliers. Since most leadership scales were severely negatively skewed (absolute skewness greater than 1; Meyers *et al.*, 2006), reflect inverse transformations were used (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2001) which greatly improved normality.

High employee
engagement

Findings

The means, standard deviations, and correlations between the study variables are shown in Table II. The correlations among leadership factors are high. Because of the negative skewness in the 360 degree items, even following transformation, we used non-parametric correlation (Spearman's rho) for these variables. All of the JRA 360-degree leadership dimensions significantly moderately correlated with employee engagement. Holding a leadership position positively correlated with employee engagement, but tenure did not. Owing to the large amount of shared variance between the leadership factors, we also calculated semi-partial correlations with engagement. Hence, each semi-partial correlation indicates the unique variance of that leadership factor with engagement, which reflects the relative importance of each leadership factor in predicting engagement (see Table II).

To test all study hypotheses simultaneously, multiple regression was conducted with employee engagement as the dependent variable. Tenure and leadership position were entered in the first step, and the three leadership factors in the second step. Given their high correlations, and that supports team has the highest semi-partial correlation (see Table II), it was anticipated that only this factor would be significant in the second step. The results are shown in Table III and confirm this. In the first step, tenure is not a significant predictor of engagement, but leadership position is ($\beta = 0.37, p < 0.001$), and remains so when the leadership factors are added in step two ($\beta = 0.34, p < 0.001$). Of the leadership factors, only supports team is significant ($\beta = 0.48, p < 0.01$), with the three leadership factors explaining an additional 22 percent of variance.

The correlation results in Table II support three of the four study hypotheses. Both relationship-oriented leadership factors (*H1*; supports team and displays integrity) and the task-oriented leadership factor (*H2*; performs effectively) are positively associated with engagement. Holding a leadership position is confirmed as being positively associated with engagement (*H3*) whereas tenure has no relationship with engagement

409

	β	ΔF	R^2	ΔR^2
<i>Step 1</i>		11.44**	0.13	–
Tenure	– 0.06			
Leadership position	0.37**			
<i>Step 2</i>		17.47**	0.35	0.22
Tenure	– 0.03			
Leadership position	0.34**			
Supports team	0.48*			
Performs effectively	0.06			
Displays integrity	– 0.08			

Notes: * $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.001$

Table III.
Summary statistics for
the hierarchical multiple
regression conducted for
employee engagement

(H4). With regard to our *RQ*, our results show that leadership behaviors overlap considerably in their relationship with employee engagement.

Discussion

Previous research has strongly suggested that various relationship- and task-oriented leader behaviors are positively associated with engagement. However, conclusions from past research are limited by inadequate measures of engagement. This research unequivocally confirms the positive associations between relationship- and task-oriented leader behavior, as reported by followers, and those followers' levels of engagement. The leadership factor of supports team, a relationship-oriented construct, was the strongest unique predictor. This suggests that direct reports react positively to leaders who behave in ways that support the team, for example taking a genuine interest in team members' personal development, and celebrating team successes, and respond to this support with higher levels of engagement.

In addition to this finding, there was a considerable overlap in the variance in engagement predicted by the three leadership factors. Thus, performs effectively (task-oriented) and displays integrity (relationship-oriented) had approximately similar correlations with employee engagement, although their semi-partial correlations (Table II) show that they predicted no unique variance in engagement. This suggests that engagement among followers is associated with a range of leader behaviors, although leader behaviors that support and recognize team members are more strongly and uniquely associated with engagement.

The three factors we found in this study, and their relationships with engagement, have similarities with Atwater and Brett's (2006) study. For example, Atwater and Brett (2006) extracted three leadership factors of employee development, consideration, and performance, which are similar to our supports team, displays integrity, and performs effectively factors. Similar to our results, employee development was the most strongly correlated with engagement, although in their research also, the correlations for all three factors with engagement were similar. The primacy of team-oriented leadership behaviors that aim to develop employees (i.e. supports team) is also consistent with research showing that supportive supervisor behaviors facilitate engagement (Bakker *et al.*, 2007; Kahn, 1990; May *et al.*, 2004; Saks, 2006). Moreover, the overall results link with survey firms' white papers, which show that integrity and confidence in leadership predict engagement (ISR, 2004; JRA, 2007). However, this research is the first to supply clear evidence of the relationship of leader behaviors with follower engagement.

The relationships of leadership and tenure with engagement

The results supported our hypothesis that leaders would be more engaged than those in staff positions. This is consistent with previous research (JRA, 2007; Robinson *et al.*, 2004; Towers Perrin, 2003). There may be a number of factors underlying this, including managers' greater access to organizational information that may engender feelings of inclusion in the organization, make their work more interesting, and enable greater contributions to organizational performance (Hallberg and Schaufeli, 2006; Salanova *et al.*, 2005; Zhu *et al.*, 2009).

Against our hypothesis, tenure was not related to engagement. This null result contrasts with previous research on engagement (IES, 2004) as well as research on

attitudes of job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Bentein *et al.*, 2005; Boswell *et al.*, 2005). While this result may be specific to this organization, it suggests that engagement does not necessarily decrease with tenure.

High employee
engagement

Practical implications

There are two important practical implications from our findings with regard to leadership behaviors. First, leaders who act in ways that support and develop team members can expect to have team members who show higher levels of engagement, with supports team explaining the most unique variance in employee engagement. Although our research design does not prove causality, other longitudinal research has shown links between leader behaviors and engagement-relevant behaviors across time. For example, leadership vision interacts with individual characteristics to predict greater adaptivity and proactivity (Griffin *et al.*, 2010), and transformational leadership has positive effects on follower performance (Dvir *et al.*, 2002). It is likely that the same causality applies here and, accordingly, we suggest that leaders wishing to achieve the benefits of engagement should focus on team-oriented behaviors primarily, such as being genuinely interested in team members' personal development, and celebrating the team's successes. Second, for leaders who are less able to develop their interpersonal skills, they may be able to increase follower engagement through task-oriented behaviors. Specifically, leaders may achieve this by delivering performance, such as through good decision making and effective task management, and in displaying integrity, by showing high ethical standards, and through being open and honest in communications. Thus, we suggest that leaders should capitalize on their current strengths, whether these are in relationship- or task-oriented domains (Luthans, 2002). However, we note that the three leadership dimensions had strong positive correlations with each other, and therefore we emphasize that our suggestions concern working on relative strengths.

For the employment variables examined, having a leadership position was positively associated with engagement. Leaders need to recognize that they are likely to be more involved in and passionate about their work than those reporting to them. Leaders can consider what it is about their work that particularly engages them, and strive to increase these aspects for their direct reports. For example, if their engagement stems from knowing the importance of their work to the organization's overall direction and performance, then they should aim to communicate to the team exactly how the team's work contributes. This fits with a transformational approach to leadership (Bass, 1997), and is in keeping with the primary factor identified here, supports team.

In this research, tenure was not related to employee engagement. The key implication is that employees can be engaged with their work regardless of their tenure in the organization. Given the potential for longer-tenured staff to contribute to organizational memory and, in turn, performance (Cross and Baird, 2000), it is good news that such employees can be as engaged in their work as their newer colleagues.

Strengths and limitations

Two strengths of our research were, first, the use of a thorough behavioral measure of leadership and, second, a theoretically-based measure of employee engagement. The use of these measures distinguishes this study from previous research that has

sampled leadership with few items (Towers Perrin, 2003), or used quasi-employee engagement measures (Atwater and Brett, 2006; Papalexandris and Galanaki, 2009). Moreover, our two sets of variables were collected at separate time points, with a four-month interval; asked about different constructs; and each survey itself was approximately 60 items. These methodological factors mean that the relationships found are likely to be true, rather than the result of common rater effects (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003).

While our results are consistent with previous research in other countries and sectors with regard to leadership behaviors and leader position, those for tenure are different. Hence, some of our results may not generalize, and there is a need for continued exploration of the links between leadership and engagement in other industry sectors.

Future research

Our study confirms the link between leadership behaviors and employee engagement. Employee engagement is, in turn, associated with positive organizational performance, including customer service, productivity, and safety (Towers Perrin, 2003; Harter *et al.*, 2002; JRA, 2007, 2008). More evidence is needed that links leader behaviors, employee engagement, and organizational performance in a single study. Longitudinal data would be particularly useful in this regard, to explore causality in the leadership-engagement relationship. Additionally, there is a need to assess whether leadership development programs are effective in improving organizational performance via engagement (Atwater and Brett, 2006).

In line with previous research, we found that being in a leadership position was associated with higher levels of engagement. More research is needed to understand why leaders have higher engagement levels, for example looking at job characteristics and social networks of leaders versus followers to assess the most important contributors (Bakker and Xanthopoulou, 2009; Bono and Anderson, 2005). From a practical perspective, it may be possible to make use of some of these factors to promote engagement among other employees. For instance, if inclusion in social networks is key in making work meaningful or providing a safe environment for engagement (Kahn, 1990), then more emphasis can be placed on supporting employees in building their networks, for example through organization-supported special interest groups or mentoring.

Conclusion

This research confirms that leadership behaviors (supports team, performs effectively, and displays integrity) are positively associated with followers' engagement, with leadership behaviors focused on supporting and developing the team being the strongest unique predictor of engagement among followers. Holding a leadership position was also associated with higher engagement, but tenure was not associated with engagement. These findings are in line with earlier research, and support the link between the behavior of leaders and the willingness of employees under their guidance to fully engage in their work roles.

Note

1. The client organization did not wish for any sociodemographic information to be collected on variables such as age, gender, and ethnicity, so that respondents would feel confident that their responses were anonymous. Hence, the sample cannot be further described. However, the high response rates provide confidence that these results were representative of the organization.

High employee engagement

413

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