

# Chapter 8

## Employee Engagement and Learning for the Transformational Leader

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### ABSTRACT

*Highly engaged employees are central to strong organizational outcomes. Nonetheless, consistency in maintaining high levels of engagement eludes most organizations. Disengaged employees are often toxic and cultivate negativity. An in-depth analysis of the drivers of employee engagement indicates that leadership is the strongest influencer of engagement. Bass's transformational leadership and the leader-member-exchange (LMX) theories outline characteristics of transformational leaders. The theories intersect where Bass posits is the stage in the relationship between leader and follower where leader behavior inspires followers to excel with no additional incentives needed. Training and development of the transformational leader who drives high engagement must take adult learning principles into account in recognition of the unique learning needs of adults.*

### INTRODUCTION

Data from companies across a broad spectrum of industries suggests far-reaching challenges in meeting employee engagement objectives. A Gallup survey of a random sampling of United States employees indicates a “high” engagement score in the last twenty years of only 34% compared to lows in the mid-twenties in 2000 and 2005 (Harter, 2018). A highly engaged workforce produces many benefits for organizations. As Parent and Lovelace (2018) posit, companies with higher levels of engagement experience lower turnover (25 percent), less absenteeism (37 percent), fewer safety incidents (48 percent), and fewer quality incidents (41 percent). Nonetheless, high employee engagement eludes most companies (Harter 2018). Kaye and Jordan-Evans (1999), Baumruk (2006), and Gyensare et al. (2019) submit that employee engagement is most prominently influenced by leadership. The breadth and depth of a leader's influence are palpable and far-reaching given leaders' responsibility to their followers to not only share

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an organization's vision but also provide guidance and direction in executing the vision. Organizations experience a significant variance in employee engagement that is directly related to how employees see, experience, and interact with their leaders (Sinyan, 2018).

To remain competitive locally and globally, Arokiasamy (2013) asserts, that companies must extend themselves and generously invest in motivating their employees. Central to addressing this need is understanding the implications of leadership in engaging employees. Leaders guide an organization, its practices, processes, protocols, and people. Leaders at all levels have the power to influence engagement on a sustained basis. Specifically, however, transformational leadership inspires a level of enthusiasm in followers that takes the achievement of goals and objectives to a higher level (Schuckert et al., 2018). Transformational leadership is defined by Antonakis and House (2014) as the “intellectual stimulation” and attention to individual needs, inspiration, and...ideals of employees or followers (p. 750). This meta-analysis critically examines Leader-Member-Exchange (LMX) Theory and Bass' Transformational Leadership Theory to argue that transformational leadership is the panacea for attaining and sustaining strong employee engagement results on a long-term basis. Consequently, focusing on a combination of elements of transformational leadership—from interaction with employees to theories of leadership to training and development—are pivotal in understanding how organizations can successfully address employee engagement outcomes. This chapter explores transformational leadership as a curiously overlooked long-term solution.

The ensuing argument unfolds in three steps. First, this chapter defines engagement, looks at disengagement, then surveys the high stakes and impact of employee engagement. Second, two theoretical leadership frameworks—Bass' Transformational Leadership and Leader-Member-Exchange (LMX) Theories—that anchor this research are discussed. Third, this chapter provides a practical application of adult learning theories that inform a training and development plan for transformational leaders.

## **Employee Engagement**

In his seminal work, Kahn (1990) defines employee engagement in terms that reflect how employees connect with others and engage physically, cognitively, and emotionally. Kahn (1990) posits that engagement is “the simultaneous employment and expression of a person's preferred self in task behaviors that promote connections to work and to others...” (p. 700). Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) expound on Kahn's definition in their description of three dimensions that make up engagement: vigor, dedication, and absorption. They define vigor as “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” (p. 295). For employees in customer-facing roles, whether in-person, on the phone, or online, vigor is evident in how they act, react, interact, and respond to customers and how they act, react, interact, and respond to their coworkers. The customer experience reflects the elevated level of enthusiasm of an employee with vigor. Schwartz (2010) asserts that customers who engage with highly enthusiastic employees feel heard, seen, valued, and appreciated and give high marks when expressing their satisfaction with a company.

On the other hand, employees with moderate to low vigor, as Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) note, are more likely to receive moderate to low customer satisfaction results because moderate to low vigor is viewed unfavorably by customers who want and, in some cases, need to feel appreciated to continue conducting business with a company. Dedication is “a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge...” (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004, p. 295). Absorption is another element of engagement and is defined as being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one's work where time passes

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