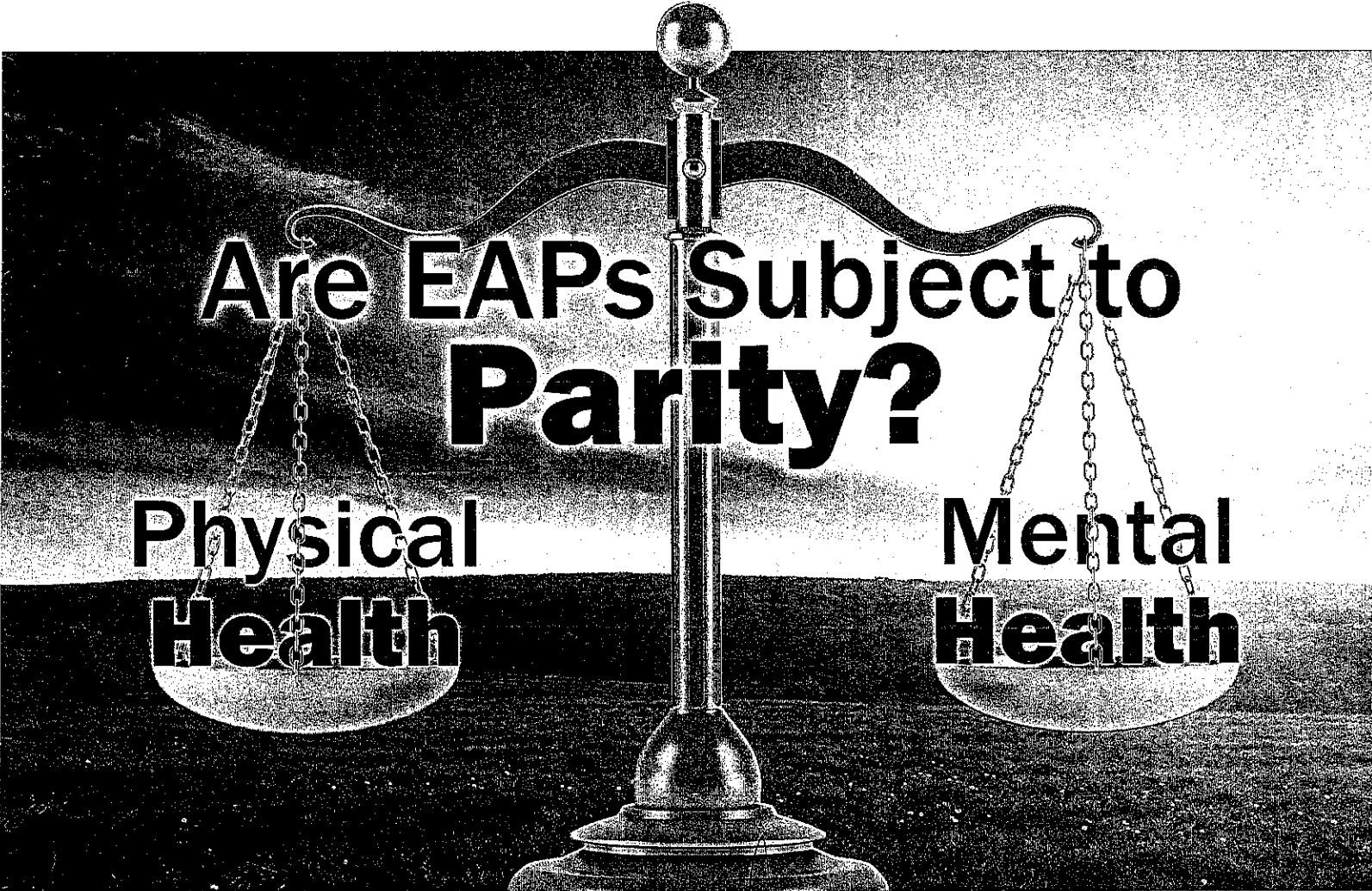


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Employee Engagement and EAPs

Creating a Meaningful Workplace

“Managers must be trained to alter their style from one centered on *policing* employees, to a more positive *coaching* approach.”

By Chester J. Taranowski, Ph.D., CEAP

What actually motivates an employee to operate at peak levels of performance? Traditionally, this question has focused on salary and benefits. However, an employee’s intrinsic interest in his/her work and the personal meaning that he or she derives from the job are also motivating factors that lead an individual to perform at a high level. Researchers call this enhanced motivation, “engagement.”

In other words, an employee’s personal experience of engagement is a work-related, positive state of mind that reflects his/her passion and commitment to the job. Engaged employees work proactively, they expand their thinking as the job requires, and they actively find ways to increase their skills. They perceive that their own self-interest is aligned with organizational goals. Consequently, they demonstrate resilience, adapt well to change, and are less likely to leave the job than an unengaged employee.

However, engaged employees are not workaholics! They enjoy activities outside of their jobs, and unlike workaholics,

they do not suffer from a compulsive attitude toward work. Instead, they find their tasks interesting and energizing.

Moreover, levels of engagement exist not only within employees, but also across organizations. Put another way, engagement can be influenced both by characteristics of an individual employee *and* by conditions within the workplace. It is the behaviors of managers that best reveal these organizational influences.

Engagement Research

Research on engagement is a work-in-progress and not free of controversy. One of the fundamental debates surrounds the many technical definitions of engagement. Some emphasize the inner psychological state of the employee, while others focus on the workplace conditions believed to influence engagement. This controversy has led to a multitude of methods for measuring work performance, creating a lack of uniformity in research.

Schaufeli and Baker (2010) suggest that engagement is characterized by three internal psychological factors:

- Vigor;
- Dedication; and
- Absorption.

Vigor is described as a high level of energy and mental resilience. Dedication refers to a sense of meaning, inspiration, and positive challenge from one’s labor. With high absorption, the employee becomes engrossed in their work to the degree that time appears to pass very quickly.

Salanova, Schaufeli, Xanthopoulou, and Bakker (2010) suggested that engagement lies at one end of a continuum of employee motivation. *Full* engagement anchors the positive side of work-related emotion, while *burnout* describes negative engagement. Burnout is characterized by exhaustion, cynicism, and a sense of inefficacy on the job (Maslach & Jackson, 1996).

Still other authors have suggested that burnout is an occupational hazard of a highly engaged employee. Since they demonstrate great personal investment in their jobs – without appropriate management support and ample resources to perform their tasks – the engaged

are likely to overextend to the point of exhaustion (e.g. Dewa, Thompson & Jacobs, 2011).

Worldwide research has linked the level of worker engagement with company success. Gallup (Wagner & Harter, 2006) found that companies with high engagement saw:

- Reduced employee turnover;
- Increased customer satisfaction;
- Greater employee productivity; and
- Enhanced company profits.

Pugh and Dietz (2008) suggest that companies with a better work environment, including greater opportunities for career growth, and a culture of support and openness, outperformed organizations that fared poorly in these areas. There are many other studies linking engagement to productivity. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (UK) published a paper extolling the virtues of engagement. The document includes a review of the linkage literature. (MacLeod & Clarke, 2009). Attridge (2009) also produced an excellent review with a focus on EAPs.

Variables that Facilitate Engagement

As mentioned earlier, certain personal characteristics identify individuals likely to demonstrate a high level of engagement. Managers and executives, for instance, usually have greater levels of engagement.

Employees who are highly educated are also typically more engaged, but they often show greater loyalty to their profession than to the organization they work for.

Generally speaking, engaged workers experience *better health, a higher state of well-being, and positive social relationships* both within and outside of work. Because these characteristics correlate with productivity, some consultants advocate work-based programs to directly address subjective well-being and other quality of life interventions, independent of direct association with the workplace.

Organizational conditions that correlate with worker enthusiasm are termed, “drivers of engagement.” Gallup conducted probably the most familiar research in this area. The factors associated with engagement are reflected in an employee’s agreement with statements similar to the following: “*I am doing something I am good at;*” “*I have all the things I need to do my job;*” “*I know exactly what I should be doing;*” “*Every week someone notices something positive about my work;*” “*People care about me at work;*” “*I have a mentor at work;*” “*People listen to my opinions;*” “*I understand how my job is related to the company’s goals;*” “*I receive respectful feedback at work;*” and, “*My job offers me opportunities for advancement*” (Wagner & Harter, 2006).

To facilitate engagement, more effort should be expended

by organizations to create a meaningful work experience. This includes redesigning jobs to reduce high strain (i.e. demanding tasks with little discretion over how to perform them). This doesn’t suggest that work should be any less challenging or that employees are not held accountable. Rather, it means that jobs should have variety and permit a worker as much autonomy, creativity, and discretion as possible.

A sense of justice, fairness, and freedom from harassment are other fundamental requirements of engagement. The presence of maltreatment or workplace bullies significantly suppresses engagement. Trust, fairness, and respect are not luxuries for companies, but are universal requirements for peak performance.

In addition, the “people skills” of supervisors remain probably the single most important influence on workplace engagement. Managers must be trained to alter their style from one centered on *policing* employees, to a more positive *coaching* approach. While these lofty recommendations for management skills and a positive organizational culture are seldom met, research clearly demonstrates that workplaces that strive to attain these goals are likely to be successful.

Measuring Engagement

Consulting aimed at improving engagement should often begin with an assessment of an organization’s current working conditions. This is often

accomplished through workplace surveys designed to identify drivers of employee productivity and satisfaction. Although engagement surveys evolved from employee satisfaction analysis, the two assessments are *not* synonymous. Engagement surveys are intended both to identify drivers that might be *unique* to a particular group and also to assess the presence – or absence – of workplace conditions identified as applicable to *any* workplace.

Large consulting firms periodically announce estimates of engagement as indicators for national and international levels of worker enthusiasm. Typical estimates reveal that only $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{3}$ of the workforce is highly engaged. Therefore, research suggests that the potential resource of employee motivation and passion is largely wasted.

Several standardized measures of engagement have been developed. These instruments can be used either to ascertain *individual* levels of engagement, or by aggregating data, they may make estimates about engagement across an entire *organization*:

➤ The *Utrecht Work Engagement Scale* (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003) includes subscales for the assessment of vigor, absorption and dedication. (www.beanmanaged.eu/pdf/articles/arnoldbakker/article_arnold_bakker_87.pdf)

➤ The *Shirom-Melamed Measure of Vigor within the Workplace* is also available at

the following link: (<http://www.tau.ac.il/~ashirom/research.htm>).

➤ The most wildly used measure for burnout is the *Maslach Burnout Inventory*, by Maslach and Jackson (1996).

➤ The *Chestnut Outcome Suite* is designed as a comprehensive measure of EAP performance and contains a subscale on engagement (Lennox, Sharara, Schmitzb, & Goehner, 2010) (www.chestnutglobalpartners.org/ResearchTools/Tools/WorkplaceOutcomeSuite.aspx).

Management Training

Regardless of whether an organizational evaluation is conducted quantitatively or qualitatively, consultants can provide programs to address obstacles to motivation. These trainings usually begin with leadership. In most American organizations, supervisors have little formal training in managing people and no training in job design. Administrators must first understand the basic components of an engaging workplace, including helping workers build self-efficacy and creating an environment of social support.

“Transformational” management is an emphasis in today’s business classes. This perspective underscores the importance of developing a supervisor’s *leadership* skill. In other words, the most effective leaders motivate by offering both a challenging workplace where employees are encouraged to grow their skills, and yet still require worker accountability.

To achieve these outcomes, transformational leaders must model a positive vision for their group, demonstrate realistic optimism, and engage in authentic communication. These changes require a significant shift from what has been considered sufficient management skill. However, in most organizations, training resources for this psychologically enlightened style of supervision are seldom available.

Interventions with Individuals

Two interventions have been demonstrated to improve the line-worker’s personal level of engagement: the careful identification of employee strengths; and “job crafting.” Assessing a worker’s talents and then matching these skills to appropriate tasks may enhance both employee productivity and well-being.

Several psychometric assessments for the identification of strengths have been developed. The most famous is the Strengths Finder (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001), but other instruments are available (The VIA at www.authenticchappiness.com and Realise2 at www.capeu.com).

Although testing may be used to identify skills, even simple conversations with employees, examining work history or probing for job preferences may suffice.

Job crafting builds on strength identification (Berg, Dutton & Wrzesniewski, 2008). Most job descriptions present an array of assignments that may leave

considerable latitude for employees to select tasks or choose the methods that produce results. Once an employee is able to identify his/her talents, job crafting allows them to emphasize the activities in which they are most likely to be successful. Yet again, few workplace resources are available to assist either managers or individual employees in creating more meaningful work experiences, be it through strength identification, job crafting, or any other process.

Engagement and EAPs

In today's lean organizations, few opportunities exist for the training and management support necessary to transform the workplace. Consequently, by either supporting *existing* engagement initiatives or *helping to begin* initiatives such as the ones described in this article, EAPs can position themselves at the center of efforts to increase the quality of an employee's work life. Particularly in smaller organizations, EAPs may be the only resource for supervisor coaching.

Unfortunately, EAP management consultants are typically professionally trained therapists who may lack business experience. For that reason, engagement literature may help these specialists understand the components of a productive and meaningful work experience and also offer an overarching structure by which management interventions can be recommended.

Unique opportunities may also exist for EAPs to help individual workers achieve a

more meaningful occupational life. Today, few employees would feel safe discussing disengagement with supervisors. However, through confidential individual consultations designed to identify strengths and opportunities, EAPs can improve both *individual* employee well-being and the engagement levels of an entire organization. ❖

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