

Leadership Traits Maintaining Work Engagement During Change Negotiations

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Abstract: Work engagement, defined as a positive, motivational state of dedication and absorption in one's work, is important for both occupational well-being and for organizational performance. Individuals experiencing work engagement are motivated to develop and voluntarily act in a way that benefits the workplace. From an organizational perspective, work engagement enhances the financial success of an organization and the commitment of its employees. However, during times of organizational change, particularly in restructuring scenarios involving layoffs or redundancies, work engagement is often diminished, which can lead to less well-being and decreased organizational commitment and poor overall performance. This study looks at how leadership can actively maintain employee work engagement during and after change negotiations. It is conducted via an online survey of members of the Finnish Academic Engineers and Architects Association. This study explores how leadership traits can help sustain employee engagement during and after change negotiations. The research utilizes survey data from members of the Finnish Academic Engineers and Architects Association to identify leadership behaviors that support engagement amid uncertainty. Work engagement is found to be closely linked to well-being, which is enhanced by a positive work environment and opportunities for meaningful contribution. Leadership traits fostering clarity, empathy, and recognition play a critical role in maintaining engagement during change negotiations. The study adds to the understanding of employee-centered strategies in order to sustain motivation and commitment. It also offers insights into how leadership can promote organizational resilience during change negotiations and offers practical insights to organizations undergoing change negotiations and wanting to maintain the motivation of the employees throughout. The importance of leadership in maintaining employee engagement is also highlighted by this study.

Key words: Leadership, Leadership traits, Work engagement, Organizational change

1. Introduction

Work engagement constitutes a positive, fulfilling state of mind, characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption, and it is widely recognized as important for organizational performance. Engagement is a motivational state fueled by job resources. (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Yet, models such as the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model have seldom been applied to coercive change contexts, which constitutes a notable omission in literature, since large-scale restructuring undermines employee well-being regardless of job cuts. Moreover, corporate downsizing creates uncertainty and anxiety among workers (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006).

Despite these risks, research has, until now, not addressed how engagement can be sustained during enforced change. This study contributes to addressing that gap by linking the JD-R framework with psychological contract and organizational trust theories. JD-R suggests that abundant job resources foster engagement, yet downsizing often depletes resources and breaches psychological contracts of the employees affected, which in turn can undermine trust (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006). Organizational trust is known to boost engagement; therefore, the present study examines how fulfilling promises and building trust during change negotiations helps employees stay engaged. Applying the empirical context of change negotiations in Finland, these findings on sustaining engagement under duress contribute to the literature by addressing the aforementioned gaps. This study looks at work engagement changes during a change negotiation process for individuals working in an organization and aims to provide recommendations which support work engagement during the change negotiation process, at both the supervisor and organizational levels.

2. Literature Review

Work engagement is a commonly used term describing the level of well-being at work. (Nunes, Proença & Carozzo-Todaro, 2024). The term work engagement has been defined as a state where a person commits and immerses oneself in his/her role in the organization (Khan, 1990). In the work environment of the 2020s, employee roles have evolved to be more autonomous, requiring broader responsibility and commitment (Nešić et al, 2020). To achieve high performance in terms of financial and customer satisfaction metrics, organizations generally expect their employees to take an initiative-driven, committed, collaborative approach that strives for

high performance standards (Manimegalai & Baral, 2018). A measurable state of employee engagement that corresponds to broadly committed, autonomous, and responsible work can be seen as work engagement (Manimegalai & Baral, 2018; Nešić et al, 2020). Work engagement is also a state of emotional and motivational fulfillment experienced during work, more enduring than flow, which is a state where one is completely absorbed in what they are doing, losing track of time and external distractions (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003).

Work-related flow can be defined as a brief, peak experience, marked by three key elements: enjoyment of work, deep absorption, and intrinsic motivation (Bakker, 2008). Work-related flow is positively influenced by supervisory support, meaning that increased support from supervisors enhances employees' flow experiences at work (Wang, 2014). Bakker (2008) also demonstrated that the intrinsic motivation aspect of flow is positively associated with extra-role performance. As a short-term peak experience, flow can boost intrinsic motivation satisfaction. Flow is a state of intense focus and immersion in a specific task, often leading to high productivity and creativity. Work flow occurs when the challenge of the task matches the individual's skills, resulting in a feeling of being in the flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013; Farina, Rodrigues, & Hutz, 2018). Work engagement, on the other hand, is a more sustained, overall state of mind, characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption in one's work. It reflects a deeper connection and commitment to the job, influenced by factors like workplace environment and leadership (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018). In essence, flow is about short-term peak experiences during tasks, while engagement is about long-term positive involvement with one's work; both can be seen to correlate with one another (Medhurst & Albrecht, 2016).

Work engagement can affect employee and organizational levels. Engaged employees are more productive than non-engaged employees (Baldoni, 2013), with less involved employees often reporting higher burnout and lower resilience (Meynaar et al, 2021). An association between work engagement, ostracism, and turnover prevails: ostracism decreases the engagement of less resilient employees but can increase the engagement of more resilient employees. Moreover, while time pressure is positively associated with both work engagement and emotional exhaustion, resilient capabilities, such as emotional coping and focused action, can mitigate the negative effects of time pressure, thus enhancing employees' ability to maintain engagement despite high demands (Kunzelmann & Rigotti, 2020).

Doughy and Casper (2021) observed a decline in work engagement as a result of staff reductions. Samreen et al (2022) noted that stress related to job insecurity increases following staff reductions, thereby weakening affective commitment through the stress associated with job insecurity. Hopkins and Weathington (2006) also found a decrease in affective commitment due to staff reductions. There is a positive relationship between affective commitment and work engagement (Choi et al, 2015)

3. Methodology

This paper seeks to establish whether work engagement changes during the change negotiation process among individuals working in the organization undergoing the change process. In doing so, it identifies leadership methods that can support work engagement during a change negotiation process. To identify leadership methods that support work engagement, a mixed methods approach, leading to a qualitative in-depth analysis, was applied as follows: First, an anonymous online survey was conducted using the Webropol software, with invitation e-mails sent to the participants - members of the Academic Engineers and Architects in Finland (TEK), which is a benefits and service organization. TEK's members are architects, engineers, and other individuals with equivalent university education in natural sciences or technology. The questionnaire was sent to individuals working in an organization where change negotiations were being conducted at the time of response, or where change negotiations had been conducted and the outcome communicated within a year prior to responding to the questionnaire. The responder could be an employee subject to the change negotiations or alternatively be working in an organization subject to change negotiations.

The basis of the questionnaire was the Work Engagement Survey (UWES) developed by Schaufeli & Bakker (2003). The survey has been validated in Finnish and has been widely used in Finnish work engagement research (Hakanen, 2009). The version of the UWES survey with 9 questions, based on a Likert scale, was used (Schaufeli, Bakker & Salanova, 2003). The questions were presented to the respondent twice in the questionnaire: first, the respondent was asked to answer the questions while recalling the time prior to the change negotiation, and after which the respondent was asked to answer the questions again based on the feelings at the time of the response. Out of the respondents, 70% worked in an expert role, 17% worked in managerial roles, 12% were white-collar workers, and 1% of respondents had other roles. The respondents were divided into different groups to further examine differences in work engagement between different respondent groups. The groups are depicted in Table 1.

Table 1: Description of Groups

Number	Description of group
1	The respondent's organization is undergoing change negotiations at the time of the survey. The respondent is not the subject of the negotiation.
2	The respondent's organization has undergone change negotiations, the outcome of which has been communicated within a year of the questionnaire. The respondent was not subject to change negotiations.
3	The respondent's organization is undergoing change negotiations at the time of the questionnaire. The respondent is the subject of the change negotiations.
4	The respondent's organization has undergone change negotiations, the outcome of which has been communicated within a year of the questionnaire. The respondent was subject to the change negotiations. The respondent's employment continues. There is no change in the content of the work/ work description.
5	The respondent's organization has undergone change negotiations, the outcome of which has been communicated within a year of the questionnaire. The respondent was the subject to the change negotiations. The respondent's employment continues and there is a change in the work content/work description.
6	The respondent's organization has undergone change negotiations, the outcome of which has been communicated within a year of the questionnaire. The respondent is employed by the organization until the end of his/her fixed-term contract or until the end of a period determined in a termination agreement following the change negotiations.
7	The respondent's organization has undergone change negotiations, the outcome of which has been communicated within a year of the questionnaire, and the person has been dismissed or has been given notice of dismissal due to the change negotiations.
not included	The respondent's organization is not undergoing change negotiations at the time of the questionnaire, and the respondent is not aware that their workplace is undertaking change negotiations. The respondent no longer works in an organization where change negotiations are undertaken or have been undertaken within a year prior to the survey. The respondent has begun working for an organization whilst change negotiations have started or finished prior to commencing employment there.

The responses to the survey are based on the Likert scale. Averages and standard deviations were calculated for the Likert scale. It should be noted that the intervals between the ratings on the Likert scale are not necessarily equal (Vehkalahti, 2019). Therefore, when examining changes in work engagement, absolute rather than relative changes are considered. Since the dimensions of work engagement have been found to be strongly correlated, an average-based composite variable can be calculated for work engagement, which serves as an overall measure of work engagement (Hakanen, 2009). In each group, the change in work engagement during the change negotiation process for each respondent is determined by the difference between the total composite variables of work engagement at the end and the beginning of the process.

4. Results

The average changes, standard deviations, standard errors of the means, group sizes, p-values produced by the paired t-test and the statistical significance of the average change in work engagement for the separate groups and the entire sample were obtained (Table 2). For Group 2, the paired t-test statistics were examined both as a separate group and as part of the combined Group 1 & 2, as Group 2 is suitable for independent examination due to the number of respondents. Based on the paired t-test, the change in work engagement measured in Group 2 was not statistically significant. In the combined Group 1 & 2, the change was statistically significant. The change was also statistically significant in all other groups and the entire sample. In Group 6 & 7, the standard deviation of the change was smaller than the average change. In other groups and the entire sample, the standard deviation was larger than the change. The standard error of the change was smaller than the average change in each group and the entire sample.

Table 2: Statistical results

Group	$\Delta\Sigma\text{IMU}$	$\text{SD}(\Delta\Sigma\text{IMU})$	$\text{SE}(\Delta\Sigma\text{IMU})$	N	p	Statistically Significant
Groups 1 & 2	-0.48	1.06	0.23	22	0.0437	Yes
Group 2	-0.36	0.97	0.24	17	0.1472	No
Group 3	-0.99	0.83	0.21	16	0.0002	Yes
Group 4	-0.78	0.98	0.11	73	2.69E-09	Yes
Group 5	-0.54	1.03	0.20	27	0.0106	Yes

Group	Δ ΣIMU	SD(Δ ΣIMU)	SE(Δ ΣIMU)	N	p	Statistically Significant
Groups 6 & 7	-3.04	1.11	0.37	9	3.59E-05	Yes
Entire sample	-0.85	1.14	0.09	147	8.28E-11	Yes

The results of the survey indicate that work engagement decreased significantly amongst all respondents apart from Group 2. In the combined Group 1 & 2, a statistically significant change can be observed. The change was also statistically significant in all other groups and in the total sample. The standard deviation of the change was smaller than the mean change. In the other groups and in the total sample, the standard deviation was greater than the mean change for Group 6 & 7. The standard error of the change was smaller than the mean change in every group and in the total sample. Work engagement for respondents whose employment contract was terminated due to the change negotiations, or whose fixed term employment ended, saw more significant decline in work engagement as compared to respondents who were working in organizations with ongoing change negotiations or whose employment continued after the change negotiation. Furthermore, it had no significant statistical effect on work engagement, if the respondent was under change negotiation or if the change negotiations occurred elsewhere in the organization; nor did the state of the change negotiations have a statistically significant effect. It did not matter if the change negotiations were ongoing or had ended. A change in job content due to change negotiations had no effect on work engagement. Work engagement decreases during the change negotiation process when examining the level of work engagement during and within a year after the negotiations. It is possible to maintain work engagement during and after the change negotiation process through actions by supervisors and organizational leadership, services provided by the organization, and at the daily work level.

Response data based on open-ended questions can be analyzed by identifying significant themes in the answers, which can then be categorized (Hirsjärvi et al, 2000). In a data-driven analysis, the data is broken down into simplified expressions, which are then organized into categories. Categorization can be done in such a way that the analysis results in subcategories, main categories, and super categories (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). The analysis observes the saturation of results, meaning the repetition of the same issues in the responses (Hirsjärvi Remes & Sajavaara, 2000). The analysis of data collected through open-ended questions began by mapping the number of respondents to each question. For each question, the number of respondents who answered in terms of factors supporting work engagement, the number of non-respondents, and the number of those who answered that their work engagement was not supported by the entity referred to in the question were calculated. Additionally, responses that did not answer the actual question were separated from the respondents; these were classified as unclear responses. Responses suspected of containing sarcasm and responses detailing factors that weakened work engagement were also separated. Therefore, the actual analysis only considered responses describing factors that supported work engagement. The classification of question responses is presented in Table 3, where the numbers belonging to different response categories are divided into responses related to supervisor actions, services provided by the organization, actions of the organization's leadership/management level, and daily work. Most of the responses were related to daily work factors (76%), and the least to factors related to the organization's leadership (22%).

Table 3: Response classifications

Replies	Supervisor actions		Available services		Management level		Daily work		Wishes	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
empty/does not know	24	16	47	32	54	37	26	18	59	40
Nothing	29	20	31	21	56	38	8	5	17	12
Unclear answers	2	1	0	0	4	3	1	1	0	0
Answers	92	63	69	47	33	22	112	76	71	48
total	147	100	147	147	100	100	147	100	147	100

When inquiring about factors related to supervisors' actions that support work engagement, 92 individuals responded to the question. Six categories were identified from the responses, which saturated the answers. The highest prevalence was in the categories of 'Communication, messaging, and discussions,' 'Style of operation,' and 'Feedback and interest.'

Several wishes emerged from the results regarding communication as well as encounters and recognition (Table 4). The wishes by the employees undergoing change negotiations regarding communication included preventing rumors within the organization, communication about the change negotiations at an earlier stage, more openness, clarity and information about the process, the necessary changes, the reasons for the changes, and the future outlook. Creating team spirit during the change negotiations was also regarded as desirable with respect to wishes from employees. The results also indicate several wishes towards the encounters within the organization and the recognition by the employers, i.e., employees wish that a sense of significance is created in relation to the work the employees undertake, also in the case where the employee’s contribution is no longer needed and humanity in encounters, creating a sense of empathy.

Table 4: Wishes from employees

Wishes Regarding Communication	Wishes Regarding Encounters and Recognition
More openness, clarity, and information about the process progress, changes, reasons, and future outlook.	Creating a sense of importance for the employee in relation to the work they do.
Communication at an earlier stage.	Creating a sense of significance even in situations where the employee’s contribution is no longer needed in the organization due to work termination.
Preventing rumors.	Humanity in encounters, for example, a sense of empathy.
Creating a sense of team spirit.	

The results indicate actions which positively affect work engagement during change negotiations, both at the organizational level and the supervisor level. The themes of organizational-level leadership recommendations include communication, clarification, creating team spirit, treatment of employees, supporting holistic health, and work peace. At the supervisor level, recommendations relate to communication, supporting work performance and role functioning, strengthening the experience of meaningfulness, presence, and enhancing team spirit (Table 5). Recommendations in both cases, supervisor and organizational level, emphasize creating clarity in change, communication, team spirit, strengthening the sense of continuity, and recognizing the employee and their work.

Table 5: Supervisor’s & Organization Level Ways to Support Work Engagement During Organizational Change

Recommendations for Supervisors	Recommendations for Organizational-level Leadership
Communicate openly and timely. Clarify the change process.	Clarify the background, reasons, goals, and progress of the change. Realistically create a sense of continuity.
Clarify priorities and goals. Support changes in work roles.	Enable a conversational atmosphere.
Strengthen the experience of meaningful work. Thank, encourage, and provide feedback	Ensure respectful, fair, and humane treatment of every employee.
Enable to act as an expert in one’s own work.	Support health and mental well-being.
Be present and interested in the employee’s well-being.	Offer flexible work arrangements and other support options.
Create faith in the future. Strengthen the team and group spirit.	Ensure the possibility to work in peace and to be able to focus on your work.
	Show that every employee is valuable, regardless of any changes affecting their work.

To summarize, recommendations can be drawn from this research aimed at both supervisors and the organizational level during change negotiations. For both, emphasis is placed on creating clarity in change, communication, team spirit, strengthening the sense of continuity, and recognizing the employee and their work.

5. Discussion

This study sought to clarify how leadership can help sustain employee work engagement during legislated change negotiations (Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2020; Kahn, 1990). Using the empirical country context of Finland as the example, we showed that, on average, engagement declines, and the decline is statistically steeper for employees whose contracts will be ending. As a result, this work helps in integrating leadership misbehaviors with the JD-R and psychological-contract traditions by showing that transparent, empathetic, and recognition-oriented leadership acts as a resource replenishment mechanism in forced restructuring (Bakker & Demerouti,

2007; Hopkins & Weathington, 2006). Moreover, the present study has, by differentiating between employees whose contracts end and those whose continue, revealed a boundary condition that until now, to our knowledge, has not been discussed in engagement literature (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006).

Therefore, our findings contribute to literature in three main ways: First, they help extend the JD-R model to a coercive change context. Second, they contribute by specifying micro-level leadership behaviors (transparency, empathy, recognition) that can restore resources and rebuild trust in specific organizational situations. Third, the present study contributes by clarifying boundary conditions that the mitigating effects hold for employees who remain, but not for those exiting (Dlouhy & Casper, 2021).

The main limitations of this study can be considered to be its cross-sectional design, with which we acknowledge the potential for reverse causality; as well, the single-country empirical context may limit generalizability due to the country-specific collective bargaining laws and similar context-specific contingencies. Going forward, panel data or a multi-country empirical setting may be required to ascertain further generalizability. Future research should employ longitudinal or multi-country designs to test the stability and generalizability of these effects across diverse legal and cultural settings. In the meantime, organizations that combine humane, candid leadership with tangible support for employees' holistic well-being are better positioned to safeguard engagement and sustain performance when difficult change is unavoidable.

6. Conclusion

This study sought to clarify how specific leadership traits can prevent the well-documented decline in work engagement that typically occurs in organizational change negotiations. Drawing on survey data from Finnish engineers and architects who had either experienced or were undergoing such negotiations, we found a decrease in engagement across almost all respondent groups. However, the findings also suggested that transparent communication, empathic recognition of employee contributions, and deliberate fostering of team spirit can, to an extent, prevent the decline. These micro-level behaviors can be seen as resource-replenishment mechanisms in line with the Job Demands-Resources framework: they rebuild trust, help employees make sense of the change process, and support a shared belief in the future of the organization. We conclude that, while transparent and humane leadership may not always be enough to fully prevent the engagement shock of job loss, it still clearly cushions those who stay, and therefore can be considered a strategic factor important for resilient performance after restructuring in organizations.

Ethics declaration: No ethical clearance was required for the research.

AI declaration: Table 2 was translated from the original Finnish data with the help of ChatGPT. Copilot was used to help with translations from Finnish to English, and Table 1 was translated by Copilot from Finnish to English.

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