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Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 911208275]

Publisher Psychology Press

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713684945>

Work engagement: Further reflections on the state of play

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Online publication date: 13 February 2011

To cite this Article Bakker, Arnold B. , Albrecht, Simon L. and Leiter, Michael P.(2011) 'Work engagement: Further reflections on the state of play', European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology, 20: 1, 74 – 88

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/1359432X.2010.546711

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2010.546711>

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Response to commentaries

Work engagement: Further reflections on the state of play

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In this article we further reflect on the “state of play” of work engagement. We consider, clarify, and respond to issues and themes raised by eight preeminent work engagement researchers who were invited to respond to our position article. The key themes we reflect upon include: (1) theory and measurement of engagement; (2) state and task engagement; (3) climate for engagement versus collective engagement; (4) the dark side of engagement; (5) where job crafting may go wrong; and (6) moderators of the engagement–performance relationship. We conclude that engagement can sensibly be conceptualized as a positive and high arousal affective state characterized by energy and involvement; that there may be additional dimensions that might usefully be included; that we need to more fully understand the day-to-day and moment-to-moment temporal dynamics and implications of engagement; that a “climate for engagement” will influence individual and organizational outcomes; that although engagement is at heart a positive construct, the “dark side” of engagement needs to be acknowledged and understood; that “job crafting” provides a potentially powerful way for employees to manage their engagement; and that we need to gain a better understanding of the moderators that influence the way that engagement is related to performance. We also outline some practical implications that follow from our conclusions.

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Keywords: Burnout; Employee engagement; Job crafting; State engagement; Work engagement.

Our position article on work engagement (Bakker, Albrecht, & Leiter, 2011 this issue) generated an overwhelmingly positive response from contributing authors acknowledging that our review is timely and that the proposed research agenda is important. In their responses, the authors offer significant further opportunities for progress in the field of engagement. We agree with many of the suggestions proposed and are grateful for opportunities to clarify our position, to respond to issues raised, to hopefully help “put to bed” some issues, and reload an agenda for future research and practice. Thus, in this reply to the commentaries, we further reflect on the state of play regarding work engagement. The key themes advanced in this response are the following: (1) theory and measurement of work engagement; (2) state work engagement and task engagement; (3) climate for engagement versus collective engagement; (4) the dark side of work engagement; (5) where job crafting may go wrong; and (6) moderators of the engagement–performance relationship.

THEORY AND MEASUREMENT OF WORK ENGAGEMENT

The commentaries indicate that there is a need for greater clarity regarding the definition and theory of engagement. This is important for scientific progress and for the application of the concept to practical problems in the workplace. It is widely agreed that work engagement is the combination of the capability to work (energy, vigour) and the willingness to work (involvement, dedication). Both Maslach (2011 this issue) and Schaufeli and Salanova (2011 this issue) remind us that the underpinning theoretical rationale and dimensionality of work engagement is, in part, derived from the study of burnout—the incapability to work (exhaustion) and the unwillingness to work (cynicism, disengagement). However, as suggested by Parker and Griffin (2011 this issue), we can use a wider nomological net to establish a clear conceptualization of engagement as an active psychological state. To that effect, we would like to position engagement in the circumplex model of affective well-being.

Russell’s (1980, 2003) circumplex model proposes that affective states arise from two fundamental neurophysiological systems, one related to a pleasure–displeasure continuum and the other to arousal, activation, or alertness. Each emotion can be understood as a linear combination of these two dimensions as varying degrees of both pleasure and activation (see Figure 1). Specific emotions or affective states arise out of patterns of activation within these two neurophysiological systems, together with interpretations and labelling of these emotional experiences.

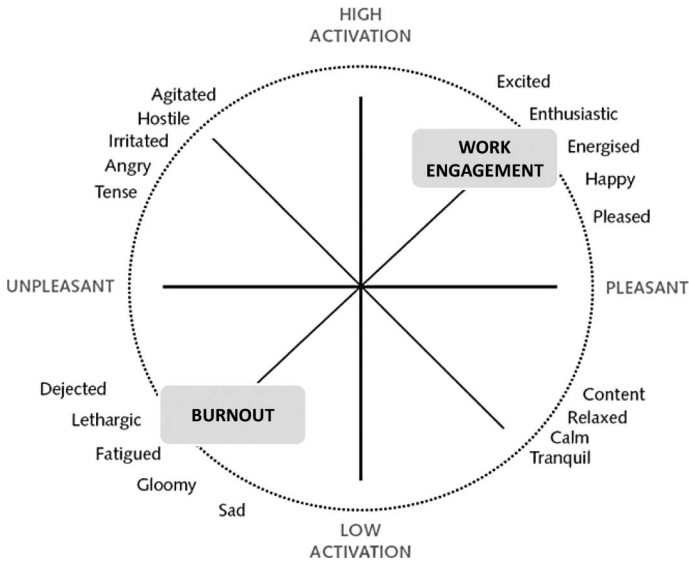


Figure 1. A two-dimensional view of subjective well-being (Russell, 2003; see also Bakker & Oerlemans, in press). Printed with permission.

The circumplex model emphasizes that emotions are not discrete and isolated entities but instead are interrelated based on the two neurophysiological systems of pleasure and activation. For instance, the degree of activation while experiencing positive (pleasurable) emotions varies considerably (Warr, 2007). Feeling calm and content implies a lower level of activation compared to feeling happy, engaged, excited, or enthusiastic. Similarly, unpleasant emotions may range from “feeling bored or depressed” to “feeling upset, anxious, or tense”. Using statistical techniques such as multidimensional scaling and factor analysis of subjective reports of emotional words, faces, and experiences, researchers have repeatedly confirmed a two-dimensional (2-D) model of affective experience as mapped by the circumplex model (e.g., Lang, Bradley, & Cuthbert, 1998; Larsen & Diener, 1992; Thayer, 1989).

Using the circumplex model of emotions, Bakker and Oerlemans (in press) positioned work engagement in the upper right quadrant of the circumplex model as it resembles high levels of pleasure and activation (see also Parker & Griffin, 2011 this issue). Burnout can be positioned in the lower left quadrant as it resembles low levels of pleasure and activation. Whereas burned-out individuals are exhausted and cynical about work, engaged employees are full with energy and enthusiasm. The implication of this analysis is that, in order to facilitate work engagement and to prevent burnout, employers should work to create an organizational context where

employees feel enthusiastic, energized, and motivated because their jobs are both “active” and “pleasurable”.

The Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Bakker, Hakanen, Demerouti, & Xanthopoulou, 2007) provides an elegant and powerful framework by which to explain the conditions that influence work engagement. Particularly the combination of high job demands (“activation”) and high job resources (“pleasure”) has been found to predict work engagement (Bakker et al., 2007; Bakker, van Veldhoven, & Xanthopoulou, 2010; Hakanen, Bakker, & Demerouti, 2005). Interestingly and important for the discussion about the relationship between engagement and burnout, the exact opposite pattern of relationships has been found for burnout. Risk of burnout is most likely when high job demands are combined with low job resources (Bakker, Demerouti, & Euwema, 2005; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). It follows that burnout (displeasure and deactivation) is most likely when such a situation is prolonged for a longer time period.

The contributing authors provided useful and stimulating commentary on the conceptual and measurement issues surrounding the relationship between work engagement and burnout. On the one hand, and as suggested by the circumplex model in Figure 1, both engagement and burnout are important to the definition and modelling of work-related well-being. In this sense, work engagement and burnout are two sides of the same, albeit imperfectly shaped, coin. However, on the other hand, we agree with Schaufeli and Salanova (2011 this issue) that not feeling burned-out does not mean that one feels engaged. As can be seen in Figure 1, researchers need positively *and* negatively framed items (as in the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory—OLBI; Demerouti & Bakker, 2008; Demerouti, Bakker, Vardakou, & Kantas, 2003; Demerouti, Mostert, & Bakker, 2010) to be able to make this very point. It follows that if, for example, only positive items (like in the UWES) are used to assess what people can and want to do (engagement), then a low score indicates no engagement but not necessarily high burnout. If only negative items are used to assess what people cannot do and are not willing to do (burnout), then a low score indicates no burnout but not necessarily high engagement. The MBI (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996) has the advantage of including both negative items (for exhaustion and cynicism) and positive items (professional efficacy), such that low scores on exhaustion and cynicism and high scores on efficacy capture both sides of the construct. Thus, burnout and engagement do not represent two different coins, but two sides of the same coin. In conclusion, although engagement and burnout are different but closely related features of one phenomenon—work-related well-being—we agree with Schaufeli and Salanova (2011 this issue) and Sonnentag (2011 this issue) that it is a good idea to maintain a critical examination of engagement and burnout measures for conceptual and empirical reasons. It would be a good idea to use both positive and

negative sides of the coin if one wants to measure employee well-being (for example, the OLBI); but positive items on their own can be effective to assess the extent to which employees feel enthusiastic, energized, and motivated because their jobs are both “active” and “pleasurable”.

It should be noted that research using the MBI and the UWES simultaneously (González-Romá, Schaufeli, Bakker, & Lloret, 2006) has indeed shown that we can distinguish two underlying dimensions: an energy dimension and an identification dimension. The same results are found if we use an instrument including positively and negatively framed items, such as the OLBI (Demerouti et al., 2003, 2010). Sonnentag (2011 this issue) correctly notices that identification is common in all engagement concepts (including the concepts proposed by May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004; Rich, Lepine, & Crawford, 2010; Rothbard, 2001), while the energy component is more unique in the UWES. Future research should explore whether additional characteristics are necessary to assess engagement, including the UWES-absorption dimension. However, and while we agree with Parker and Griffin (2011 this issue) that engagement research should not limit itself to studying only the UWES (or other instruments) and that engagement researchers should draw from complementary and alternative research streams, we also agree with Maslach (2011 this issue) that unless there is mutual understanding and agreement about what engagement is and is not (i.e., unless we are all on the same page about construct validity), then the future will not bode well with respect to meaningful and effective transnational research.

STATE WORK ENGAGEMENT AND TASK ENGAGEMENT

Sonnentag (2011 this issue) agrees with us that it is important to look at daily changes in work engagement, so that we can better capture the dynamic and temporal aspects of engagement. She argues that examining engagement from day to day might even be a too rough assessment, and proposes that engagement may fluctuate from hour to hour, similar to within-day fluctuations of job performance (Beal, Weiss, Barros, & MacDermid, 2005). We completely agree that the next generation of engagement studies should focus not only on daily changes but also on fluctuations within the day. Moreover, this view is perfectly in line with our third proposition, stating that conceptualizations and measures of work engagement will need to more closely consider the dynamic, temporal, and configurational dimensions of the construct. We also agree that the nature of the task at hand is an important determinant of whether we experience work engagement (see also Schaufeli & Salanova, 2011 this issue). For example, whereas most researchers will be highly engaged when testing their theoretical models or writing their articles; only some may feel energetic and

dedicated (be engaged) when filling in administrative forms. An important question that would benefit from further conceptual development as well as empirical research is the relationship of state engagement with ongoing engagement. Do responses to daily diary items assess identical experiences as responses to the same items referring to the past year?

According to George (2010), “[i]t would seem to be especially important for employees to be engaged at work when there are real problems and the need for improvements and change” (p. 259). This perspective is consistent with a state or task engagement perspective. Furthermore, we agree with the idea that engagement is not exclusively about ‘having fun’ (George, 2011 this issue). In contrast, employees can be highly engaged (enthusiastic, dedicated, motivated) in difficult and emotionally demanding work. Moreover, we believe that particularly engaged employees are able and willing to cope with high job demands. They have the psychological capital (e.g., self-efficacy, self-esteem, optimism; Luthans, Youssef, & Avolio, 2007) that is needed to manage the emotions of their clients, and they are best able to craft their work environment and mobilize their job resources, including social support from colleagues, supervisory coaching, and feedback (Bakker et al., 2011 this issue).

Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, and Stone (2004) have suggested that the best methodology available for studying situational activities and corresponding affective experiences in real world conditions are experience-sampling methods. In particular, daily reports may not be subject to biases involved in making global estimates, which makes them more valid compared to survey research. Experience sampling research and research with the day reconstruction method indeed suggests that positive, active affect is a function of the activities people engage in during the day.

CLIMATE FOR ENGAGEMENT VERSUS COLLECTIVE ENGAGEMENT

In our article, we argued that when employees perceive that their organization provides a supportive, involving, and challenging climate, and hence accommodates their psychological needs, they are more likely to be engaged: to respond by investing time and energy and by being psychologically involved in the work of their organization. A climate for engagement refers to employees’ shared perceptions regarding their work environment—is the work environment facilitating engagement? We proposed that the six areas of work life (Maslach & Leiter, 2008) potentially provide a useful way to conceptualize “climate for engagement”. Shared perceptions in how employees perceive the six areas—workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values—will determine a climate for engagement. That is, do employees perceive that senior management set

employee workloads that are realistic and challenging? Do employees perceive that senior management actively facilitate a sense of collaboration and community across the organization? We hypothesize that climate for engagement (measured at the level of the organization) will influence employee perceptions of job demands and job resources (measured at the level of the individual), which in turn have been shown to influence work engagement and performance (see also Dollard & Bakker, 2010).

Schaufeli and Salanova (2011 this issue) interpreted climate for engagement as collective engagement. Although collective engagement is more likely with a favourable climate for engagement, it is definitely not the same. Collective engagement refers to the engagement of the team/group (team vigour, team dedication, and team absorption), as perceived by individual employees. Climate for engagement refers to the shared perceptions of the work environment—it indicates whether the environment is challenging and resourceful, and consequently facilitates work engagement at the group and individual level. It is also not “awkward” (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2011 this issue, p. 43) to operationalize climate for engagement using the six areas of work life. The six areas have been shown to facilitate engagement in many different organizations (Maslach & Leiter, 2008), and can thus safely be used as a proxy of the working conditions climate for engagement may refer to. In our article, we proposed that a climate for engagement (measured at the level of the team) influences individual job demands and job resources, which in turn influences work engagement. We believe that it is theoretically and practically more interesting to examine such cross-level models than examining all constructs at the higher level. Although it is true that the relationship between the predictor and criterion becomes stronger when operationalized at the same level of specificity, the relationship also becomes rather self-evident and may even become almost tautological. What do we learn if we would find a positive correlation between climate for engagement and collective engagement? It seems much more interesting to address the question how a collective, shared climate for engagement may set the stage for individual job challenges and resources, which in turn may facilitate individual engagement. Multilevel approaches, such as hierarchical linear modelling that differentiates variance on the individual from variance on the workgroup level may help to shed light on these issues. In any event, such effects would be far from self-evident.

THE DARK SIDE OF WORK ENGAGEMENT

George (2011 this issue), in a typically incisive fashion, invites and encourages us to question our fundamental assumptions about work engagement. Extending the issue of “does engagement have a dark side?” George asks us to consider whether we have adopted an overly romanticized

notion of engagement which is skewed more toward a managerial focus than an employee well-being focus. George questions the fairness and rightness of organizations reaping bottom line benefits from highly engaged employees, whereas employees' only source of benefit is through increased intrinsic motivation. Input–output ratios and notions of distributive justice are here at play. We, as researchers and practitioners, beyond advocating that employers have a duty of care to their employees, need to amass and disseminate more evidence to confirm that organizations remain competitive when they monitor and manage known causes of engagement—including employee perceptions of procedural and distributive justice. Despite the increasing evidence linking engagement to individual, unit, and organizational effectiveness, more linkage research is needed.

Additional to the issue of whether engagement is a win-win situation for employers and employees, Bakker and Demerouti's (2008) model of work engagement proposes that engagement is particularly likely if high job demands are combined with high job resources. The JD-R and social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) therefore suggest equity sensibly being in-built in the employer–employee dynamic whereby both employers and employees negotiate and perceive an appropriate equilibrium in the provision of demands and resources within the working context. Employers invest in their employees by offering sufficient job resources, and employees pay back with high levels of energy and dedication, resulting in high-level performance. Moreover, as indicated in our position article, recent research suggests that engaged employees are proactive—they actively increase their job resources and job demands, or decrease their job demands if needed. Also, research has shown that engaged employees work hard, but they are not workaholics (Gorgievski, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2010). This means that in the evenings they will likely prefer to do other things than working. Whereas George (2011 this issue), Maslach (2011 this issue), and Schaufeli and Salanova (2011 this issue) point at possible conflicting interests between employers and employees, we believe that employees need actively try to keep the exchange relationship equitable. Employees contribute valuable time and effort and in return they receive important outcomes such as pay, but also opportunities to learn and meaningful work.

Nevertheless, it is important that future studies continue to examine the dark sides of work engagement. It is known for example that engagement may foster work–family conflict (Halbesleben, 2011 this issue), and may even lead to more demands (Sonnentag, Binnewies, & Mojza, 2010). We very much concur with Sonnentag's (2011 this issue) call to further explore the conditions under which negative outcomes of work engagement occur. Does work engagement only have a detrimental effect on very specific outcomes? Does engagement have a curvilinear relationship with positive outcomes? Or are the consequences of engagement contingent on other

factors? Sonnentag, Mojza, Binnewies, and Scholl (2008) showed that high state work engagement was only related to reduced positive affect when employees did not detach psychologically from their work. Parker and Griffin (2011 this issue) suggested that engagement may only be related to innovation if there are no constraints in the work environment that may inhibit innovative behaviours. Maslach (2011 this issue) proposed it is important to assess critical levels of engagement—when do employees show too little or too much engagement?—and we agree. We additionally propose that critical levels of job demands and resources are assessed, improved, and managed so that employees stay engaged and perform well. Only assessing engagement levels may result in the conclusion that the levels are too high—hence, one is too late with the assessment. When simultaneously assessing job demands and resources, one is able to find out what the correlates of work engagement are, and these working conditions offer a good basis for interventions as well.

WHERE JOB CRAFTING MAY GO WRONG

In our article, we proposed that engaged employees craft their own jobs—they increase their job challenges and job resources—in order to stay engaged (see also Bakker, 2010). Parker and Griffin (2011 this issue) suggested that the proactivity literature can help finesse this proposition. They argue that being proactive and using one's initiative can be psychologically risky, incurring potential resistance from others. This view is consistent with those of George (2011 this issue) and Halbesleben (2011 this issue), who argued that job crafting may turn out to be not so favourable at the level of the team. We agree. When employees choose to craft their jobs to increase their own job resources this may not be positive for others. Job crafting may become a problem when employees focus on areas that lead to positive outcomes at the expense of less desirable aspects of the job or tasks are “tedious or painstaking” (George, 2011 this issue, p. 56). What are the boundary conditions of the relationship between engagement and job crafting? When does job crafting begin to look like self-interest or dysfunctional organizational politics?

We believe that all employees engage in some kind of job or task crafting, and that engaged employees are more inclined to do so. Engaged employees are enthusiastic about the content of their work, and feel energetic when working on their tasks. They will generally be open for new experiences, and ask for support and feedback when needed to reach their work-related goals. We believe that job crafting is generally positive, since employees proactively try to align their working conditions to their own needs and abilities. In other words, engaged employees work on their person–environment (P-E) fit.

According to Edwards (2008), P-E fit refers to the congruence, match, or similarity between the person and environment. Specific types of P-E fit involve the needs of the person and the rewards provided by the environment, and the abilities of the person and the demands of the environment. Engaged employees strive for congruence with their environment in terms of needs and abilities. If the needs of the person are fulfilled by intrinsic and extrinsic rewards in the environment then there is *needs–supplies fit* (French, Caplan, & Harrison, 1982; Kristof, 1996). If the needs of the environment are fulfilled by capabilities of the person, then there is *demands–abilities fit*. Note that, in the latter case, environmental needs are reframed as demands imposed on the person (French et al., 1982; Kristof, 1996).

Combining person–environment fit theory (Edwards, 2008) with JD-R theory (Bakker, 2010; Bakker & Demerouti, 2008), we argue that a misfit between the person and the environment will result in tension and foster the inclination to change the work environment. Engaged employees will proactively work on their needs–supply fit by mobilizing their job resources, and work on their abilities–demands fit by increasing or decreasing their job demands. Is this a bad thing? According to Halbesleben (2011 this issue), job crafting may go wrong in a situation where employees craft their jobs by focusing on positive activities, at the expense of less desirable aspects of the job that are nonetheless important. We agree that there are limits to job crafting. It may be that individual job crafting works best in organizations with strong cultures, such that core values guide employees' decisions about shaping their work activities. Future research is needed to clarify the boundary conditions of job crafting behaviours, and the role of engagement.

MODERATORS OF THE ENGAGEMENT– PERFORMANCE RELATIONSHIP

We agree with several of the contributors that future research on engagement should look for moderators. What are the facilitators and obstacles of the impact of work engagement on performance? Under which conditions does work engagement result in positive or negative work outcomes (Sonnentag, 2011 this issue)? We liked Parker and Griffin's (2011 this issue) idea that in predictable environments, engagement might be expressed through effort on core task performance, whereas in uncertain environments engagement might be expressed through proactive (job crafting) behaviour. Parker and Griffin also suggest that knowledge and skills may moderate the engagement–performance link. Engaged employees who lack appropriate knowledge and skills may not perform effectively.

George (2010) argues that high levels of engagement may be necessary to acquire the knowledge and information relevant to decisions and judgements that come up on a job. However, when actually making

complex decisions and judgements, too much engagement may be dysfunctional at a certain point and decision makers might be better off relying on their gut feelings (George, 2010, 2011 this issue). This implies that fluctuating levels of conscious engagement might be beneficial with high engagement involved in acquiring knowledge, information, and expertise; and less conscious engagement involved in using that expertise to make decisions. This view is also consistent with the notion of task engagement.

Halbesleben (2011 this issue) argues that depending on personality traits, employees may be more or less inclined to invest their resources. He discusses the finding that attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) moderated the engagement–performance link. It seems that employees with ADHD are less able to focus their resources on constructive outcomes like job performance (Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2008). In a similar vein, it may be more difficult for employees with a chronic disease to transform their engagement into performance.

Consistent with Halbesleben's (2011 this issue) claim, Bakker, Demerouti, and Ten Brummelhuis (2010) showed that trait engagement was only positively related to job performance and active learning behaviour when employees scored high (vs. low) on conscientiousness. The reason for this is that conscientiousness has been associated with self-discipline, achievement striving, dutifulness, and competence. Their persistency and self-discipline will presumably cause the conscientious individual to finish tasks and to accomplish things. Whereas conscientiousness can provide the resources for performance and active learning behaviour (in the form of self-discipline, perseverance, etc.), work engagement can provide the motivation to perform well. We agree with Parker and Griffin (2011 this issue) that there is more to learn about how, when, and why engagement influences job performance.

CONCLUSION

We are delighted that such an eminent group of researchers agreed to comment on our position article. As expected, some alternate and conflicting positions were presented in the commentaries. The differing positions, we believe, reflect a healthy state of affairs in the work engagement literature and reinforce our conviction that while enormous progress has been made in the study of work engagement, there are still key outstanding issues which need to be resolved. We are confident that our position article and the commentaries herein provide a solid platform from which great research and practice may proceed.

We would like to conclude our reflection with a brief summary of the practical implications suggested by one of the most important issues raised by the position article and the commentaries. George (2011 this issue, p. 54) suggested that we have adopted “a managerial approach whereby what is of

interest to managers and potentially relevant for firm performance takes centre stage”. George indicated that employees’ interests are often conflicting with the interests of managers and other stakeholders such as shareholders. The example George offers is that of employees who are being called on to take on more tasks and responsibilities and work longer hours in an era of layoffs and high unemployment (see also Maslach, 2011 this issue). So should engagement be a win-win situation for employers and employees? Yes it should. Even more so, engagement should reflect a genuinely felt commitment and alignment across a common purpose, a common vision, and common interests.

To achieve a genuine system of engagement we believe that employers and employees need jointly to craft a positive, trusting, civil, respectful, and mutually beneficial working relationship such that all parties genuinely believe there is the potential for equity, fairness, opportunity, and meaningful growth within the system. Just as at the level of the individual and the work team, we need systems, training, and supports to effectively work together and communicate with genuine openness, civility, and respect (Leiter, Laschinger, Day, & Gilin-Oore, 2010; Leiter, Price, & Laschinger, 2010)—so too do organizations. We know already the human resource management systems that need to be in place if we are to “put people first” (see Becker & Huselid, 2006; Burke, 2006). We already know some of the individual and organizational level interventions, for example focused on the six areas of work life (see Leiter, 2006), which can make a profound difference to engagement in organizational contexts. As such, employers need to take the initiative to provide systems and supports that recognize and help navigate real and potential conflicting interests between employers and employees. We believe that some of the practical actions that organizations can initiate to co-create energy, involvement, and efficacy (Leiter, 2006) include establishing and communicating a clear vision. Within that vision employees need to know how their work contributes in a meaningful way. Organizational “health” or “pulse” checks should be routinely used to monitor employee perceptions of climate, resources, and demands. Joint consultative committees, constituted of employers and employees, trained to communicate effectively about and action issues such as organizational design, job design, resource allocation, training and development opportunities, workloads, job satisfaction, productivity, and innovation need to be in place. We look forward with great anticipation to future studies that evaluate such interventions aimed at promoting and embedding the appropriate quality and quantity of work engagement to simultaneously support individual, team, and organizational health, well-being, and effectiveness. We believe now is not only a good time to study engagement but also to “do” engagement, and as such further strengthen the nexus between science and practice.

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