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Stress and Employee Engagement

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Managing Workforce Diversity in a New Age: The Challenges and Implications of Ageism 1
David M. Savino, Ohio Northern University

Gender Imbalance Improvements in Academia, Business, and Physical Education 8
Stephanie D. Trendowski, Valparaiso University
Thomas N. Trendowski, University of North Carolina Pembroke
Joseph Trendowski, Valparaiso University

Utilizing Professional Development Seminars in Academia as a Diversity Management Education Strategy in Post-Apartheid South Africa: A Fulbright Specialist Scholar Experience 18
Chaunda L. Scott, Oakland University

Diversity Initiative Schemas: Student Cognitive Representations of Managing Diversity on College Campuses 24
Jeanetta D. Sims, University of Central Oklahoma
Ashley Neese, University of Central Oklahoma
Anna Henson, University of Central Oklahoma
Atoya Sims, University of Central Oklahoma
Treyce Glidden, University of Central Oklahoma

A Cross-Disciplinary Examination of Institutional Diversity: How University Programs Advance a Diverse Workforce 35
Joseph Trendowski, Valparaiso University
Matthew R. Trendowski, University of Chicago
Thomas N. Trendowski, University of North Carolina Pembroke
Stephanie D. Trendowski, Valparaiso University
Michael J. Trendowski, Wicomico County School District

JNAMS Featured Reprint 2018 MBAA International Distinguished Paper Award

Stress and Employee Engagement 48
Kumar Subramaniam, Johns Hopkins Medicine, Baltimore
Steve Roussas, Grand Canyon University

Publishing Guidelines 67

Stress and Employee Engagement¹

Kumar Subramaniam, Johns Hopkins Medicine, Baltimore
Steve Roussas, Walden University

We explored strategies that HR leaders within a single healthcare organization in Franklin, Tennessee, used to reduce employee disengagement caused by stress and identified four themes related to business practice. The four themes were (a) integration of employee engagement practices into culture and business processes, (b) providing managers with the job resources they need, (c) intentionality, transparency, and honesty in communications, and (d) relying on supportive supervisor behavior. Senior executives and HR leaders should examine the feasibility of proactively implementing similar strategies to mitigate employee work place stress, reduce disengagement, and improve employee engagement and commitment to the organization.

Employees who bring an emotionally positive state of mind to their workplace invest of themselves emotionally and cognitively in their work (Lee, & Ok, 2015). Cohen (2014) observed that a motivated workforce improves business productivity, revenues, and performance. Analysis of data on employee engagement and financial performance from 94 companies between 2008 and 2012 found a significant correlation between increased engagement and sales growth (Merry, 2013).

People experience stress as physiological and psychological reactions when they are unable to handle the demands of life events, with work-related events, relationships, and finances being the most common stressors for adults (Durante & Laran, 2016). Employees can experience stress at work and outside of work for a variety of reasons. People experience job-related stresses, such as job dissatisfaction, job insecurity, organizational conflict, and organizational change (Smollan, 2015); money stress (Sturgeon, Zautra, & Okun, 2014); and retirement-related stress (Verne, 2015). Stress, inside and outside of work, affects employee productivity (Tunwall & Stutzman, 2012), and the estimated impact of employee absenteeism on U.S. businesses was \$225 billion per year through reduced efficiency, overtime wages, fixed fringe benefits, and the cost of replacement employees (Biron & De Reuver, 2013).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Stress and Its Effect on Individuals and Organizations

Stress is a negative, bodily, and psychological reaction to individuals' inability to cope with situations in their life; work-related events, relationship issues, and finances are the most common stressors for adults (Durante & Laran, 2016). Jain, Giga, and Cooper (2013) observed that researchers have variously conceptualized stress as a stimulus, a response, an interaction between stress and the response, and an individual's specific interaction with their environment.

Behavioral reactions, physical reactions, and psychological reactions are the strains that individuals experience under stress (Spector, 2006). MacFadyen, MacFadyen, and Prince (1996) noted that stress is cumulative in its effect on individuals' mental wellbeing across stressors such as lack of employment, lack of social support, social status, organizational changes, savings, and income. Individuals' reactions

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to stress can manifest as muscle tension, mental fatigue, and cognitive impairment (Sandmark, Sarvento, Franke, & Akhavan, 2014; Voci, Veneziani, & Metta, 2016).

Walinga and Rowe (2013) noted that sustained stress experienced in the workplace led to employees experiencing job burnout resulting in absenteeism, lower organizational productivity, and higher attrition, causing increased costs for the organization on staffing and health benefits. Employees experiencing chronic work-related stress show lower concentration and productivity at work because their blood pressure is not steady, their cholesterol levels are elevated, they experience muscle tension, and they suffer from chronic conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, and clinical depression (Colligan & Higgins, 2006). Stress at work arises from issues such as too much work, conflicting goals, vague task goals, emotional demands, lack of autonomy, and absence of supervisory support (Corin & Bjork, 2016).

Workplace stress places significant burdens, physical, cognitive, and emotional, on both the employee and the organization through lower productivity, increased absenteeism, increased presenteeism, counterproductive work behavior, and job burnout in the workplace (Colligan & Higgins, 2006). Employees with high sense of their ability to succeed in certain situations see more opportunities than situational threats and demonstrate greater efficacy in coping with stressful situations (Lu, Du, & Xu, 2016). Montgomery, Spanu, Baban, and Panagopoulou (2015) and Elst et al. (2016) commented on the job demands-resources model and stated that individual characteristics interact with work characteristics to cause psychological reactions such as burnout or work engagement and that job resource availability was the primary predictor of work engagement. Stress and cynicism affect enthusiasm in the workplace; cynicism, one of the components of burnout, is one of the first indicators of deteriorating wellbeing in the workplace (Viitala, Tanskanen, & Sääntti, 2015).

PURPOSE STATEMENT

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the strategies that HR leaders used to reduce employee disengagement caused by stress. The sample population for this study comprised of HR leaders and line managers within a single healthcare organization in Eastern Tennessee, who had used such strategies and had reduced employee disengagement caused by stress. The findings of this study could help employers reduce their employees' level of disengagement caused by stress. The implications for positive social change include the potential to improve human resource management (HRM) practices in organizations that might implement such strategies, which could lead to improved emotional wellbeing for employees, with concomitant benefits to their families and communities.

METHODOLOGY

Researchers use qualitative methods to explore the ways in which people experience and perceive situations (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). We selected the qualitative method because we wanted to ask exploratory questions to understand the ways in which HR leaders and line managers experienced and perceived situations related to stress and engagement. Researchers use the quantitative method to examine the statistical significance of relationships or differences among variables to test hypotheses (Skott & Ward, 2016). Researchers use the mixed method to approach a topic from an objective, detached perspective and a participative, exploratory perspective to obtain a multidimensional view of the study topic using statistical analysis and rich descriptions, which they then analyze to identify and explore key themes either in parallel or in sequence (Stuart, Maynard, & Rouncefield, 2017). We did not use the quantitative method or the mixed method for my study because We did not intend to conduct a statistical analysis of significant relationships or differences among variables and therefore did not wish to test statistical hypotheses for relationships among variables as part of a mixed study.

Researchers use case study designs to ask what, how, or why qualitative research questions about a current day phenomenon in a real-life context and use multiple sources of data for triangulation of evidence (Morgan, Pullon, Macdonald, McKinlay, & Gray, 2016). We used the case study design, as we wanted to interview managers in a single organization to determine the strategies they used to reduce the effect of stress on employees and improve employee engagement. We did not use the ethnographic design, which researchers use to explore the cultural values and beliefs of a group of participants (Shover, 2012), or the phenomenological design, which researchers use to explore the meanings of participants' lived experience with a phenomenon (Eberle, 2013).

RESEARCH QUESTION

What strategies do HR leaders use to reduce employee stress and increase employee engagement?

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What strategies did you use to increase employee engagement and commitment to the organization?
2. What strategies did you use to reduce stress in the workplace?
3. How did you assess the effectiveness of these strategies on decreasing employee stress and increasing employee engagement?
4. What barriers/challenges did you experience in implementing these strategies?
5. How did you overcome these barriers/challenges?
6. What other topics that we did not cover in our discussion would you like to discuss that can contribute to my understanding of the strategies your organization utilized to reduce employee stress and increase employee engagement?

POPULATION AND SAMPLING

We conducted a single case study in a healthcare organization in Franklin, TN, that had implemented policies and practices towards employee engagement. The identified participant population was 12 executives who either oversaw the HR function or were line managers with responsibility for supervising other employees. We used census sampling to identify the pool of 12 study participants in the single organization. Guest, Namey, and Mitchell (2017) observed that sample sizes in case studies are generally small because the researcher is interested in the case's special attributes. The final list of participants represented executives with a varying range of employment tenure from across many business functions within the organization: human resources, clinical operations, coaching operations, technology, emerging business, account management, and finance. The identified participant population was 12 executives who either oversaw the HR function or were line managers with responsibility for supervising other employees. Table 1 provides a classification of the participants based on their role and tenure in the organization. Seventy five percent of the participants had worked in the organization for 5 or more years.

THE FINDINGS

We identified four themes related to business practice as shown in Figure 1. The four themes were (a) integration of employee engagement practices into culture and business processes, (b) providing managers with the job resources they need, (c) being transparent and honest in communications, and (d) relying on supportive supervisor behavior.

We conducted the study within a healthcare organization in Franklin, TN, to understand the strategies its HR leaders used to improve employee engagement and mitigate employee stressors. The organization's management had experienced a long period of business success leading up to 2015. During this period, management empowered high commitment human resource practices, invested in leadership training and support activities over a period of years, framed these activities within a set of organizational culture development practices, and embedded employee engagement practices into business processes. The organization's leadership trained line managers, provided them the tools to help employees mitigate work stressors, and involved them in defining employee engagement practices. Between 2014 and 2016, the organization's management had to reduce costs in response to setbacks in business.

TABLE 1
ROLE CATEGORY AND TENURE OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS

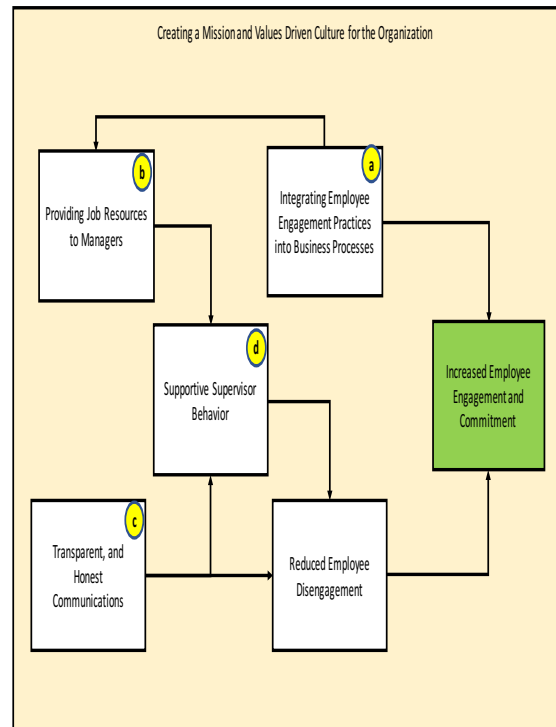
Alias	Role category	Tenure (Years)
P1	Communications and culture manager	10-20
P2	HRM practice leader	10-20
P3	Emerging business division leader	5-10
P4	Clinical operations manager	5-10
P5	Technology operations manager	0-3
P6	HR business liaison leader	0-3
P7	Technology leader	10-20
P8	Coaching operations leader	5-10
P9	Call center leader	10-20
P10	Account management leader	20+
P11	Finance manager	5-10
P12	Emerging business manager	0-3

At the time of our study, the new leadership was assimilating the division into its systems and processes. As a result, the study participants had experienced or heard about the prosperous years, had faced periodic layoff events since 2014, and had become employees of a new organization in 2017. Based on discussions with the organization's HR leadership, we decided to present the findings over these two distinct periods in the organization's recent history, "the golden years" and "the change years", in order to provide a context for strategies HR leaders used to reduce disengagement caused by stress and improve employee engagement. We identified the golden years as the period between 2008 and 2015. The following themes relate to the golden years of the organization.

THE GOLDEN YEARS

Integration of employee engagement practices into culture and processes. During its golden years the organization created a mission-driven, values-based work culture. The study participants were nearly unanimous in their responses (10 out of 12 participants) on this theme. Berens (2013) stated the four qualities conducive to employee engagement were (a) employees want to be part of something bigger than themselves, (b) they feel a sense of belonging, (c) their journey needs to have a purpose and be meaningful, and (d) they want to see their contributions make a significant impact. Byrne (2015) observed that the organizational factors that inhibit employee engagement include lack of perceived organizational support, physical resource constraints, hostile or abusive work environment, micromanagement, absent or ineffective leadership, and constant change.

FIGURE 1. STRATEGIES FOR REDUCING EMPLOYEE DISENGAGEMENT AND IMPROVING EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT



The organization's leaders, knowing that "there will always be a culture in an organization so long as you have people because of the people, the personalities, the dynamics, and the way people engage" (P2), were intentional about creating a work environment in which employees felt a sense of purpose and developed a sense of commitment to the organization. Organizations determine the employees' engagement experience through the creation and sustainment of an organizational culture (Shuck, Collins, Rocco, & Diaz, 2016). The approach contrasted with Valentin's (2014) observation that organizations' employee engagement initiatives focused on performance and overshadowed discussions around the employee's workplace experience and wellbeing.

The organization's mission, as P8 stated, was "to create a healthier world, one person at a time." The human resource department integrated the mission statement and the organization's set of values into its employee hiring, employee onboarding, employee development, and performance evaluation procedures. These procedures helped articulate that the organization's values were "more than just knowing what the values were, but how they interacted, and why it was important that we had those ones and what they meant" (P2). P8 explained the link between the organization's mission and values, "when we had a clear mission with very clear values, I felt like most colleagues that interacted with across the board were "dialed into" that mission and people came to work even when it was hard, I would hear people say, "I am helping people."

These statements appeared to support the Kopaneva and Sias (2015) assertion that employee commitment to the organization arises from a shared understanding of the organization's purpose and generates trust, leading to a sense of belonging. The organization was intentional about nurturing a culture of engagement in the work environment as the following responses indicated, "one of the things that I believe is unique about XYZCo in its history is that there was an intentional effort, a decision made by

our founders to define the culture that they wanted. They wanted to define the workplace where they wanted to work and went about a series of steps to put that culture into play” (P2). As P2 stated, “We made that shift, and with that we put a lot of effort into defining what engagement meant for our managers and for our colleagues and to really build into the culture a sense of engagement.”

The organization’s leaders believed that leaders, managers, and employees had a collective responsibility to create an engaged workforce. Eight of the 12 participants agreed that the organization signaled their commitment, financial support, and leadership in creating a work environment that reflected the organization’s mission and values and tasked the managers and employees with defining and implementing the required practices and procedures. This aligned with the observation by Shuck et al. (2016) that employees engage when organizations (through organizational development and culture) and managers (through leadership) nurture the conditions of engagement. Organizations can counter the negative effects of stress and burnout by building a positive trusting work culture (Anthony-McMann, Ellinger, Astakhova, & Halbesleben, 2017).

As a result, employees and managers in the organization felt a sense of ownership in creating the environment in which they worked. As P1 stated, “that was helpful for our colleagues and our leaders because our colleagues were able to participate and drive their own engagement and drive the engagement of their peers. Our managers and senior leaders were able to say, “it is not just up to us, engagement is all of our jobs” and I think it gave people more sense of pride in our engagement because we all owned it.”

Bakker (2017) asserted that HR practices such as creating a culture of trust and empowerment, performance development, training, career development, and ongoing appraisals influence employee engagement. P7 compared the organization’s effort at engagement with other organizations, “XYZCo has been one of those places where I have worked where you have more of those types of individuals that are here because of the mission and they want to know that what they do every day adds value in helping the organizations achieve its mission. Whereas, other organizations I have worked for, not so much”.

The HR department partnered with business leaders to embed employee engagement practices into business processes and workflows. The organization updated its performance evaluation process to measure not just performance goal achievement but also how the manager and employee went about achieving those goals. Saks (2017) stated that organizations should manage employee engagement the same way they manage job performance, by making employee engagement the focus of and embedding it into the ongoing performance management process. Anthony-McMann et al. (2017) found that training leaders and employees in fostering a work environment that helped develop positive work relationships was the most important activity an HR department could undertake to improve employee engagement.

Leaders and line managers were trained on the tactical activities designed to improve employee engagement, including training on the Gallup Q12 survey methodology, a tool used to measure engagement scores at the individual, team, division, and organization levels. The organization shared the list of Q12 survey questions (Table 2).

Leadership developed a robust set of activities framed within the purpose and values of the organization to implement, measure, and monitor employee engagement and commitment to the organization based on responses to questions 1 to 12. Managers received regular training on creating engagement impact plans and tools to measure, monitor, and report progress on an annual basis. Participant P10 observed that “every year, it wasn't just that we got the readout of the result. We were further challenged to take the read out of the results, look for the areas where we could obviously improve, and then generate action plans that we measured throughout the year to try to address those areas for opportunities for improvement”.

Participant P2 observed that “on the whole, we did see significant improvements from year to year in our engagement results that we felt stemmed from the work we did, not only around engagement but also around change management, around training and development, leadership development and such, and overall communication path and strategy.

TABLE 2
GALLUP Q12 SURVEY QUESTIONS

Number	Question Wording
Q0	How satisfied are you with XYZCo as a place to work?
Q1	I know what is expected of me at work.
Q2	I have the materials and equipment to do my job right.
Q3	At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.
Q4	In the last 7 days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work.
Q5	My supervisor, or someone at work, appears to care about me as a person.
Q6	There is someone at work who encourages my development.
Q7	At work, my opinions seem to count.
Q8	The mission or purpose of my company makes me feel my job is important.
Q9	My associates or fellow employees are committed to doing quality work
Q10	I have a best friend at work.
Q11	In the last 6 months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress.
Q12	This last year, I have had the opportunities at work to learn and grow.

The HR leaders also empowered employees to take an active role in creating the impact plans to ensure they had a voice. The organization’s HR department, with support from senior leadership, developed policies and practices that were people-centered. Hiring and selection processes assessed applicants’ identification with the organization’s purpose and values. Such recruiting practices may have helped hire staff who came equipped with coping mechanism defenses to deal with negative effects of stressors (Newton & Teo, 2013). Employees were known as “colleagues” (P1). The HR department developed trusting relationships with managers and employees. Bakker (2017) asserted that high-performance HR practices engender employee engagement. As P1 stated, “Our colleagues are our customers and they are the center of our experience. And everything we do is to make their experience better.” P6 echoed this by saying, “I think all that plays into people knowing that they are treated with respect and there is an openness about the culture.”

Leadership created a work environment that felt open and bright. Leaders and managers encouraged work-at-home and flexible hours to promote a work-life balance among employees and invested in creating a work environment that supported physical activities and made it easy for employees to find healthy food options. Participants P3 and P12 described their efforts at helping their staff step away from their community level engagement responsibilities. P1 stated that her supervisor encouraged her to balance her work and life commitments. P5 explained how he encouraged his staff to take vacations and not answer e-mails while being away. P6 talked about the opportunities to engage in physical activity and the general approach to wellbeing within the organization. P7 contrasted his work experience at the organization and his earlier companies to say that the organization implemented employee engagement practices across the board. The organization appeared to mirror an observation from Boreham et al. (2016), who asserted that low levels of employee engagement were linked to low level of wellbeing at an organizational level. P11, a line manager, stated,

the company really prides itself in having a culture that is very health oriented and along with that, being an employee-friendly, work-life balance sort of focus. Having a flexible generous PTO policy for one thing, paying for our gym memberships, and things like that.

The leaders encouraged managers to involve frontline staff in the decision-making process even if it meant merely listening to employees' reactions to leadership decisions. As P10 stated, "Just the fact that somebody took the time to listen to them and to hear out their perspective, to me, makes a huge difference in their engagement and whatever process or activity is being rolled out." When colleagues' positions had to be terminated, the organization ensured that the decision was carried out in a respectful manner and did the most it could do for the employee being terminated. As P1 stated, "we had 155 colleagues at the time and only five left and the other 149[sic] stayed to the very end and to this day, I get emails from people who say this was the best place they ever worked and there is a Facebook group of them that I am a part of and the ones that are still in Raleigh still get together. And we had people thank us at the end . . . "thank you for doing this in a dignified way" and "thank you for this being a great place to work," and that's not always the case when you close a facility with 150 people losing their jobs on the same day".

Providing managers with the job resources they need. The leaders empowered employees and their managers to collaborate in identifying barriers that prevented them from achieving their best work outcomes, creating improvement plans, and implementing robust monitoring and reporting processes around such plans. The HR department provided managers opportunities to participate in leadership training events as part of their personal development plan and emphasized equipping managers with the tools, the talking points, and the context behind organizational changes so they could proactively address employee concerns. In providing managers job resources such as leadership training and training in engagement practices, the organization engaged in a social exchange principle of reciprocal interdependence (Cropanzano & Mitchell 2005).

HR practices, such as creating a culture of trust and empowerment, employee development, training, career development, and ongoing appraisals influence employee engagement (Bakker, 2017). Employees engage when they have the resources to do their job, manage work stressors, feel safe in the work environment, find meaning in their work, have an interpersonally oriented leader, and connect with their colleagues to align with the organization's mission (Byrne, 2015). Bakker (2017) observed that leadership development intervention had a positive effect on followers' perceptions of work-culture support and strategic alignment. Social exchange relationships at work evolve when employers take care of employees, which thereby gives rise to beneficial consequences (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). As P4 stated, "HR would take a lot of depth in the leadership growth, being an active partner in not only being a part of the team, a superficial part of the team, but being able to really help, 'how can I help you have that conversation?', 'how can I help you develop this certain skill?' and watching." HR managers were involved in providing the mentorship and support managers needed in implementing the leadership training.

The HR department recognized the importance of providing line managers the information, the support, and the tools they needed to engage with their staff to facilitate two-way communicate about the organization's direction and leaders' decisions. Many participants praised the HR-sponsored training and development programs. P8 stated, "I feel like they were important for manager engagement. It helped them feel like they were supported. On a scale of 1-10, the value they provided in 2010 and 2011 was 7 or 8. They were good programs." Referring to the HR department, P10 stated, "Having a team of people waking up every day trying to think about how to make sure we support and sustain our culture is significant to the success". Social exchange theory explains employee engagement by stating that employees who perceive higher organizational support are more likely to reciprocate with greater levels of engagement in their job and in the organization (Saks, 2006). Dewettinck and Vroonen (2017) found that managers' beliefs regarding the usefulness of employee performance management activities were the key determinants of a successful implementation. Anthony-McMann et al. (2017) found that training leaders and employees in fostering a work environment that helped develop positive work relationships, was the most important activity a HR department could undertake to improve employee engagement. P2 explained how the organization approached its role in supporting line managers, "they may have limited

amounts of information or context, but yet, they are needing to craft a message for their employees that motivates, that gives them hope, that gives them meaning and so, if you are able to empower them, give them more tools, more information, then I think you are set up for more success when you think about colleague engagement, when you think about stress levels and the ability to impact anxiety”.

Being transparent and honest in communications with employees. Five participants responded that the organization developed a communication strategy that emphasized transparency, helped employees understand what organizational decisions and events meant to them, provided managers with the talking points they would need to cascade information to their staff, and helped develop trust with the employees. Meyer (2017) had suggested that effective, two-way communication was important in shaping employee perceptions of the organization’s efforts at creating a values-based culture and implementing employee engagement practices. A communications and culture specialist within the HR department described the role was about “ensuring our colleagues and leaders are set up for success through transparent and timely communications, so making sure our messaging makes sense to people, aligning messages of our senior leaders on down to our front-line colleagues” (P1). Straatmann, Kohnke, Hatstrup, and Mueller (2016) found that implementation of change related communications processes helped employees perceive greater behavioral control around change events because they felt informed. Straatmann, Kohnke, Hatstrup, and Mueller found that the theory of planned behavior constructs of attitude, perceived behavioral control and subjective norms explained about 47% of the variance in employee intentions to engage in organizational change events and process. As P2 stated, “some level of transparency I think, was very important, for colleagues to feel a sense of trust from the organization and for them to understand what it truly meant for them – positive impact or not, they knew where they stood, to the degree it could be communicated but on the other side it was important to prepare our leaders – frontline and middle management with the talking points, the tools, the context behind that change because they were the ones that had to carry that change forward and they were the ones that were going to get the questions and concerns from their team about this change, they were the ones that were going to see the stress and anxiety in their team mates and were going to be ones that had to address it”.

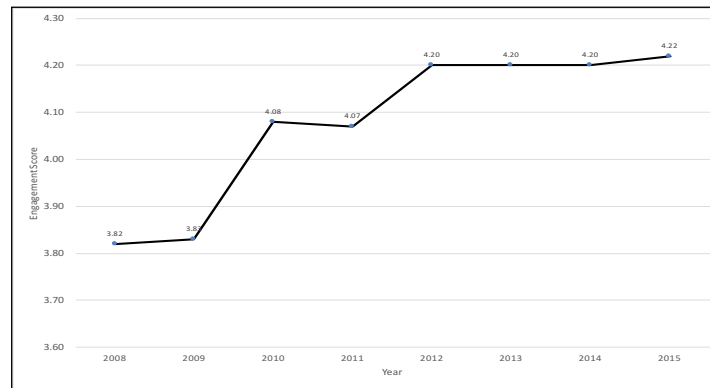
HR leaders reached out to influencers within the organization as part of an overall change management strategy and communications plan in advance of major organizational events. Participants P6 and P12 insisted that it was important to be open and as professionally transparent as possible with their staff. P12 observed, “I think, if people think that something is going on and they are kept in the dark about that, it just creates more stress and gossip and speculation”. P10 emphasized the importance of communication as part of an overall engagement approach, my leadership philosophy has always been that it's really important sometimes, to the point of over communicating to make sure that you're consistently informing the people that report to you, about anything that's happening in the company both positive and negative.

However, these communications practices were likely insufficient to cope with the sheer size and frequency of the organizational changes that occurred during the change years. Responses from a few participants appear in the change years section of this study. Meyer (2017) argued that organizations that recognized the basic human needs of autonomy, efficacy, self-control, social connection; implemented HR policies that reflected fairness in hiring, development, and evaluation practices; and implemented frequent and effective two-way communications with their employees, as best principles, had a greater chance of improving employee engagement and improvements to the bottom line. As P10 observed, “the values of the organization were the focus on culture, the fact that we looked at it, we measured it, we talked about it, we where we had it on our badges, where we were consistently reminded of the importance of culture and the very specific tenets of that culture that we wanted to uphold”.

The leadership invested in these strategies over a period of more than 7 years to allow employee engagement practices and perspectives to become part of the way the whole organization conducted itself. Figure 2 shows the trends in annual employee engagement Gallup Q12 scores for the organization.

Organizational engagement scores measured on a scale of 0 to 5, rose from 3.82 in 2008 to 4.20 in 2012, and plateaued for the next three years.

FIGURE 2. TREND IN EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT TREND BETWEEN 2008 AND 2015AS PROVIDED BY PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATION.



However, even in an engagement-oriented culture, there remained pockets of disengaged employees. As Shuck et. al. (2016) observed, even though organizations determine the experience of employee engagement by creating and sustaining an organizational culture, employees may become disengaged because of an uncontrollable, local condition of work. P9 mentioned the differential treatment towards the call center staff by saying, “For the longest time, I feel that the call center people were treated like a different caste or group within the corporation.” Leaders in the call center had to go to lengths to create, according to P9, a “bubble around the call center” to make it a fun place. The call center leaders developed a manager training program that focused on building team morale by “promoting from within” (P9). They created a program that would allow front line staff to take on managerial roles when they became available. P7 wished that HR’s scope of engagement could have extended from the organization level to the employee level. P3 mentioned having to customize organization-level communications to suit his business. Participants’ responses related to the change years revealed additional details related to some of the themes from the organization’s golden years.

THE CHANGE YEARS

Organizational changes including changes in leadership, curtailment of non-essential expenses, and staff headcount reductions started in late 2014. Employees lost long-term friends to departures or layoffs. Remaining team members saw an increase in their workloads. Leadership stopped administering the Gallup Q12 survey after 2015 even though employee engagement practices remained integrated into business processes. Then, in 2016, the organization was spun-off from its parent company and sold. More changes occurred in leadership positions. New rounds of layoffs occurred across the organization. Reporting relationships changed.

Integration of employee engagement practices into culture and processes. Leadership commitment to creating and maintaining a culture of engagement appeared to be important leading up to and during the change years. Six participants responded to the changes in organization culture during the change years. P10 used the term “counter cultural” to describe the effect on the organization’s values and culture as new leaders came into the organization and spoke about the need for leaders to be aligned with the organization’s culture because the organization took its cues from their behaviors. P12 spoke about the

palpable sense of loss employees felt in the organization's culture activities after the acquisition. P2 spoke about the "ebbs and flows, and changes based on new leaders" as the reason for the shift away from the values that formed the basis for the organization's culture during the golden years.

The relatively sudden erosion of values starting in 2015 and the associated ambiguity about the organization's mission after the acquisition, caused perceptible changes in how employees talked about the organization. The main source of stress during the change period arose from uncertainty about changing job roles, potential redeployment, layoffs, perceptions of change processes, lack of resources, and the absence of consultation and information (Smollan, 2017). Based on their findings on organizational identity and employee stress, Newton and Teo (2013) suggested that organizations should facilitate high levels of identification with the organization, its mission, and values because such identification would allow employees to adjust better to organization changes and the effects of such stressors. When individuals identify with the organization, they are likely to express satisfaction and commitment to the organization (Lee, Park, & Koo, 2015). Newton and Teo (2013) found that employees who identified strongly with their organization showed decreases in their job satisfaction levels and their psychological health when they were unclear about their role.

P2 mentioned that employees were not sure how they fit into the organization after the acquisition. P8 stated, "And where we are now is, we don't have any values, we got some values thrown on to our annual performance evaluation. They weren't all that meaningful and they were a little confusing" when speaking about the sense of confusion among employees about the organization's purpose under the new parent. P1 was optimistic, but cautious about the future of culture-related activities after the acquisition. P12 spoke about the steps the team took to reinstate the cultural values of employee recognition and celebration of life events when they realized that the HR department had stopped doing so.

Employees appeared to be going through an identity crisis because they sensed a loss of identification with the organization. Organizational identification forms the basis for the theory of planned behavior model of attitudes and behaviors in organizations (Lee, Park, & Koo, 2015). It is common for individuals to construct their identity from the identity of the organization they work for because being part of and working for an organization consume a significant portion of a person's life (Lee, Park, & Koo, 2015). Balanescu (2017) found that the three motivational factors that motivate employees to stay with their employer were (a) the working environment, (b) relationships with coworkers and supervisors, and (c) identification with the organization. P7 used the term "wandering in the wilderness" to describe employees who did not understand what the "tsunami of changes" (P10) meant for them in their jobs. Sung et al. (2017) suggested that perceived changes in employees' social exchange relationship with the organization based on their perceptions of job security, job continuity, and distributive justice, affected their attachment to the organization. Thus, it appeared as though employees who identified strongly with the organization felt stressed, disengaged, and less committed to the organization during the change years because of the erosion in employees' sense of organizational identity. Supervisors had an important role to play in helping employees reduce their stress, regain their sense of belonging and commitment to the organization.

Providing supervisors with the job resources they need. Seven participants highlighted the importance of psychological contract fulfillment through employee training and development programs during the change years. A psychological contract represents employee beliefs and perceptions about implicit promises and obligations between the employee and employer in an employment exchange relationship (Birtch, Chiang & Van Esch, 2016). Participants lamented the absence of ongoing training and development programs during these years. P4 missed HR's involvement and active participation in leadership development programs. P10 stated that the training programs were "critical to our success in engagement". P11 stated that he had received little to no management training since his promotion as a manager in 2016. P3, P8, and P11 spoke of the constraints they faced in trying to invest in training and

development programs for their staff. P7 regretted the “lip service” the organization was providing to investing in employee growth. These participants appeared to be referring to concept of psychological contract fulfillment. Birtch, Chiang and Van Esch (2016) stated that psychological contract fulfillment, a social exchange perspective on the employer-employee exchange process, reflected employee beliefs, expectations, and perceptions about the employment relationship and the satisfaction of implicit promises between employee and employer. Communications strategies provide employees with the tools to manage their beliefs, expectations, and perceptions of the organization’s decisions and activities.

Being transparent, and honest in communications with employees. During the change years, the organization increased its use of communications as a tool to help reduce employee disengagement and mitigate change-related stresses. Straatmann, Kohnke, Hattrup, and Mueller (2016) found that implementation of change-related communication processes helped employees perceive greater behavioral control about the change because they felt informed about the change. As identified by Francis, Ramdhony, Reddington, and Staines (2013), the HR department recognized the role that line managers could play in moderating the adverse effects of the workplace changes on employees, by engaging in near continuous dialogue with their staff, to help reconcile individual and organizational needs and interests. Tucker (2017) stated that managers could play an important communications role to reduce employee frustrations caused by lack of direction and information by planning their communications ahead of time, sharing information as completely as allowable, and listening carefully to employee feedback. The department leaders implemented a change management strategy that included a detailed communications plan. The plan included, as P2 stated, “talking point” memos that provided managers with information on the nature of the change, impacts if any, and the reason for the change.

P7 expressed concern about the communications strategy implemented during the change years by saying, “They communicate that change is occurring, but they don’t communicate what is the overall objective behind this change, and what are we trying to accomplish, and getting everybody aligned around that proverbial North Star.” P7 positioned his concern with the communications strategy within the context of lack of job resources; mission clarity, the absence of clearly defined goals, and objectives for operational teams, after the acquisition. The common factor between engagement and burnout may be the presence or absence of job resources; the physical, psychological, and organizational features that help employees achieve their goals (Gruman & Saks, 2011; Hernandez, Stanley & Miller, 2014). Supervisors play an important role in providing essential job resources to their staff.

Supportive supervisor behavior is essential to mitigating employee stress. Ten participants provided a variety of examples on how supportive supervisory behavior can help organizations with employee stress mitigation. The change years highlighted the importance of training and developing managers in employee engagement activities because the training helped mitigate employee stresses. Teoh, Coyne, Devonish, Leather, and Zarola (2016) found that social exchange theory explained the positive relationship between supportive manager behavior and employee engagement.

Kang and Kang (2016) asserted that perceived supervisor support significantly reduced employee job stress and reinforced the effect of high-commitment HRM practices in lowering employee job stress. Kinman and Jones (2005) observed that managers’ beliefs and attitudes regarding work-related stress and its impact on employees would determine the culture of the organization and inform its policies and practices on dealing with stress. During the change years managers had to focus on strategies that would help employee reduce disengagement and mitigate stress. The stress mitigation strategies required building and leveraging trusting relationships with employees by being available to employees, engaging in honest and transparent communications, listening with compassion, and helping employees cope with organizational change.

The dominant cause of stress participants reported hearing from their staff was the fear of losing their jobs after the acquisition. Referring to the frequent layoffs in the recent past, P6 stated, "I think people have it in the back of their minds that another shoe is going to drop." This stressor remained dominant in employees' minds despite attempts by the organization's leaders to increase the frequency and types of communications and events. P9 confessed that attempts to obtain feedback from employees about their job-related concerns generally devolved to the questions "when am I going to get fired, when am I going to get laid off, when is the next layoff?" P6, P7, P8, and P10 expressed distrust in leadership because of the perceived dishonesty about the number of organization changes that they experienced. Stress at work arises from issues such as work overload, conflicting goals, unclear tasks, emotional demands, lack of control, and lack of supervisory support (Corin & Bjork, 2016; Newton & Teo, 2013). P10 appeared to echo Balanescu (2017) by stating that, while he was keeping his employee options open, he worried about leaving a work environment that was supportive of his work-life balance needs. P5 felt that his staff feared change even though their skills were in high demand in the industry.

Six participants discussed the reasons why employees felt disengaged. The primary reasons for disengagement during the change years were ambiguity of mission, feeling uncertain about the future, unclear or unstated organizational objectives, and lack of clarity on employees' roles in the future organization. Participants P1, P7, P9, and P12 differentiated between good stress and bad stress. They were unanimous in their belief that the organization had a history of coming together to resolve the good stress situations. Their staff had told them that the organization could have done a much better job of stating the organizations' change objectives, reasons for the changes, and what they meant for teams and employees.

Mont and Beehr (2014) noted that supervisor communication and social support for employees had the largest positive effect on employees' subjective wellbeing. Managers helped mitigate employee stress by sharing their own feelings honestly with their staff, providing examples of how they coped with their stress, and by channeling the conversation towards the tasks at hand that both, manager and employee, needed to focus on. Anthony-McMann et al. (2017) observed that organizations might be able to mitigate stresses caused by role conflict, role ambiguity, and role-stress fit through improved resource allocation, increased team collaboration, improved communications, and developing a culture in which employees can safely express their concerns. P4 and P12 allowed staff to vent their feelings by providing them a safe environment to do so and then helping them channel their feelings into focusing on tasks ahead. P9 helped employees face where they were in their "state of change" by facilitating team discussions where employees assessed their readiness to accept the organizational changes and focus on their daily tasks. P5 helped his staff see that despite the many changes in the organization leading up to and beyond the acquisition, nothing had changed about their tasks and their relationships with their internal customers. Consistent supportive behavior from managers can help employee engagement by providing job resources, emotional support, and appropriate working conditions (Byrne, 2015; Luchman & Gonzalez-Morales, 2013).

Tucker (2017) asserted that managers could encourage continued learning and development by their staff by helping them identify new learning opportunities and providing them with opportunities to connect with experts. Most manager participants invested their time in helping their staff deal with stressors and helping them with career growth options. P7 and P12 allowed staff time to pursue skills adjacent to their core skills and said, "I think the type of people you need to be able to grow an organization you have to take time in to let them explore internally and to look at things and learn and bring something back that is different". P8 found creative ways to help staff pursue low-cost training opportunities and by finding other roles within the organization. P9 spent a significant portion of each morning being available to staff and engaging in team and individual mentoring activities. P11 kept his team engaged by helping them acquire new skills related to their roles. Managers in the organization used stress mitigation strategies they learned as part of their HR sponsored leadership training programs. They were responsible for

meeting the organization's commitment to its customers and other stakeholders. Byrne (2015) asserted that employees see supervisors who demonstrate support for their staff and value individual employee contributions, as good role models. The elements of organization culture and employee engagement practices that remained in place allowed them to help their staff cope with the stresses during the change years.

Thus, participant responses spanning the organization's golden years and change years provided a unique set of contexts to explore the themes that emerged and yielded information about the importance of the strategies the organization's leaders used to mitigate employee stress and reduce disengagement. The intentional deployment of employee engagement strategies occurred within the context of the organization's golden years. The strategies to mitigate employee stress and reduce disengagement, were realized to greater extent within the context of the change years. The conceptual framework theories of social exchange and planned behavior were adequate in identifying the four themes. These strategies might have useful applications to professional practices within the context of employee stress mitigation and employee engagement in other organizations.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Many study participants reported that ambiguity of mission and objectives, and lack of role clarity were causing stress and disengagement among employees. The organization's leaders should consider implementing a comprehensive communications plan that clearly presents the parent company's mission, and the role that various divisions and teams within the organization play in achieving that vision. They should consider utilizing the available set of change management and communications practices developed by the HR department over time.

Given the dynamic nature of business environments in which organizations exist, senior executives and HR leaders in other area organizations could consider a proactive implementation of similar strategies to identify opportunities to mitigate employee work place stress, reduce disengagement, and improve employee engagement and commitment to the organization. Leaders could engage with researchers on employee engagement to stay abreast of latest research on implementation outcomes. They could partner with organizations like Gallup to implement a data-driven employee engagement strategy. The leaders could experiment with these strategies in a relatively insulated division in the company to understand costs and benefits before full implementation. However, these strategies required significant, long-term investments and therefore might be available to a limited set of organizations. Organizations that consider themselves either as startups, or large companies with many geographically dispersed divisions, would need to address differing sets of challenges in implementing these strategies. Byrne (2015) cautioned against using a single approach to stress mitigation and employee engagement because organizational environments are likely heterogeneous in terms of organizational climate, job characteristics, and leadership style.

The benefits of implementing such strategies appear to be attractive, nonetheless. Workplaces that demonstrate high levels of engagement potentially may attract top talent (Joyner, 2015). Kaliannan and Adjovu (2015) supported Joyner and stated that organizations with high levels of engagement among employees experienced a 19% increase in net income and a 28% increase in earnings per share growth while those with low engagement levels experienced more than 32% drop in net income and an 11% decline in EPS. The organization had not been able to objectively relate their employee engagement initiatives to business outcomes, however. I propose recommendations for future research that could address this and other limitations of the study.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

We conducted this case study research in a single healthcare organization in Franklin, Tennessee. Recommendations for future research include the following:

Conduct a quantitative study to determine the relationship between improvement in employee engagement score as the independent variable and reduction in healthcare costs for an organization as the dependent variable.

Conduct a follow-up case study after 12 months to understand the resiliency of the employee engagement strategy implementation in a post-acquisition scenario.

Conduct a comparative case study across two or more similar organizations to compare their approaches to mitigating employee stress and reducing employee disengagement.

Conduct research on employee stress mitigation and reducing employee disengagement in other types of healthcare organizations such as health plans and hospitals, using other conceptual frameworks such as social identity theory, organizational identity theory, and conservation of resources theory.

These recommendations may provide organizations additional insights into employee engagement practices and the long-term economic benefits of creating an organization culture that allows managers to develop productive, engaged, and committed employees.

CONCLUSION

Stress, whether it is work-related or from a person's life outside of work, causes an increase in employee disengagement and a decline in employee productivity and workplace performance. Disengaged U.S. workers cost the country's businesses \$225 billion annually in lost workdays and overtime wages. In contrast, organizations with high levels of engagement among employees experienced a 19% increase in net income and a 28% increase in earnings per share growth while those with low engagement levels experienced more than 32% drop in net income and an 11% decline in EPS.

We explored strategies that HR leaders within a single healthcare organization in Franklin, Tennessee, used to reduce employee disengagement caused by stress and identified four themes related to business practice. The four themes were (a) integration of employee engagement practices into culture and business processes, (b) providing managers with the job resources they need, (c) intentionality, transparency, and honesty in communications, and (d) relying on supportive supervisor behavior. Senior executives and HR leaders should examine the feasibility of proactively implementing similar strategies to mitigate employee work place stress, reduce disengagement, and improve employee engagement and commitment to the organization.

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