

Engagement Pulse:

Team Leader Effectiveness
Through the Eyes of Employees

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Introduction

» *In the next decade, the biggest challenge facing HR professionals will be “retaining and optimizing human capital” (SHRM, 2012).*

Human capital can make the critical difference when it comes to innovation, organizational performance, competitiveness, and business success (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008). While numerous studies have shown a connection between the hiring process and future job performance (e.g., customer satisfaction, productivity and employee turnover; McDaniel et al., 1994; Schmidt & Hunter, 1998), another factor has powerful influence on whether people stay and thrive in a work environment: the team leader (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999). Even an individual whose strengths, talents and skills are a perfect fit for the job will often leave it because of the skills (or more accurately, lack of skills) of the team leader (Wasmuth & Davis, 1983; Loi, Hang-Yue, & Foley, 2006). The team leader is the glue that helps employees remain productive and engaged in their work. One of the best gauges of a leader’s effectiveness, then, is his or her ability to create the optimal conditions for employee engagement.

The Engagement Pulse survey is constructed deliberately to measure the conditions of engagement created by the team leader. Specifically, it investigates four broad areas: *Purpose, Excellence, Support, and Future*. To help reduce the measurement error that often plagues survey research, all of the survey items are crafted with four specific criteria in mind: (1) a single thought per item, (2) extreme wording, (3) “me rating me” and (4) actionable for change.

This paper will describe the item development process for the Engagement Pulse survey in the context of the rich history of employee engagement and its connection to employee outcomes.



Why engagement?

Engagement is a positive state of mind characterized by “vigor, dedication, and absorption” (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). To unpack that statement just a little, “vigor” describes the willingness to invest all of oneself into work and involves high levels of conscientiousness, persistence, energy, and mental toughness. “Dedication” refers to being strongly connected to one’s work while experiencing a sense of significance, pride, enthusiasm, and challenge. And “absorption” implies being involved deeply in one’s work, such that time passes quickly and disconnecting from work becomes difficult.

The team leader’s ability to draw out these qualities in an employee can have lasting effects on an organization.

Employee engagement has been shown to have a statistical relationship with higher levels of **performance** (e.g., Harter et al., 2002;

Saks, 2006; Rich, LePine & Crawford, 2010), **profitability** (e.g., Harter et al., 2002; Harter, Schmidt, Killham, & Agrawal, 2009), **safety** (e.g., Harter et al., 2009; Nahrgang, Morgeson & Hofmann, 2011; Wachter & Yorio, 2014; Zohar, 2000), **customer satisfaction** (e.g., Coffman & Gonzalez-Molina, 2002), and **lower turnover and intention to leave** (e.g., Bakker, Demerouti & Schaufeli, 2005; Brunetto et al., 2014; Harter et al., 2002; Saks, 2006; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). In addition, employee engagement at the business unit level has been connected to customer satisfaction, productivity, profit, employee turnover, and accident rates (e.g., Harter, Schmidt & Hayes, 2002; Schneider, Macey, Barbera & Martin, 2009; Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Heuven, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2008).

In addition to performance outcomes, empirical evidence links engagement to many different constructs: job satisfaction (Hakanen et al., 2006); positive job attitudes (Harter, Schmidt & Hayes, 2002; Schaufeli, Taris & van Rhenen, 2008); organizational commitment (Saks, 2006); and organizational citizen behaviors (Bakker & Bal, 2010; Rich et al., 2010; Saks, 2006).



Item Development Process

Items were developed for the Engagement Pulse survey using an iterative process. First, we selected items based on their content connection to known criteria that affect employees' engagement with their work and organization. Then, we placed these items in the field for testing, and analyzed results. Finally, we refined and rephrased the items to make sure that they measure what we want them to measure.

Within the item development process, concerted effort is paid to validity (i.e., content-related, construct-related, and criterion-related). While the criteria for validity are presented in separate categories, there is considerable overlap from one category of validity evidence to another, and thus validity is treated as a "unitary concept" (Messick, 1989).

Content-Related Validity

The content-related validity of the Engagement Pulse survey has been established over the years through the content expertise of Buckingham and his colleagues. They conducted literature reviews of empirical studies in psychology, positive psychology, business management, and organizational management to understand the phenomenon of engaged employees. They also conducted focus groups and interviews to gain an understanding of employee engagement from thousands of teams and their leaders. Content for the Engagement Pulse was derived from the findings of this research.

Construct-Related Validity

Construct-related validity is the degree to which the items on the Engagement Pulse survey measure what they are intending to measure. The Engagement Pulse was designed to represent the construct of engagement and be a gauge for leader effectiveness. Within the Engagement Pulse survey, there are four areas of interest: Purpose, Excellence, Support, and Future. Decades of research have shown the connection between these areas and employee engagement. A recent confirmatory factor analysis was conducted using data from representative samples of the working populations of eleven countries. The eight items on the Engagement Pulse compose one factor, which accounts for 59% of the total variance contained in the scale. In addition, the reliability coefficients for each country were all above .87. The Alpha of the entire data was .94.

Criterion-Related Validity

We conducted criterion-related validity testing to understand the connection between items on the Engagement Pulse survey and relevant performance outcomes. Recent studies comparing high-performing teams (based on performance criteria selected by the company) to contrast groups of lower-performing teams reveal a strongly positive correlation between the Engagement Pulse items and performance. On average, the high-performing teams had between 16–26% higher levels of engagement than those in the contrasting teams.



Four Development Criteria

To reduce measurement and psychometric error, the Engagement Pulse survey items were intentionally written with four specific criteria in mind: (1) a single thought per item, (2) extreme wording, (3) “me rating me” and (4) actionable for change.

Single Thought

A single thought measuring one construct per item helps to reduce the cognitive burden experienced by the user. When an item includes more than one thought, this “double-barreled” item (Berg, 2004) tends to confuse the individual and take longer to process, as well as introducing unneeded error into the measurement (Bassili & Scott, 1996). For example, consider the item: “I have received sufficient advice and support with my career decisions.” This item may cause confusion if team members interpret “advice” and “support” as different ideas. Advice may come from the team leader, but support might come from the organization. Team members responding to this item could be confused about whom they are rating. All of the items on the Engagement Pulse survey are designed to avoid this confusion.

Extreme Wording

The Engagement Pulse survey deliberately uses extreme wording to overcome problems with acquiescence (i.e., agreement regardless of content). The response process for survey items “can potentially have a significant impact on the meaning of results” (Nye, Newman & Joseph, 2010). Authors have recommended the use of extreme wording in surveys for decades (Clark & Watson, 1995; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; Thorndike et al., 1991). A recent investigation by Nye and his colleagues found some evidence for differential item functioning (DIF), but the effects were unlikely to disrupt the scale-level properties. Small shifts in the intercepts/location parameters can occur, but the effects are seen equally across the entire Likert scale items (Nye, Newman & Joseph). The findings suggest that with the use of extreme wording it is possible to overcome the tendency to acquiesce — without losing measurement accuracy.

“Me Rating Me”

The Engagement Pulse was intentionally designed to solicit information from team members about themselves, or “me rating me.” We chose this method to overcome potential issues that occur with the ratings of others — namely *rater effect* and *rater insufficiency* (i.e., cognitive limitations).

The first potential issue, rater effect, refers to the differences in rating that are attributed to the rater, often called “idiosyncratic rater effects” (Hoffman, Lance, Bynum & Gentry, 2010). Scullen, Mount, and Goff (2000) attributed over half of the variance (62% and 53%) in ratings from two different studies of leader effectiveness to idiosyncratic rater effects.

The second potential issue, rater insufficiency, pertains to the cognitive limitations of those providing the ratings. Team members might not have enough relevant contexts to provide a rating or judgment about certain constructs outside their scope of knowledge. The ratings become more about how the team member feels (positively or negatively) than actual performance of a leader on a given construct (Allen & Rush, 1998).

The Engagement Pulse survey allows team members to speak directly to what they know — themselves — thus removing the potential bias and inaccuracy of the ratings of another person.

Actionable Items

The intent of the Engagement Pulse survey is to measure engagement of team members at the team level. The items are designed to be actionable and under the control of the team leader to effect change. The items measure causal conditions to engagement, such as **mission** (Balfour & Wechsler, 1991), **expectations** (Spreitzer, Lam and Fritz, 2010), **shared values** (Cannon-Bowers & Salas, 2001), **job-fit** (Saari & Judge, 2004), **team camaraderie** (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), **recognition** (Raft & Clifton, 2004), **job clarity** (Lu et al., 2014) and **growth** (Crawford, LePine & Rich, 2010).



Engagement Pulse Item Description

Saari and Judge (2004) conclude, based on empirical studies, that the most accurate way to measure engagement is a well-constructed employee survey. The Engagement Pulse survey was designed to understand both employee engagement and leader effectiveness through the eyes of team members.

The Engagement Pulse is based on decades of accumulated qualitative and quantitative research from multiple organizations and industries. It is designed to gauge a leader’s effectiveness with his or her team. Each of the items was included based on its usefulness for a team leader to create change in the workplace.

The Engagement Pulse statements are:

- Purpose** **1. I am really enthusiastic about the mission of my company.**
- 2. At work, I clearly understand what is expected of me.**



- Excellence** **3. In my team, I am surrounded by people who share my values.**
- 4. I have a chance to use my strengths every day at work.**



- Support** **5. My teammates have my back.**
- 6. I know I will be recognized for excellent work.**



- Future** **7. I have great confidence in my company’s future.**
- 8. In my work, I am always challenged to grow.**

These items measure the levers that a team leader can influence. Below is a brief examination of the four areas that combine to measure engagement, and thus effectiveness, along with the relevance of each of the items chosen for the Engagement Pulse.



Purpose

Team leaders can help team members see how their work connects to a broader purpose, reminding them and helping them to see the larger context of their efforts. If a team leader can engage and inspire team members to believe in the mission, then those team members will be actively engaged with the organization (Balfour & Wechsler, 1990, 1991).

1. I am really enthusiastic about the mission of the company.

The “intrinsic job characteristics,” the purpose for the work, is the most notable situational influence on job satisfaction (Saari & Judge, 2004). Individuals who are more aligned with the mission of an organization are more satisfied and engaged (Judge, Bono, Erez & Locke, 2005). Research has also shown that mission-driven teams suffer fewer accidents and have lower turnover (Wagner & Harter, 2006).

Mission/Purpose: Great team leaders help their team members understand the purpose of their work and how that work provides benefits to the organization as a whole and its outcomes. Team members who are more engaged through the mission of an organization are willing to personally invest mind, body, and spirit for something they believe in deeply.

2. At work, I clearly understand what is expected of me.

Macey and Schneider (2008) found that leadership plays an important role in the engagement process concerning role clarity. Leaders need to provide guidance in job demands for employees to be engaged (Spreitzer, Lam, and Fritz, 2010). When employees are unsure of their responsibilities because of ambiguity in expectations, they are more likely to be disengaged from their work and often show intent to leave (Crawford, LePine & Rich, 2010). Acker (2004) studied social workers’ intention to leave their organizations and found a strong positive connection between role conflict and role ambiguity. Employees who lack clarity in their work are more likely to leave an organization.

Work expectations: Team leaders have the responsibility to make expectations of team members transparent and clear. Team members who understand their expectations are happier and more engaged with their team leader and organization as a whole.



Excellence

The best leaders delineate excellence both for the team and for each team member. By defining what is truly valuable, the team leader helps team members understand precisely what they are striving for. This clarity serves to drive feelings of both person-job fit and, more broadly, of engagement (Warr & Inceoglu, 2012).

3. In my team, I am surrounded by people who share my values.

Teams that have common values — defined as one's personal beliefs about what is right and wrong and about what is worth doing at work — have higher levels of trust and communication. Chou and colleagues (2008) found that teammates who shared intrinsic work values demonstrated increases in team performance, trustworthiness, trustfulness, and satisfaction with cooperation. Team members must have similar work values to draw common worth, have like-minded perceptions, and reach effective decisions (Cannon-Bowers & Salas, 2001). Shared values can be reinforced within organizational contexts and supported by team leaders (O'Reilly et al, 1991).

Share my values: Team members want to work with individuals who care about them and share their personal values and organizational commitment. Developing relationships with like-minded people builds trust, improves communication, and spurs other valuable outcomes.

4. I have the chance to use my strengths every day at work.

An interesting and challenging job that uses an individual's strengths directly influences that individual's satisfaction and thus engagement (Saari & Judge, 2004). Team leaders can position team members for success by helping them use their strengths to accomplish their daily work. Wagner and Harter (2001) state that this is the most powerful benefit a team leader can provide to a team.

Use my strengths: Team leaders who understand the strengths of their team will help utilize the talents and skills that make their team members fully engaged. Team members who use their strengths provide outstanding performance for the organization.



Support

The feeling of support from others helps individuals to accomplish more. Schreurs et al. (2014) found a strong positive connection between Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and shared work values. There are three psychological needs associated with SDT: autonomy (i.e., the desire to experience a sense of volition and self-worth in respect to one's actions); competence (i.e., feeling effective in one's actions); and relatedness (i.e., caring for and being cared for by others). Each of these needs when met helps an employee be more engaged. According to the SDT, individuals want to develop and grow, build meaningful and satisfying relationships with colleagues, and help people (Vansteenkiste et al., 2005).

5. My teammates have my back.

The third basic need postulated by SDT is the need for relatedness, which refers to caring and feeling cared for by others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Team members surrounded by others who care for them are more engaged. Team leaders can increase engagement by caring for their team members and providing support.

Have my back: Working together and developing relationships allows teams to feel supported. Great team leaders help to foster this sense of protection when unanticipated situations arise. Teams that endorse this statement have greater communication and trust in one another.

6. I know I will be recognized for excellent work.

Maslaach and Leiter (1997) proposed that rewards and recognition are predictors of engagement. Rath and Clifton (2004) discovered that one of the main reasons employees leave their jobs is the lack of appreciation or recognition. Team leaders can directly effect change for employees by providing timely recognition, which will have a positive impact on engagement (Saks, 2006).

Recognition for excellent work: Great team leaders provide constant feedback to their team members to let them know their work is important. Recognition is not a once-a-year project but an ongoing feedback loop focused on performance. Team members need to know that their efforts are being recognized and supported.



Future

Confidence in the future of the organization is necessary for the investment of employees' talents and skills. Employees who experience an uncertain environment (i.e., insecure job situation) are more likely to make changes to their contexts (i.e., change jobs; Lu et al, 2014). Employees are willing to invest mind, body, and soul if they feel challenged and developed by their team leader.

7. I have great confidence in my company's future.

Teachers who held feelings of certainty were more likely to be engaged and make better decisions (Munthe, 2003). When employees feel a sense of insecurity around their jobs or organizations, they are more likely to leave (Acker, 2004). Team leaders can help team members see how the organization is stable and has longevity.

Confidence in the future: Team leaders have the responsibility to be the connection (eyes and ears) between the organization and the team members. Team members need to feel comfortable that the company in which they are investing their mind, body, and spirit will be around to support them in the future.

8. In my work I am always challenged to grow.

Employees need the opportunity to grow within their jobs. When team leaders fail to provide challenging growth opportunities or developmental opportunities for their team members, it can dampen engagement and increase turnover (Shuck, Twyford, Reio & Shuck, 2014). Team leaders who provide challenging job demands to their team members can positively effect changes in levels of engagement (Crawford, LePine & Rich, 2010).

Challenged to grow: Team leaders are responsible for the growth of their team members. A deep understanding of each individual's strengths will allow the team leader to provide challenging opportunities for each team member to grow. Continued support to learn and grow is part of the work-life benefit provided by an organization.



Conclusion

Successful organizations require employees who have high levels of energy and high levels of involvement in work (Bakker, Albrecht, & Leiter, 2011). In order to find and retain those employees, team leaders must engage team members in the mission of the organization, provide clear expectations, strengthen shared values, understand person-job fit characteristics for each employee, build team camaraderie, trust and communication, recognize good work, remove job ambiguity and invest in growth opportunities for each team member. How well this happens for each team member is in the hands of each team leader.

The Engagement Pulse survey was designed to gauge how effectively leaders are engaging their teams. Each of the survey items was thoughtfully designed to reduce measurement error owing to poorly designed items and the idiosyncratic rater bias that can occur with 360-degree evaluations. Even more importantly, the items have been crafted to be actionable, providing a team leader with the insight required to more effectively and intentionally engage employees — thereby creating more profitable, productive teams and organizations.