

The use of coaching principles to foster employee engagement

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The emerging area of positive psychology has created a heightened interest in applied positive organisational practices, such as coaching, which is increasingly being understood from the positive psychological perspective. A key focus in this area has been what organisations can do to engage their employees, in the form of organisational level drivers of engagement. However, there has been less concern with the individual level (or internalised) drivers that deliver an engaged state. Through an in-depth thematic analysis of factors known to contribute to peak performance at work, this research has identified a series of individual level drivers that contribute to an engaged state. The three individual drivers are Focusing Strengths, Managing Emotions and Aligning Purpose, which can be understood and applied practically through coaching interventions. Through coaching dialogues, it is proposed that individuals can work to utilise their signature strengths, positively manage their emotions and align their values to those of the organisation more effectively, ultimately serving to enhance their happiness, well-being and engagement, and thus be more likely to achieve peak performance.

Keywords: engagement; coaching; well-being; strengths; emotional intelligence; values; culture; personality; positive psychology.

THE POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY movement has been increasing in popularity since the modern day notion was crystallised in 1998, during Martin Seligman's 1998 Presidential Address to the American Psychological Association. Linley and Harrington (2005) define positive psychology as the 'scientific study of optimal functioning, focusing on aspects of the human condition that lead to happiness, fulfilment, and flourishing'. Positive psychology results in different questions from 'traditional' psychological approaches, which have tended to focus on a disease model of human functioning, and healing people of their shortcomings; it explores not why people fail, suffer or deteriorate, but why they excel, achieve and flourish (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In other words, positive psychology takes a more holistic approach to human existence; looking at both the positive and negative aspects in context to establish what is right, working and good about people.

In Linley and Harrington's (2005) paper, the authors state that there has been

growing interest in applied positive psychology, defined as 'the application of positive psychology research to the facilitation of optimal functioning'. This may mean that organisations are beginning to adopt 'positive' organisational practices, such as coaching, that focus on enhancing employee skills, happiness or well-being to achieve optimal performance, instead of 'plugging' development gaps to meet 'acceptable' performance. Synergies have been identified between coaching psychology and positive psychology principles in the literature, as both approaches are explicitly concerned with the enhancement of performance and well-being, by focusing on the positive side of human nature rather than what is flawed (Linley & Harrington, 2005).

Employee engagement is a type of positive organisational practice that has received a wealth of attention, mainly from practitioners rather than academics in recent years (Saks, 2006). In their influential study on the drivers of employee engagement, Robinson et al. (2004) define employee engagement as 'a positive attitude held by the employee

towards the organisation and its values. An engaged employee is aware of business context, and works with colleagues to improve performance within the job for the benefit of the organisation. The organisation must work to develop and nurture engagement, which requires a two-way relationship between employer and employee.’ The notion of employee engagement is an appealing concept to business leaders, as the research highlights numerous organisational benefits obtained from an engaged workforce. For example, studies have shown that organisations with engaged employees create higher performance levels and remain ahead of their competitors (Towers Perrin Global Workforce Survey, 2007/2008). Also, a survey of employee attitudes found that engaged employees tended to take less sick leave and were less likely to leave their employer than their non-engaged counterparts (CIPD Annual Survey Report, 2006).

The research into employee engagement has been informative and useful, but up until now has tended to focus solely on what organisations can do to engage their employees (e.g. Robinson et al., 2004). Typically, the so called ‘drivers’ of engagement are at the organisational level, considering job features such as engaging managers, supportive supervisors, giving the employee a ‘voice’ and displaying organisational integrity (Macleod & Clarke, 2009). These are drivers that the organisation (rather than the individual) can control and, as valuable as this information is, there has been little consideration to date of what can be done at the individual level in order to help people achieve the right mindset and attitude for engagement. In other words, what are the internalised drivers of engagement that people hold within themselves? Some researchers (e.g. Schaufeli et al., 2002) have identified the cognitive and affective aspects of ‘state engagement’, such as vigour, dedication and absorption; however, these are the outcomes of individual level engagement and not the drivers of it.

There remains a notable gap in the literature regarding what an individual can practically do in order to drive internal states of engagement at work. This article aims to address this by exploring the following questions: what are the individual level drivers of employee engagement, and how can these be applied within an individual’s work? What drives an engaged internalised state that, when combined with organisation level drivers, can result in peak performance that benefits both the individual (enhanced happiness and well-being) and the organisation (reduced sickness, greater productivity, increased revenue)?

The author and his colleagues embarked on a three-year research project to identify the key individual level drivers of an engaged state that were face-valid, measurable and actionable, which could then be developed to produce sustained workforce engagement through practical interventions. This article describes their approach to this research, along with the findings that emerged. The results section describes each individual level driver of engagement, and how coaching interventions can help individuals to diagnose and develop each of these within their roles.

Methodology

Thematic analysis was the methodology employed for identifying the individual level drivers of employee engagement. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data, and was selected as the chosen methodology because of its flexibility and ability to produce rich yet complex accounts of data. Braun and Clarke (2006) state that, because thematic analysis is not bound to a particular theory or epistemology, it is highly flexible as it can be used across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches (unlike Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, for example, which has limited variability in how the method is applied).

The authors devised a list of relevant topic areas that were known or found to

contribute to individual level peak performance within the workplace as a starting point for the thematic analysis. These topic areas formed the analysis criteria, and consisted of the following subjects:

- job satisfaction;
- organisational commitment;
- employee engagement;
- job design;
- well-being;
- flow;
- optimism;
- resilience.

The data was collected through an extensive review of academic and commercial publications (e.g. articles, conference papers, journals, reports, books, and dissertations), along with attending relevant conferences, seminars, workshops, presentations and forums relating to the above topic areas.

An inductive method of thematic analysis was employed, whereby the authors extracted themes from the data that were strongly linked to the data themselves (Patton, 1990), without trying to fit the themes into the authors' pre-existing interests or analytical preconceptions. The authors began by becoming highly familiar with the data collected; reading and re-reading the content and coding interesting features of the data. From these codes, the authors then searched for 'themes' that could incorporate clusters of codes. The themes were then reviewed by constantly revisiting the initial data and codings produced, checking that the themes were still an accurate reflection of the data as the themes (and the data) evolved. The themes were then clearly defined and named, with the specifics refined by revisiting the data collected.

Results

The thematic analysis of the data elicited three key 'themes' of individual level drivers of an engaged state. These are listed and provided diagrammatically (Figure 1) below:

- focusing strengths;
- managing emotions; and
- aligning purpose.

In eliciting the themes for these individual level drivers of an engaged state, the authors considered how practical it would be to develop them through methods such as work-based coaching. This would ensure that line managers could influence their direct-reports throughout all levels of the organisation by first helping them to identify and understand their individual level drivers and working with them to enhance the effectiveness of these within their roles.

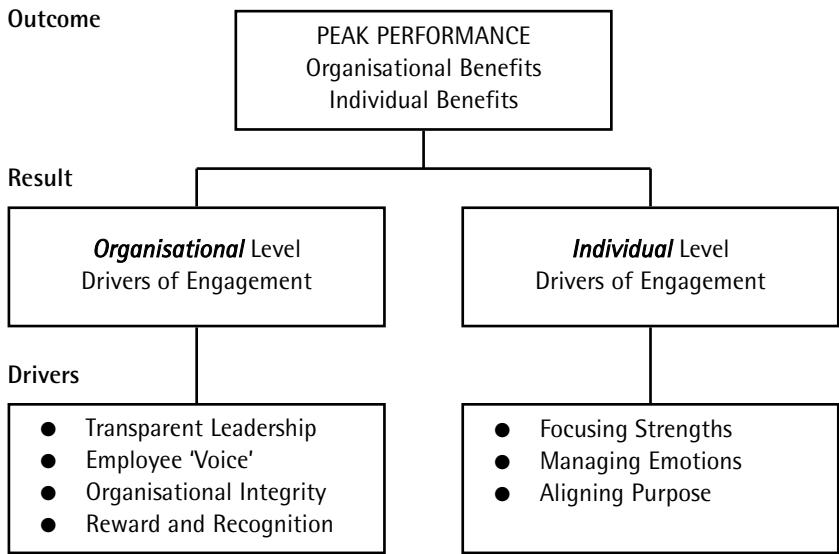
Focusing strengths

Linley and Harrington (2005) stated that positive psychology and coaching psychology are natural partners in applied psychology given their common focus on enhancement of performance, and argued that the psychology of human strengths provided 'significant potential for development and benefit' to coaching psychologists. The findings from this research would substantiate these authors' claims, as focusing strengths was evidenced as one of the key individual level drivers for an engaged state in this research, which the author here has outlined can be identified and explored through effective and practical coaching interventions.

The notion that every individual has a core set of 'signature strengths', which enable them to perform consistently and near perfectly in a series of tasks or roles, originated from the positive psychology movement (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Strengths, like engagement, have been defined differently within the literature (see Linley & Harrington, 2006, p.88), but what is common across several of these definitions is that strengths:

- are partly innate: you need some form of innate 'talent' to begin with (i.e. personality, motivation, mental ability);
- are partly shaped by the environment (e.g. tasks, opportunities);
- bring enjoyment and fulfilment to the individual; and
- produce peak performance that benefits the organisation.

Figure 1: Organisational and Individual Level Drivers of an Engaged State.



In summary, the research suggests that when individuals are able to deliver tasks that they enjoy and are able to develop to a near perfect or ‘peak’ level, then they are engaged in their roles because they are focusing on their strengths (Wagner & Harter, 2006). As a first step to realising individual level engagement, line managers and coaches should seek to identify the strengths of their employees through open and honest coaching conversations facilitated by the use of personality tools that identify and measure individuals’ strengths. Coaches can use such tools as an effective method to identify and discuss their coachees’ signature strengths. Like with any personality tool the true value comes not from the outputs of the tool itself but from the conversations that it generates between the individual who completed it and the person providing the feedback. Conversations here could focus on whether the coachee agrees with the outputs, and if so, why (and if not, why not)? Which strengths resonate most or least with the coachee, and why?

Once the strengths have been identified and agreed the coach can then ask the coachee to consider how and when these strengths could be applied further within their role. What opportunities are there within the job and organisation for the coachee to play to their strengths further? Once identified, the coachee and their line manager should work together to establish ways in which these opportunities can be realised (i.e. through secondments; amending role requirements), along with who would need to be asked or informed along the way.

Inevitably, any role will require a blend of the coachee’s strengths and weaknesses, as the less gratifying parts of any role cannot always be completely avoided. However, the coaching dialogue will aim to uncover how the role can be shaped to accommodate more of the coachee’s strengths and fewer of their weaknesses. Where the less favourable parts of the role are unavoidable, the coaching discussions should focus on how the coachee’s strengths can manage these

weaker areas effectively. For example, if an individual has a strength in collaboration, but not in resilience, then the collaboration strength could be used to manage their lack of resilience by talking through their issues with their colleagues (ideally ones who have a strength in resilience).

Managing emotions

The second individual level driver of an engaged state is 'Managing Emotions'. This driver relates to intrapersonal intelligence: the ability to be self-aware, acknowledge and understand our own thoughts, feelings and emotions (Gardner, 1983). More specifically, this research has highlighted that an individual must be able to fully focus on the tasks that they are undertaking, rather than be distracted by negative or irrelevant thoughts, if they are to develop the right mindset for engagement. Intrapersonal intelligence encompasses aspects of resilience also; developing a set of positive behavioural or psychological responses, for example, perseverance (Reivich & Shatté, 2002); adaptation (Luthar et al., 2001); and coping (Wagnild & Young, 1993) to a given set of negative events, such as 'adversities' (Neenan, 2009).

Research has shown that positive outcomes are associated with effective management of emotions, particularly when demonstrating resilience. For example, it has been found that resilience is a predictor of several key attitudinal variables including organisational commitment, job satisfaction and workplace happiness (Youssef & Luthan, 2007). In addition, individuals who demonstrate high levels of resilience have been found to be more effective in their roles (Seligman, 1990; Lusch & Serpkeuci, 1990).

Success in coaching for emotional management may largely depend on the relationship between the coach and coachee, along with the coach's own levels of intrapersonal intelligence. The coach may need to manage their own emotions during the conversations by remaining objective and free from bias, which could prove to be difficult if the coach is the line manager of

the coachee and topics under discussion are sensitive or close to the coach's own experiences. Also, coaches must be able to interpret where the boundaries are for discussing a coachee's emotional 'triggers', and key to this will be their ability to perceive and understand their coachee's emotions. By taking them into uncomfortable territory too soon or too regularly could jeopardise the coaching relationship, as the coachee will feel reluctant to 'open up' and share their feelings with their coach. Coaching conversations of this nature should be handled with care, to avoid further setbacks or a reluctance to have open and honest conversations.

Coaching dialogues that focus on managing emotions can take a similar approach to strengths-based coaching, where personality tools are used to facilitate the initial discussions. From using personality tools that measure an individual's understanding of their own emotions and resilience levels, coaches can initiate dialogues with their coachees that discuss the following key areas:

- Understanding the emotions that the coachee feels regularly and rarely, and how these impact upon their work and performance.
- Situations/tasks where the coachee feels most optimistic and resilient, and delving into why this may be the case.
- How and where the most positive emotions are apparent, and how these can be applied more regularly in the coachee's role.
- Exploring how the coachee can develop their resilience, by challenging their negative emotions and reframing their irrelevant or negative thoughts.
- Setting realistic goals for the coachee that helps them to manage their emotions in their role.

To facilitate these discussions the coach can draw upon personality tools that measure intrapersonal intelligence, optimism and resilience. A combination of tools may be an effective approach, as key emotional themes

are extracted from the tools that can assist the coachee in understanding their emotions further.

Regular coaching sessions can help the coachee to reflect on their agreed actions in a supportive environment. The coach can assist the coachee in exploring the areas that worked well and how they might improve on the areas that were less successful in future action plans. By improving their work performance through successfully managing their emotions and building their resilience, individuals will obtain greater rewards from their work and will become more engaged within it.

Aligning purpose

The final individual level driver of employee engagement is called 'Aligning Purpose'. This relates to how well the individual's values align to the work that they do and the values and culture of their organisation. At the individual level, values can be defined as underlying dispositions that drive behaviour (Hyde & Williamson, 2000), and the research into this area has highlighted both individual and organisational benefits where the employee's values are aligned to the organisation's values.

At the organisational level, research suggests that high alignment of individual and organisational values leads to enhanced business performance, including employee commitment, competitive advantage and efficient responses to crises (Dearlove & Coomber, 1999). Although, more relevant to the individual level drivers of engagement, research from Posner et al. (1985) demonstrated that shared values between the employee and the organisation resulted in personal feelings of success, organisational commitment, self confidence and ethical behaviour. This research also demonstrated higher levels of stress in employees whose values were not aligned with those of the organisation.

In order to ensure employees internalise the individual level drivers of engagement, coaches must not only focus on getting them

to manage their emotions and play to their strengths but they must also identify the areas where the individual's values align closely to the work that they do. The coach must ask questions to the coachee that help them identify and understand their underlying values, questions such as: What motivates them?; What do they feel passionate about?; What's important to them?; and, What will they never compromise on? As with the first two individual level drivers of engagement, these discussions can be assisted by using an objective measure of an individual's values, including discovering their motives and preferences, and aligning these to the values of the organisation. The outputs of such personality tools can help the coachee to clarify what their working preferences may be, and how these are driven by their underlying motives and values.

Once the values, motives and preferences of the coachee have been identified, the coach can then help them to explore where they feel most aligned to their values in their work. Which parts of their job mean the most to the coachee, and why? The coach can then help the coachee to consider ways in which they can maximise the amount of time they spend delivering tasks that gives them a sense of purpose, and minimise parts of their role that are not aligned to their values.

Coaches should be aware that this can be a difficult task as it is not always possible to reduce certain parts of the coachee's role that do not align with their own values. Where this is the case, the coach should assist the coachee in finding meaning in the tasks that they do. This will mean getting the coachee to think through why they are being asked to do these things, who they are helping, and ultimately what it is achieving. By getting the coachee to clearly see how they are contributing to the organisation's wider goals, and where their values align to the work that they do, they should retain a sense of purpose and find greater meaning. Ultimately, this will serve to drive an inter-

nalised engaged state, where the individual will feel confident, successful and committed to the role and the organisation.

Conclusions

The growing popularity of positive organisational practices has led to research into the organisation level drivers of employee engagement; determining what the organisation can do to engage its employees. This article has explored an alternative set of engagement drivers that have been overlooked in the literature: drivers at the individual level that lead to internalised mindsets and attitudes that foster employee engagement.

Through an extensive thematic analysis of the literature, this research has identified individual level drivers that are actionable and measurable, called Focusing Strengths, Managing Emotions and Aligning Purpose. By exploring individual strengths, facets of emotions such as intrapersonal intelligence and resilience, as well as how one's values align with their work, coaches can assist indi-

viduals in producing internalised engaged states. The use of relevant personality tools can help coachees to understand their strengths, emotions and values, and how these fit with their role and organisation. These objective measures can be integrated into a series of coaching dialogues that explore how the coachee can shape their role to further utilise their strengths, become more resilient, and find meaning in what they do. In doing so, the coachee can utilise the individual level drivers of engagement which, when combined with the organisation level drivers, could result in tangible and intangible benefits to both the individual and the organisation.

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