

## SUCCESSFUL LEADERSHIP: OPTIMIZING THE INFLUENCE OF PERSONALITY ON WORK ENGAGEMENT

### Abstract

**Objective:** This paper examines the positive influence that personality has on the level of engagement workers have in their work. By determining the connection between personality characteristics and work engagement, leaders can be proactive in promoting higher levels of engagement by their workers. **Background:** Engaging in one's work encompasses the total person and includes elements such as energy, mental resilience, willingness to invest in one's work, enthusiasm, pride, and the happiness that comes with being involved in work. The level of work engagement of workers in their work has implications for the workers as well as for the organization. **Method:** Through a review of literature related to personality characteristics and work engagement, the personality characteristics having a positive influence on work engagement are identified. Along with these characteristics, the practical actions associated with these characteristics that have been shown to promote work engagement are discussed. **Results:** On the basis of literature reviewed, the personality characteristics of conscientiousness, extraversion, and proactive personality were found to have a positive influence on work engagement. Associated with these personality characteristics are a variety of practical actions that impact work engagement. **Conclusion:** The connection between personality characteristics and engagement in work has been identified. Utilizing practical actions that have been shown to be a positive influence on work engagement is beneficial for the workers as well as for the organization. **Application:** Leaders can achieve higher levels of success by utilizing the practical actions associated with certain personality characteristics to promote higher levels of work engagement among workers.

### Introduction

Work is a very important part of many people's lives. Much time and energy is devoted to the work that one does throughout his or her life. Even though this work may come in many different forms, the extent to which people are engaged in their work has implications for those in leadership roles as well as for the workers. Bakker and Leiter (2010) describe work engagement as providing "a distinct, valuable perspective on the experience of work" (p. 181). The level of engagement of the worker in his or her work not only affects the worker but also impacts those who are part of the greater organization. These effects can be either positive or negative. For some, work is something that is exciting and brings fulfillment. For others, the opposite is true as their work is tiring, exhausting, and unfulfilling. Given the significance of work, it is beneficial to take into consideration the perspective that one has regarding his or her work.

Directly connected with work engagement is the influence that one's personality has on his or her level of engagement. According to Wefald, Reichard, and Serrano (2011) there is an association between personality and engagement resulting in the tendency to be satisfied with one's job depending on personality type. Even though the relationship between personality and work engagement has been made, Sonnentag, Dormann, and Demerouti (2010) point out that there is only a limited connection between personality variables and work engagement research. As a result, the purpose of this paper is to examine the positive influence that personality has on the level of engagement

of workers in their work. This examination will take place through a review of scholarly literature associated with personality and work engagement.

While this has relevance for the worker, the implication for leadership is of vital importance. By having a greater understanding of the relationship between personality and work engagement and the actions that have been shown to optimize the impact of personality on one's engagement at work, leaders can have a positive influence in the work engagement of their personnel resulting in benefits for the workers and for the organization. Discussion includes the theory underlying work engagement, two research questions, a review of relevant literature, and discussion and implications for leadership. Limitations are also presented. A conclusion summarizes the discussion and presents future research opportunities.

### **Work Engagement Theory**

Being engaged in the work that one does is very important. According to Schaufeli and Bakker (2010), work engagement has a direct connection with the relationship that employees have with their work. This relationship can be either positive or negative. One's view of work depends on the person, the work, and even those who are part of the larger organization. Often a person is considered engaged by being productive. While productivity may result from being engaged in one's work, there is more to being engaged than what may be revealed on the surface.

For the purposes of this discussion, work engagement is described according to Schaufeli and Bakker's (2010) description of work engagement that includes three components:

- (1) vigor, which is a behavioral-energetic component;
- (2) dedication, which is an emotional component; and
- (3) absorption, which is a cognitive component.

This view of work engagement goes beyond productivity to encompass a variety of feelings and associated behaviors. Taris, Schaufeli, & Shimazu, (2010) describe the three components of work engagement in the following way:

Vigor is characterized by high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in one's work, and persistence, also in the face of difficulties. Dedication refers to being strongly involved in one's work, and experiencing a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride and challenge. Finally, absorption is characterized by being fully concentrated on and happily engrossed in one's work, whereby time passes quickly and one has difficulties with detaching oneself from work. (p. 41)

By viewing work engagement in terms of one's vigor, dedication, and absorption in his or her work, the impact of the level of engagement has implications for both the worker and the organization. For the individual, engagement is related to one's growth and development; for the organization the quality of performance is affected (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2010). Work engagement results in workers who tend to work harder because of their positive connection with their work. Or as Schaufeli and Bakker (2010) state "engaged employees put a lot of effort into their work because they identify with it" (p. 12). This type of engagement with work is good for the worker since the worker identifies with the work and perhaps views the work as valuable. Along with this is the positive impact for the organization as a result of workers being engaged in their work. Schaufeli and Bakker (2010) also point out that increasing work engagement is beneficial

for the entire organization. One very important way that work engagement benefits the organization is by increasing competitive advantage (Bakker and Letiter, 2010).

Given the significance that work engagement has for both the individual and the organization, it is very important for those who provide leadership to be knowledgeable of the influence of work engagement and take practical steps to increase the level of engagement by workers in their work. As leaders utilize practical actions that have been shown to have a positive impact on work engagement, they can increase the level of engagement of those who are part of the organization with benefits extending to the entire organization.

### **Research Questions**

This paper will be guided by the following two research questions.

Research Question #1: What is the influence of personality characteristics on work engagement?

Research Question #2: What are the practical actions related to personality characteristics that influence work engagement?

### **Review of Related Literature**

The literature reviewed revealed that certain personality characteristics have a positive influence on work engagement. The research indicated the personality characteristics of conscientiousness, extraversion, and proactive personality positively influenced work engagement. In addition, the literature reviewed revealed certain practical actions associated with these personality characteristics that are influential on work engagement. It should be noted while other personality characteristics may also be important to work engagement, literature associated with these areas is not included in this discussion.

### **Conscientiousness and Work Engagement**

Research affirmed that the personality trait of conscientiousness has a positive influence on work engagement. Conscientiousness is characterized by mannerisms such as being orderly, decisive, consistent, industrious, and reliable (Wefald et al., 2011). According to Kim, Shin, and Swanger (2009), conscientiousness is a personality trait having a significant influence on engagement. Based on their research with employees in the quick-service industry, conscientiousness was found to have a positive relationship with vigor, absorption, and professional efficacy, which are sub-dimensions of engagement (Kim et al., 2009). The influence of conscientiousness on work engagement has positive benefits as described by Kim et al. (2009) in their statement that “employees high in conscientiousness, characterized by strong responsibility, organizational skills, and steadiness, are more likely to drive their energy into work, complete the job, and ultimately feel a strong sense of professional efficacy” (p. 102).

Others are in agreement that conscientiousness makes a positive contribution on the level of work engagement. In their research with employees who were working in a variety of places including the chemical industry, consulting and personnel agencies, telemarketing, education, and catering, Bakker, Demerouti, and Brummelhuis (2012) found that conscientiousness influenced engagement resulting in both higher job performance and learning. Joseph, Luyten, Corveleyn, and De Witt (2011) reported that conscientiousness had a negative association with burnout. According to Leiter and Bakker (2010) “work engagement is a positive, fulfilling, affective-motivational state of work-related well-being that can be seen as the antipode of job burnout” (pp. 1-2). Given

this, the negative association with burnout reinforces the positive connection of conscientiousness with work engagement. Inceoglu and Warr (2011) performed research using an international website that offered free advice on assessment processes for the recruitment and development of staff and found a positive association between conscientiousness and work engagement.

### **Extraversion and Work Engagement**

Extraversion is a personality characteristic that has also been found to have a positive influence on work engagement. Mannerisms indicative of an extroverted personality include being sociable, assertive, active, and full of adventure (Wefald et al. (2011). As a result of their research, Joseph et al. (2011) reported that extraversion is positively associated with engagement and negatively associated with burnout. This reinforces the previous discussion of the opposite poles regarding work engagement and burnout. Joseph et al. (2011) pointed out that those who had low scores on extraversion were exhausted and frustrated trying to meet the demands expected of them and as a result eventually experienced burnout. On the other hand, those who scored high on extraversion were engaged in what they were doing (Joseph et al., 2011).

As a result of their research with Dutch employees, Langelaan, Bakker, van Doornen, and Schaufeli (2006) found that those with high levels of work engagement scored low on neuroticism. Here again, the positive influence of extraversion on work engagement is documented. For those with the personality characteristic of extroversion, the impact of extroversion on the engagement in their work is beneficial.

Research also indicated that there is a combined impact of both extraversion and conscientiousness on work engagement. Wefald et al. (2011) stated, "Schaufeli's measure of engagement also fully mediated the relationships between personality (in this case Extraversion and Conscientiousness) and both job satisfaction and affective commitment" (p. 534). In their research with Norwegian cross-occupational employees, Andreassen, Hetland, and Pallesen (2010) came to a similar conclusion that there is a positive relationship between extraversion and conscientiousness with work involvement. Andreassen et al. (2010) described work involvement to include "aspects of being highly energized and ambitious" (p. 13). In addition, Andreassen et al. (2010) reported that both extraversion and conscientiousness had a positive relationship with the enjoyment people have for their work while neuroticism had a negative relationship with their enjoyment in work. This supports the positive influences of conscientiousness and extraversion on the level of engagement in the work that one does.

### **Proactive Personality and Work Engagement**

Another personality characteristic that has been shown to have a positive influence on work engagement is a proactive personality. A proactive personality is manifested by tendencies to be intentional by identifying potential opportunities and then taking action and preserving until completion (Bakker, Tims, & Derks, 2012). Two research studies of relevance are as follows. The first is by Bakker, Tims, et al., (2012) who studied participants employed in several organizations in The Netherlands. Bakker, et al. (2012) reported that those with a proactive personality displayed initiative and made an impact on the world, found ways to adapt to their environment, and let their environments shape them. By crafting their level of job demands, those with a proactive personality were more engaged resulting in better performance (Bakker, Tims, et al., 2012).

The second research study of importance was performed with employees of a large governmental institution in the Netherlands by Dikkers, Jansen, de Lange, Vinkenburg, and Kooij (2009) resulting in their view that proactivity is a personal resource which employees use to impact the environment where they work leading to a higher level of work engagement. This is important because it reflects the impact that a proactive personality has on work engagement over a longer period of time. More specifically, according to Dikkers et al. (2009), a proactive personality resulted in an increase in both dedication and absorption that remained for a year and a half.

### **Practical Actions**

The practical actions related to personality characteristics are very important to examine. It is through these actions that work engagement is influenced. In this section, the actions associated with conscientiousness, extraversion, and a proactive personality that were found to be influential in the literature reviewed are presented and discussed.

**Practical actions associated with conscientiousness.** In regards to the personality characteristic of conscientiousness, Bakker et al. (2012) stated that “employees are more actively involved in learning when they set high demands for themselves (cf. conscientiousness) and when they choose to invest effort in their job (cf. vigor, dedication, absorption)” (p. 562). Making the choice to set these high demands for one’s own self is an individual decision. According to Bakker et al. (2012), spontaneous behavior resulted in high quality performance attributed to the work engagement components of vigor, dedication, and absorption.

Planning also appears to be of importance for those with the personality characteristic of conscientiousness and connecting high demands with a plan of action is essential. From their research, Bakker et al. (2012) concluded that conscientiousness was an important characteristic of personality leading to positive behaviors and actions. Bakker et al. (2012) stated that “organizations can profit by stimulating work engagement among their employees by creating engagement-evoking working environments through work (re)design approaches” (p. 563). Given this, it is beneficial for leaders to take steps to create environments that stimulate engagement.

Bakker et al. (2012) also recommended that leaders should provide guidance to motivate employees who have lower levels of conscientiousness. By providing guidance, leaders promote an atmosphere where those with lower levels of conscientiousness can also perform well. In order to do this, Bakker et al. (2012) recommended the use of performance targets to provide clear guidance to which tasks are primary and which are secondary. As a result, employees will know what is important at the organizational level as well as for their own performance (Bakker et al., 2012).

It is important to note that these actions are not intended to change the personality of others. Bakker et al. (2012) emphasized this by stating “since organizations cannot and should not try to change the personality of employees they can take some measures to ensure that employees are aware of the tasks/activities on which they should focus their attention” (p. 563). Bakker et al. (2012) recommended that leaders utilize a transformational leadership style in order to have higher levels of work engagement resulting in benefits for all of their followers. The point that is underscored is leadership should not attempt to change the personality of others, but rather to utilize practical actions to enable others to be successful.

In their research, Inceoglu and Warr (2011) focused on the connection between engagement and worker characteristics and emphasized that engagement levels increased when employees were selected on the basis of their emotional stability, extraversion, and conscientiousness. While this practical action may not be an acceptable alternative for some, it is one that is presented in the research as an action leading to higher levels of work engagement. In a more practical way, Inceoglu and Warr (2011) placed value on the development of task assignments focusing on individuals in an attempt to build on their strengths. As more is known about one's personality characteristics, job assignments can be made that build on the strengths of others, and as a result, lead to higher levels of work engagement.

**Practical actions associated with extraversion and conscientiousness.**

Some of the practical actions from the research are not specific to only one personality characteristic. Such is the case with extraversion and conscientiousness. Joseph et al. (2011) recommended that "future priests in India should be screened for personality issues, and those with high levels of Neuroticism and low levels of Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness should be identified and assisted in helping them to overcome these personality issues through further training and/or personal therapy" (p. 287). The emphasis does not seem to be on keeping someone from being a priest nor at removing a priest from his work. The goal is to help the priest to overcome personality related issues.

Joseph et al. (2011) emphasized the importance of having an action and a people orientation, both of which are characteristics of extraversion. Given the work of a priest, certain personality characteristics were noted to have benefits. Therefore, even though discussions related to personality may not always be popular, they are beneficial at times. As a result of their work, Joseph et al. (2011) recommended that the selection and training of priests is very important to consider. By identifying one's personality characteristics there is the potential for the opportunity to select work that will build on these characteristics and thereby promote work engagement.

In their research, Andreassen et al. (2010) found that enjoyment in work had a positive correlation to extraversion and conscientiousness. According to Andreassen et al. (2010), being involved in one's work is directly related to participation in new and interesting projects. Given this relationship, there is evidence of a connection between what interests a person and his or her level of work engagement. Andreassen et al. (2010) also reported that there was a relationship between personality traits, the need for satisfaction at work, and motivation and incentives. The implication of this is the importance of creating a work environment that motivates workers and develops their interests leading to increased work engagement for those with the personality characteristics of extraversion and conscientiousness.

**Practical actions associated with proactive personality.** From their research, Bakker, Tims, et al. (2012) highlighted the importance of proactive workers engaging in their work. According to Bakker, Tims, et al. (2012), "employees with a proactive personality are most likely to craft their own jobs" (p. 16). This resulted in their suggestion that interventions in the organization should be guided by employee surveys that focus on the job demands and that resources are provided to meet those demands (Bakker, Tims, et al., 2012).

In addition to focusing on job demands and resources, Bakker, Tims, et al. (2012) recommended that organizations provide support to their employees as they use their own suggestions to optimize their job characteristics and thereby bring about change in their jobs. By following this process, employees craft their own jobs. Bakker, Tims, et al. (2012) suggested this as a way for workers to mobilize their resources and as a result set their own challenges leading to higher levels of work engagement. Dikkers et al. (2009) indicated that less proactive employees have the potential to increase their levels of engagement by changing their situations at work. This is an important practical action because it benefits those who may not consider themselves as proactive as what others do. Even so, work engagement may be increased as a result.

### **Discussion and Implications**

The review of literature revealed a connection between certain personality characteristics and work engagement. As a result of this information leaders can make decisions to promote higher levels of engagement in work. In this section the discussion and implications focus on the two research questions used as the basis for the review of literature. These questions are as follows. Research question #1: What is the influence of personality characteristics on work engagement? Research question #2: What are the practical actions related to personality characteristics that influence work engagement?

In response to research question #1, the literature review revealed that personality characteristics do have an influence on work engagement. Research in this area indicated that the personality characteristics of conscientiousness, extraversion, and proactive personality made a positive influence on the worker's engagement in his or her work.

Conscientiousness was found to have an impact in the areas of responsibility, organizational skills, and the ability to put energy into work and to complete the work being done. Workers high in conscientiousness also felt that they were able to bring about the desired result corresponding to their efficacy. The outcome was a connection with performance, which was noted by those who were high in conscientiousness.

The personality characteristic extraversion was also found to have a positive influence on work engagement as the result of its negative association with burnout. Since burnout is considered to be on an opposite pole from work engagement, experiencing lower levels of burnout due to a higher level of extraversion is beneficial. The significance is beneficial for those with a more extraverted personality and their tendency to remain engaged in their work.

Some of the research reviewed in the literature presented findings that revealed the combined impact of extraversion and conscientiousness. As a result, their influence is considered as such. According to the findings, both extraversion and conscientiousness had a positive influence on work engagement. Of significance is the connection between extraversion and conscientiousness and job satisfaction, commitment, and finding enjoyment in one's work. The benefits of extraversion and conscientiousness working in tandem is perhaps more beneficial than only one or the other individually.

A proactive personality is the final characteristic discussed that has been identified by the research reviewed as influential in work engagement. The findings indicated that a proactive personality positively influenced work engagement. By taking initiative, those who are proactive make an impact that affects the work that they do. In some cases, those with a proactive personality crafted their work resulting in a higher level of work engagement. A proactive personality was also considered to be a personal

resource that made a positive influence in one's work engagement. The research findings also indicated an association existed between a proactive personality and the specific work engagement components of dedication and absorption.

In response to research question #2, related to the specific actions associated with personality characteristics that influence work engagement, the literature reviewed identified some important areas to consider. In terms of conscientiousness, setting high demands, investing effort in one's job, planned behavior, and putting the plan into action were found to be important. Through work redesign, there is the possibility that organizations can create environments that stimulate work engagement. Along with this, utilizing job assignments that build on the strengths of workers in terms of their personality is beneficial to work engagement.

With workers having lower levels of conscientiousness, it was recommended that additional guidance be provided as a motivation to perform at a higher level. It is also beneficial to help the workers to know what is important in the organization. The emphasis is on providing assistance to the workers rather than attempting to change their personality. Leadership is instrumental in this endeavor with a focus on helping others to be successful. One practical action that may not be very popular is to have selection procedures aimed at identifying personality characteristics and then making employment decisions accordingly. Implementing these types of procedures could be problematic and care must be taken accordingly.

Practical actions associated with extraversion and conscientiousness in combination includes the identification of personality characteristics and providing support through training. Providing therapy that is helpful in overcoming any corresponding issues was also beneficial. The goal is to assist the worker rather than to keep the worker from a particular job activity. Perhaps it may be more beneficial for the worker to request assistance rather than for leadership to provide assistance prematurely.

Another practical action was to engage those with these personality characteristics in work that interests them. This builds on the strengths of the worker's personality and influences work engagement in a positive manner. There are implications to this as well, since this is not always possible depending on the organization and the work performed. In terms of a proactive personality, recommended practical actions include the use of employee surveys to help determine how the workers experience the demands of their job. This can then be used to provide personalized feedback to the workers and thereby help them to craft their jobs. Work engagement will be influenced in a positive manner by focusing and building on personality strengths. In a similar way, employees who are less proactive are encouraged to make changes in their situation at work thereby increasing their work engagement.

### **Limitations**

While this review of literature on personality and work engagement makes an important contribution for leaders in a variety of organizations, there are limitations that should be taken into consideration. The limited number of research studies in this literature review is one consideration. Along with this, the influence of personality on work engagement is an area that does not seem to have a significant amount of recent research. Perhaps discussion related to personality characteristics is not popular and therefore, does not receive as much attention as it should. Even so, the literature reviewed suggested that personality does have an influence on work engagement. As a



result, additional research in this area could be completed in such a manner that promotes the positive rather than the negative.

Another limitation is the difficulty in defining personality. Authors have defined personality characteristics in differing ways and connecting the information in the various research studies is not clear-cut in many instances. More information may be found through a continued review of related literature. To an even greater extent, additional studies could be completed related to personality and work engagement that would provide information that may, or may not, support what is found in this review.

### **Conclusion**

People participate in a variety of work experiences and often this work takes up a major portion of one's life. Furthermore, the view that one has towards his or her work makes an impact on the individual as well as on others in the organization. Work engagement is much broader than just being productive. Feeling vigorous, dedicated, and absorbed in one's work encompasses the total person and includes elements such as energy, mental resilience, willingness to invest in the work, enthusiasm, pride, and the happiness that comes with being involved in that work.

The influence of personality on work engagement is an important topic for leaders to consider. Even though discussions on personality and work engagement are not always commonplace, they still provide valuable information. Through a detailed review of literature related to the personality and work engagement the relationship between these two was examined. The personality characteristics of conscientiousness, extraversion, and proactive personality were found to have a positive influence on work engagement. The practical actions associated with these personality characteristics were instrumental in bringing about higher levels of engagement in one's work.

The literature reviewed has provided valuable information in the area of personality and work engagement and additional studies that confirm, reject, and add to the work that has already been completed will be even more beneficial. Seeking to understand the positive influence that personality has on work engagement was an important element for the discussion included in this literature review. As a result of this information, leaders can utilize practical actions to promote higher levels of engagement by workers in their work benefitting both the workers and the organization.

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