

Managers vs. Employees: The Differing Effects of Communication Strength and Supervisor Support on Work Engagement

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Abstract

Employee engagement can predict critical outcomes for the bottom line of business operations; organizations want employees to feel engaged and therefore be motivated to produce significant results. Research has focused on employee engagement, but significantly less research has examined managerial engagement. The purpose of the present study is to test whether or not managers and employees derive their sense of engagement in the same manner, which could ultimately lead to ways in which businesses can most effectively build an engaged workforce with both entities. We used strength of leader member exchange to predict engagement. We also assessed whether the nature of the social exchange relationship between supervisor and employee served a mediating role between communication and engagement. Using data from a Fortune 500 company, we tested the effects of communication strength and the mediation of supervisor support on engagement for samples of lower level employees and managers. Results showed that for both employees and managers, communication strength had a significant impact on their feelings of engagement. However, when testing for mediation, supervisor support was not a mediator for employees but was a significant partial mediator for managers' engagement. These results imply that there may be differences in the way employees and managers become motivated and engaged in their work roles, and points to the need for more research on how to best engage managers.

Keywords: Engagement, Employee, Manager

1. Introduction:

Employee engagement has been the subject of many studies due to its high number of beneficial outcomes for both the employer and the employee. At an individual level, an engaged worker tends to have better psychological health, better work performance, and also higher commitment^{1 2}. Because these are all characteristics that make for a successful organization, it is in the organization's best interest to consider how these work attitudes can be developed to their greatest potential.

Not surprisingly, supervisor support has been shown to have a positive effect on employee engagement; employees who feel their supervisor is supportive of their efforts are more willing to support the supervisor, and in return, the organization^{3 4 5}. In addition, the communication that takes place between employees and their supervisors can make a difference in how this support is perceived. There is little research, however, that examines the differences in these forms of engagement across levels of management. Managers have unique roles in the workplace^{6 7 8}, and may rely on different factors to foster their engagement than do lower level employees. The current study attempts to identify these differences, if they exist, by examining the effects of supervisor support and communication strength on employee engagement among lower level employees and upper level employees, such as managers and supervisors.

1.1 Engagement:

Although engagement has been shown to be a construct which many organizations find highly valuable, it is important to thoroughly explore its meaning. State and trait engagement have been defined and distinguished⁹. State engagement signifies positive affectivity associated with the work setting and job, which tends to indicate a wide array of positive feelings such as pride, dedication, energy, vigor, alertness, and persistence. Conversely, trait engagement signifies many interrelated personality facets, including conscientiousness and positive affectivity. Both engagement interpretations imply that employees feeling engaged are more inclined to approach work actively, positively, and with high levels of energy. Such employees go above and beyond expectations supporting organizationally relevant outcomes⁹. Furthermore, research has found employee engagement to predict critical outcomes such as organizational success and financial performance^{10 11 12 13}.

Existing literature concerning engagement sheds some light on known antecedents. For instance, employee engagement research outlines several relevant factors. Maslach and colleagues¹⁴ revealed six arenas of work-life which can lead to engagement, including control, recognition, community and social support, perceived fairness, values, and workload. In addition, Saks¹⁵ found that perceived organizational support (POS) predicted job and organizational engagement. Finally, comprehending the antecedents of employee engagement is vastly important within the current organizational context, as recent reports have identified an increasingly disengaged workforce, totaling costs for US businesses around \$300 billion annually through lost productivity^{10 13 16 17}.

1.2 Communication Strength and Supervisors:

Extensive research has examined how characteristics of leadership styles can ultimately affect employee engagement. According to Shamir, House, and Authur¹⁸, “[an] important aspect of charismatic motivational influence is the creation of a high level of commitment on the part of the leader and the followers to a common vision, mission or transcendent goal.” In order to effectively reach this level of commitment, strong communication channels must be present in the relationship between leaders and employees. Leaders must be able to clarify what the goals are and motivate their employees by explaining past examples and new methods – giving employees a true feeling for what they will be doing and why¹⁸. By clearly articulating and setting goals, giving and receiving constructive feedback, and giving appropriate training to employees, the needs of the company become aligned with the needs of the individuals, making them collective interests. This allows employees to feel a sense of identity with what their tasks are; they feel responsible for the outcomes of the company. Compared to other types of leadership styles, transformational and charismatic leadership leads to a better bottom line, including “lower turnover rates, higher productivity, and higher employee satisfaction” because the techniques used to manage people focus on communication between the hierarchical levels in a company¹⁹.

Leaders and their followers develop a variety of relationships ranging from low to high quality, depending on the interactions that occur between these dyads over time; Leader Member Exchange theory explains how these relationships develop. Graen and Uhl-Bien²⁰ explore different stages that describe the transformation that relationships between leaders and members go through starting with the most basic stage which consists of strictly obligatory compliance on the part of the member, and leading up to the most mature stage, which charismatic and transformational leadership are identified with, by rising above the strictly formal interactions between leader and employee and becoming more trusting and loyal to each other. Employees stop acting just as they are told to do, and instead take the initiative to go above and beyond in the workplace for their superiors²⁰. This is the effect when leaders go beyond the transactional aspects of the job and interact with their followers on a more personal level, allowing for communication to flow both ways²¹. Having a developed relationship between leaders and members will tie back into having employees go beyond their own self-interests and taking on the interests of the company as a whole²⁰. “Employees seek a balance in their exchange relationships with organizations by having attitudes and behaviors commensurate with the degree of employer commitment to them as individuals”²². This leads to the assertion of the following hypothesis for this study:

H1: Communication strength will be positively related to employee engagement.

1.3 Supervisor Support and Engagement:

Of the many predictors of employee behavior in the workplace, supervisor support has been shown to be a valid subject for studying levels of employee engagement. Kottke and Sharafinski²³ found that employees tend to develop general views concerning the degree to which supervisors value their contributions and care about their well-being. These views may carry over into the employee's views of the degree to which the organization itself values their contributions. A study by Eisenberger, et al.²⁴ found that employees who perceived their supervisor as supportive of their efforts and contributions also increased the degree to which they perceived the organization as supportive. This study also linked these two constructs to suggest that a positive relationship existed between perceived supervisor support (PSS) and perceived organizational support (POS), due to the fact that supervisors are seen as representatives of the organization itself²⁴.

In regards to engagement, the relationship between supervisor support and the degree to which the employee engages with the organization can be seen as, in essence, a social exchange relationship. Social exchange theory can be defined as a reciprocal relationship that involves an exchange of socio-emotional resources between two parties^{4 25 26}. According to Blau²⁷, this creates unspecified future obligations to each party, allowing the cycle of exchange to continue. In this study, the application of social exchange theory to the employee-organization relationship focuses on the relationship between employee and supervisor. It is suggested that an employee who views their supervisor and employer as supportive is more likely to support the supervisor in return³. This exchange relationship is therefore more likely to affect the employees' behaviors so that they match the "goodwill and helpfulness" they have received in order to support the organization³. Across levels and types of social exchange relationships in the workplace, studies have found that greater social exchange is associated with stronger employee contributions; When social exchange is high, employees have higher levels of commitment, higher organizational citizenship behavior, better performance, and are less likely to quit their jobs⁴. Settoon, et al.²⁸ found evidence that supported Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) as the reason behind this relationship, finding that POS predicted organizational commitment³. It can be said, then, that social exchange is the theory providing the explanation for LMX, such that employees exchange commitment for their supervisor's support, creating the cycle of trade between the two parties⁵. Thus, this study suggests the following additional hypothesis:

H2: Supervisor support will mediate the relationship between communication strength and employee engagement, such that communication strength positively predicts supervisor support, which will positively predict employee engagement.

1.4 Managers vs. Employees:

When studying work engagement, it is also important to note the unique roles of managers within an organization and how they differ from the roles of lower level employees. As stated by Mintzberg⁶, all managers hold a formal authority over an organizational unit. This authority constitutes their role as leader, and the responsibilities that accompany this role. Challenges of the manager role include finding systematic ways to share information, and giving serious attention to many issues at once, while simultaneously focusing on the overall goals and priorities of the organization as a whole⁶. Managers must rely on information gathered and transferred from subordinates as well as other managers in order to have the tools necessary to implement these goals⁷. It becomes necessary, then, for managers to depend on communication in order to share information. However, this may contrast with the job requirements of lower level employees, specifically due to the nature of the information needed for lower level employees to do their job effectively depending on their role in the workplace; for instance, the need for managers to communicate decisions and ideas versus the need for lower level employees to communicate actions taken to execute a task.

This sharing of information also promotes reciprocal exchanges with others within the workplace, citing the different role requirements of managers; in addition to the decisional and informational roles of managers⁶, interpersonal interaction is necessary for managers' success in terms of sharing information, workload sharing, and boundary spanning⁸. Whereas this interaction is vital for managers, for lower level employees, this may not be the case since their tasks can generally be more repetitive and less dependent upon constant feedback. Thus, based on these differences in work roles, could it hold true that managers need different things to feel engaged? Could previously mentioned factors of engagement, such as perceived fairness, workload, and control, differ in the level of

importance for managers compared to lower level employees due to their leadership role in the workplace? This study poses the following research question:

What differences, if any, exist between managers and employees in our proposed engagement model?

2. Methods:

2.1 Sample:

Sample 1 consisted of employees working in the customer service department from a large, global Fortune 500 organization based in the southeastern United States. Of the 325,000 participants surveyed, roughly 1% were customer service employees. Approximately 12% of these employees (n = 408) did not hold managerial positions, and served as the first sample for the analyses used below. Approximately 6% of the customer service participants held managerial positions, and were used to examine a second sample (sample 2) of customer service supervisors (n = 219) in response to the above research question.

2.2 Procedure:

All measures were self-report scales included as a part of the organization's annual attitudes survey. Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). Communication strength was assessed using 3 items, with sample items including such questions as "The person I report to is receptive of new ideas" and "I receive useful feedback from the person I report to." Supervisor Support was assessed using 9 items, including questions such as "The person I report to takes time for meaningful discussions about my career" and "The person I report to explains new changes to employees." Engagement was assessed using 5 items, with questions such as "I am motivated to contribute more than what is expected of me in my job" and "My job gives me a feeling of accomplishment."

2.3 Analysis:

Data analysis was run using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression with centered IV and mediator variables. Full and partial mediation was tested using the Baron & Kenny²⁹ approach. The engagement model in Figure 1. was used to test the effects of the independent variables on engagement for sample 1, employees holding no managerial positions, and for sample 2, employees holding managerial positions.

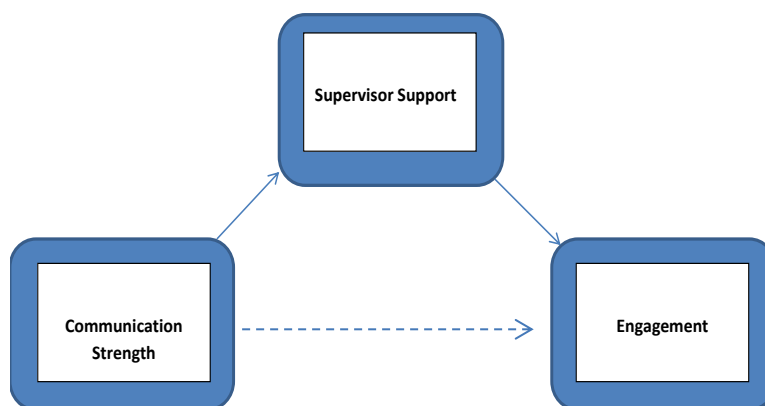


Figure 1. Engagement Model

3. Results:

An analysis of the paths within the lower level employee engagement model in sample 1 resulted in a significant correlation between Communication Strength and Supervisor Support ($\beta=.766$, $p < .01$), as well as a significant correlation between Communication Strength and Engagement ($\beta=.599$, $p < .01$, $R^2 = .357$). When testing mediation, both the predictor and the mediator variable were entered into the regression model to predict Engagement. This model yielded a non-significant value for the mediator, Supervisor Support ($\beta=.048$, $p = n.s.$), with this model adding no incremental R^2 change. These results support the first hypothesis that communication strength would positively predict employee engagement. The second hypothesis, however, was not supported, in that supervisor support was not a significant mediator for the relationship between communication and engagement.

As for the management engagement model in sample 2, analyses again resulted in a significant correlation between Communication Strength and Supervisor Support ($\beta=.778$, $p < .01$), and also a significant correlation between Communication Strength and Engagement ($\beta=.432$, $p < .01$, $R^2 = .183$), supporting the first hypothesis. Mediation was again tested by entering both the predictor and the mediator variable into the regression model to predict Engagement. However, contrary to sample 1 results, this model yielded significant values for the predictor and mediator variables, with the beta value of the predictor variable growing weaker from the aforementioned model, although still significant (Communication Strength and Engagement: $\beta=.241$, $p < .05$; Supervisor Support and Engagement: $\beta=.245$, $p < .05$, $R^2 = .203$). This suggests that partial mediation occurs within the management engagement model, and supports the second hypothesis.

These results are significant to this study in that differences were found in the relationships between supervisor support and engagement for lower level employees compared to upper level employees, supporting the research question that there may be differences that exist in how managers and employees become engaged.

4. Discussion:

In summary, when testing to see if supervisor support was a mediator of communication strength as a predictor of engagement, the results imply that lower level employees seemed to derive their feelings of engagement more so from communication strength rather than supervisor support. In contrast, when testing to see if the same held true for managers and their supervisors, it was found that supervisor support was a statistically significant mediator for communication and engagement. This implies that for upper level employees, supervisor support plays a more important role in the way engagement is derived than that of communication strength.

Explanations for these results include the possibility that lower level employees simply do not consider supervisor support as important compared to upper level managers. This may be linked to a supervisor's credibility; according to Kotter³⁰, credibility is one of the characteristics that makes supervisors successful. Upper level managers might naturally have more credibility because their status, expertise, and experience all presume greater knowledge. Lower level managers, on the other hand, might not have earned that credibility or prominence yet, and therefore their support may not hold as much weight, and therefore importance, to their employees as would upper level managers' support.

Other possible explanations may pertain to the nature of employee roles within an organization; the roles of lower level managers and their seniors may be defined differently. As the ranks increase within a company, the amount of autonomy is reduced and one's actions are more closely watched³¹. Referencing Blau's²⁷ idea of perceived obligations, employees may expect certain things from their superiors, with that list of expectations growing as the rank of that supervisor also grows. These expectations might support our findings in that lower level managers will not be held to as high of a standard by their employees as senior managers will be held by their subordinate managers due to the fact that senior managers wield more power. In addition, as a person advances he carries more responsibility, and therefore his decisions and the results of his work are monitored more closely³¹. The feedback an upper level manager receives is crucial to his progress, whether positive or negative. Managers may need to have feedback from their supervisors in order to feel secure in their position and proceed with their daily tasks. Supervisor support may then be more clearly recognized in these roles than in the relationship between employees and lower level managers.

This falls in line with one of the limitations of the study, in that the data primarily focuses on the customer service department of the organization. For these employees, their job roles may be more procedural and straightforward,

and not necessarily focused on developing a supportive relationship with their supervisor. In contrast, there is the possibility that lower level employees in other departments whose jobs are more complex may need this supervisor support due to a difference in their role within the organization. Future research might examine the constructs of this study (communication strength, supervisor support, and engagement) within other departments, or even other organizations, to test the external validity of our results.

Based on this study, it can be concluded that employee engagement is important to an organization in many ways. More importantly, knowing how employee engagement is produced can be essential to a company's success and could aid efforts to help organizations increase their employees' productivity by increasing their motivation to work more actively. The results of this study indicate that supervisors can play a big role in fostering these attitudes in employees through effective support and communication. In addition, the results of this study also imply that there may be differences in the way employees and managers value this support and communication from their supervisor. Because the leadership roles of managers are vital to an organization's success, it is important to understand these differences and points to the need for more research on how best to engage managers. In doing so, organizations may be able to promote a healthier work atmosphere by focusing on these sources of employee engagement, considering work role differences, and incorporating their specifications into the organization's agenda.

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