



## **Engagement and Wellbeing: An Integrated Model**

Chris Burton, Linda Buchan and Roland Tarleton, 2015

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'Engagement' is without doubt the flavour of the decade for organisational development and HR practitioners. With an estimated global cost of dis-engagement reaching a staggering £450 Billion per annum, amounting to £29 Billion in the UK alone, it's no wonder that it represents the holy grail of performance opportunity for organisations of all shapes and sizes.

This has in turn led to an exponential growth in "engagement consultants" keen to exploit the wave of new and innovative research in this field, all desperate to demonstrate the tangible returns on investment which have so far eluded scientific scrutiny. Whilst there may be an abundance of empirical and anecdotal evidence linking engagement with positive outcomes for both organisations (improved performance, reduced turnover, greater creativity, better commitment, enhanced customer experience etc.) and individuals (raised motivation, improved sense of fulfilment, greater happiness, positive challenge etc.) the lack of a single consistent definition of "engagement" means that many of the interventions which claim to drive improvements are not supported by measurable results.

## So what do we mean by 'engagement'?



**"A DISTINCT AND UNIQUE CONSTRUCT  
CONSISTING OF COGNITIVE, EMOTIONAL AND  
BEHAVIOURAL COMPONENTS... ASSOCIATED  
WITH INDIVIDUAL ROLE PERFORMANCE"**

Saks (2006)

Whilst there is currently no globally recognised definition of engagement, there is increasing acceptance in the academic community that engagement is a psychological state and is "*a distinct and unique construct consisting of cognitive, emotional and behavioural components...associated with individual job performance*" (Saks, 2006).

This definition helps to establish two important principles:

- That engagement is ***individual and personal*** – we're not arguing that a group can't be engaged, but we are suggesting that each individual within the group might be engaged with different things, or for different reasons. This is important as it establishes that organisations cannot build engagement at a group level, interventions must rather be focused on engaging every individual within the group.
- That engaged people make an ***emotional, cognitive and physical commitment to their work*** – in other words they commit to their work on more than one level.

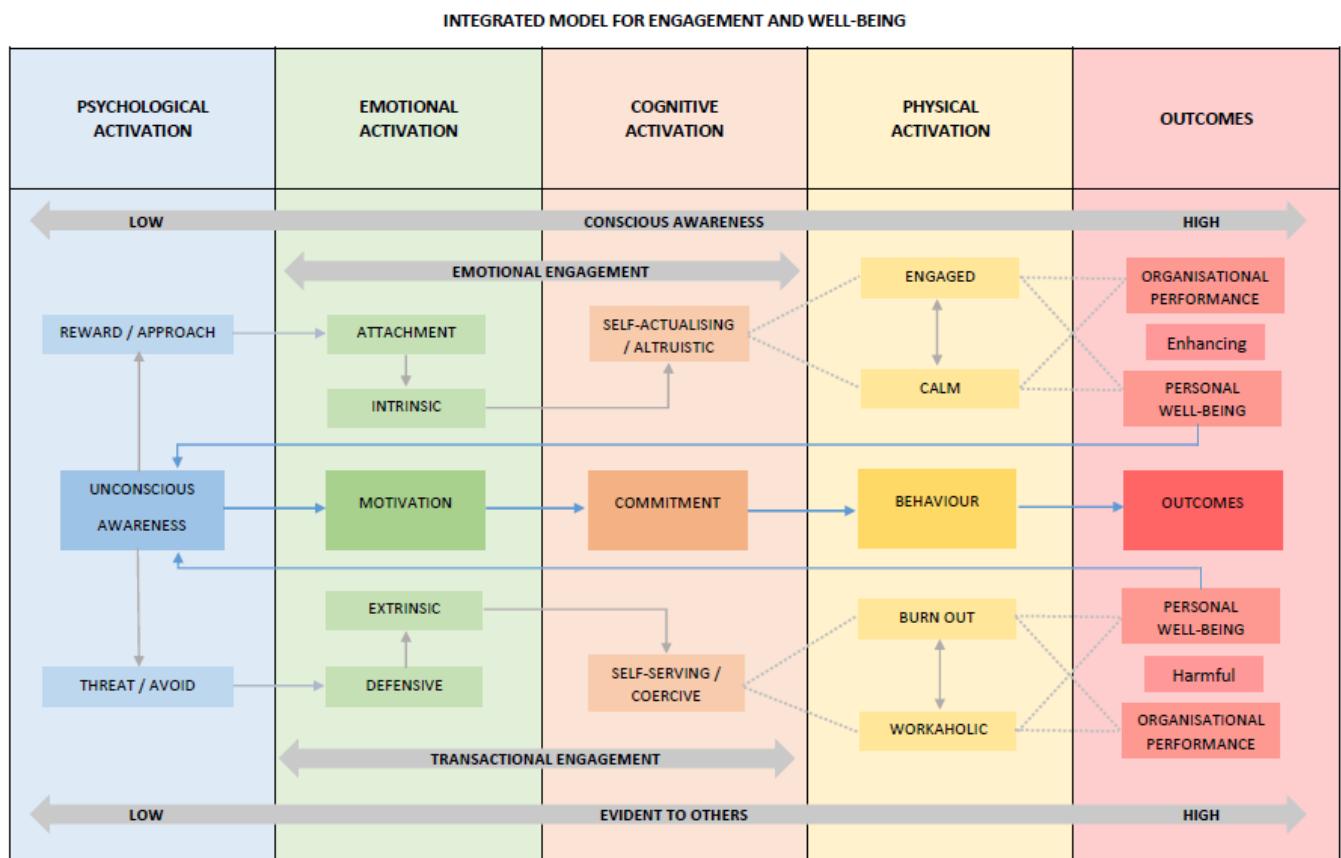
This definition also implies that, through association with individual job performance, engagement should have specific benefits to organisational interests. Therefore, we will argue that although people may be engaged with (or committed to) something, unless the focus of that engagement is

aligned with organisational intent and adds value as such, then some engagement (or commitment) may actually be detrimental to organisational interests. We believe that more than representing a psychological state in its own right, engagement depends on a positive psychological activation as an antecedent to the emotional, cognitive and behavioural processes which follow. Therefore, without the psychological activation a state of 'full engagement' (Robertson and Cooper, 2009) is unlikely.

Additionally, we believe that the drivers of engagement are perfectly aligned with, and support, a conceptual framework for psychological and physical well-being in the workplace and that one cannot therefore be addressed without the other. In other words, engagement contributes to well-being and vice versa.

Finally, we propose an extended model of 'locus of engagement' which shows that individuals can be engaged with (or committed to) different things at different times (we identify six discrete loci of engagement) and that not all engagement (or commitment) is necessarily beneficial to the organisation.

Based on the above principles, this paper proposes an integrated model which considers the state of engagement as a multi-faceted progressive process beginning in an individual's unconscious state. This leads to the conclusion that the current efforts to build engagement may start from the wrong place; current interventions typically address motivational or behavioural states whereas evidence arising from recent advances in neuro science suggest the seeds of engagement (and therefore well-being) are sown at a much deeper and earlier state of consciousness.



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## Psychological Activation

Neuroscientist Evian Gordon proposes that perhaps the most fundamental organising principle of the brain is to minimise threat and maximise reward; the same principle which initiates our ‘fight or flight’ response (Gordon 2008). This deep-rooted psychological survival mechanism is described by David Rock as an ‘approach/avoid’ response i.e. we will approach anything that our brain perceives as a reward and avoid anything which presents a perceived threat. To our unconscious, the perceived threats encountered in a modern organisation are no less real than the threat of a sabre-tooth tiger was to our prehistoric ancestors. And we react accordingly.

Rock summarises a wide range of neuroscience findings to identify five domains which trigger our approach / avoid response, often at an unconscious level:

**Status** – our perceived relative importance to others

**Certainty** – being able to predict the future (even the immediate future)

**Autonomy** – our personal sense of control over events

**Relatedness** – the sense of safety we get from being with familiar people (people like ‘us’)

**Fairness** – our perception of fair exchanges between ourselves and others

We’ll explore each of these domains as described by Rock, and their relevance in modern organisations, in the following sections:

In his 2008 article, Rock suggests that the unconscious neural response to threat and reward influences the extent to which we will engage with (or avoid) the external stimulus. Furthermore, the chemicals released by our brain when we experience reward (dopamine, oxytocin, serotonin) provoke feelings of happiness, well-being and a willingness to cooperate with others whilst the chemicals associated with threat (cortisol and adrenaline) may protect our immediate survival but have a long-lasting and significantly damaging effect on our health and longevity. Researcher Michael Marmot has gone so far as to suggest that **status** is the most significant single determinant of human longevity and health, even when controlling for education and income. This finding is supported by Sapolski’s work with primates (Sapolski, 2002) which found that in primate communities, higher status monkeys have lower baseline levels of cortisol, live longer and remain healthier. In an organisational context, status threats present in many different shapes and forms and are not always related to rank or position; for example, the way in which feedback is delivered by a peer, or behaviour in meetings could both potentially activate a status threat which may impact future performance and outcomes.

There has been considerable research into the importance of **relatedness** and to some extent we might argue that despite the impact of status as an approach / avoid domain, relatedness is at least of equal importance to most people; there are many examples of the damage caused by isolation. Some of the early research into intrinsic motivation by Edward Deci (1995) identifies “relatedness” as a main driver, and more recently research into the neuroscience of trust by Paul Zak identifies the

“WE PROPOSE THAT ENGAGED EMPLOYEES ARE EXPERIENCING HIGH LEVELS OF POSITIVE REWARDS IN THE SCARF DOMAINS, AND THAT DISENGAGED EMPLOYEES ARE EXPERIENCING HIGH LEVELS OF THREATS IN THE SCARF DOMAINS”

Rock, D. and Tang, Y. (2009)  
The Neuroscience of Engagement

importance of oxytocin, a neurotransmitter produced in circumstances where an individual feels a sense of “closeness” and “safety”. This supports results from Edelman; their international “trust barometer” consistently shows “people like me” as scoring in the top quartile of groups we trust the most.

In modern organisations where the environment is often described as “VUCA” (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous), some might argue that **certainty** is less achievable. Our own view, supported by David McLain (2015) and is that certainty is not always a desirable state, particularly where it constrains curiosity and creativity. McLain’s research has shown that each of us has an inherent level of “ambiguity tolerance” and that for most of us, ambiguity without threat is both pleasurable and stimulating; a good psychological thriller or murder mystery which keeps us guessing with twist after twist right to the end are examples of ambiguity enjoyed by most people. Most of us don’t require certainty in order to operate at our best and when organisations create too much certainty they close down other possibilities. Certainty can also be boring, particularly for those with a higher ambiguity tolerance. We therefore propose that **transparency** (or lack of) is more likely to be implicated in the activation of an approach / avoid response. Most of us can tolerate ambiguity if we are firstly aware of it, and secondly we can assess any associated risk. This is particularly true between individuals, where transparency of intent is an important foundation of trust (Covey, 2006 and Kohn, 2008). Most theories of goal motivation involve a level of challenge in order for individuals (and teams) to deliver their best performance; challenge implies a lack of certainty. We therefore propose that for modern organisations, certainty is unnecessary and may even be undesirable; what people need is transparency of situational context (in order that risk can be assessed), individual motives (in order that intent can be judged) or both.

Most definitions of **autonomy** imply self-determination, freedom and independence and in an organisational context it is often associated with empowerment. Unfortunately, that often translates into a lack of support or guidance. Studies show that different individuals have different needs for autonomy; employee satisfaction can be reduced by too much autonomy just as easily as it can be through lack of autonomy. For most people, the level of desired autonomy is dependent on the task, the situation and their own level of comfort / experience. There is also a link to **transparency** as described above; the need for or acceptance of autonomy is likely to be positively correlated with the perceived level of transparency relating to situation or task. Too much autonomy (as defined for most people in an organisational context) can feel like a lack of direction, which serves to increase ambiguity risk. We propose therefore that for most people, **control** (or lack of it) is a more appropriate way of describing the trigger which activates the approach / avoid response. If an individual has control, they are able to define the level of autonomy which feels right for them in any given situation. We may not always want autonomy, but if we have control, we can decide if and when it might be desirable.

In the eleventh century, St. Anselm of Canterbury argued that the will possesses two competing affinities: an affection for what is to a person’s own selfish advantage and an affection for justice. It is the second of these affinities which forms the basis of **equity theory** (Adams 1963, 1965). Equity theory is based on the principle that individuals evaluate relationships with others in terms of the rewards (outcomes) relative to effort (inputs). Where the input : outcome comparison is perceived to be unequal, then inequity exists. The greater the level of inequity the more distress it will create; a sense of “over reward” being just as distressing as a sense of “under reward”, and the harder an individual will work in order to restore balance. Equality restoration techniques include altering or cognitively distorting the inputs or outcomes, changing the comparison, or ending the relationship – none of which would support high levels of engagement. Unfortunately for David Rock, had he stuck

with “equity” rather than “fairness” we would be discussing the “SCARE” domains which might be seen as having an unhelpful association to a threat response rather than an approach response..! For our purposes, whilst we don’t have any issue with the need for “fairness”, we prefer to stick with “equity” as it has a well-established definition based on many years of scientific research and study and is therefore less open to challenge. Notwithstanding this position, recent research suggests that “equity sensitivity” differs between individuals (Huseman, Hatfield, & Miles, 1987) in much the same way as we each have a distinct level of ambiguity tolerance. This must be taken into account in determining the relative impact of equity based activation events (AE).

Finally, we propose that there is one critical approach / avoid domain missing from the SCARF model described by Rock. Much of the recent research into intrinsic motivation demonstrates the positive emotional response arising from the ability to make progress, or move forward with something that’s perceived as important. The Progress Principle (Amabile & Kramer, 2011) shows that even relatively small amounts of progress can result in disproportionately large improvements to emotional state and therefore to intrinsic motivation. Carol Dweck’s (2007) work shows how a growth mind-set, which focuses on trying new things even at the risk of failure, leads to success and higher levels of performance. The innate need for “mastery” is described by both Edward Deci and Dan Pink as being fundamental to intrinsic motivation, which again aligns with the notion that people have a need to be able to “move forward”, “grow”, or “make progress”. When this need is constrained it can cause frustration, anxiety and dissatisfaction, ultimately leading to stress and disengagement. This would be particularly true where an individual already has a high level of work-related motivation; if they are immersed in their work (in a state of “flow”) and become constrained somehow from making progress, then this would activate a threat response similar to any of the other domains described above. Similarly, an individual who desires to make personal progress in something they hold important e.g. mastery of a particular skill, may also experience a threat response if they find they are prevented from moving forward.

The video gaming industry has long recognised the power of the brain’s reward mechanism in keeping players engaged with their games, and have successfully exploited it. By constructing games in multiple levels, each level presenting new and more difficult challenges, the game manufacturers reward progress regularly. Each time a player completes a level or overcomes a challenge, the reward centres of their brain fire up and release a burst of dopamine encouraging the player to push forward to the next level(s). The reward for making a small amount of progress, even in something as unimportant as a video game, can become so addictive that players will spend hours (or even days) in front of their console.

For this reason, we propose adding **advancement** as an additional but no less important approach / avoid trigger. We have chosen this word carefully because it encompasses elements of achievement, growth and making progress, all of which have been shown to be important in motivation and engagement.

## REACTS – A model for Psychological Activation

Understanding what triggers might activate our approach / avoid response suggests that for organisations to build engagement they must activate the reward circuitry in the brain to create a positive psychological state which will form the basis for motivated, engaged individuals who choose to contribute positively to organisational performance. It also follows that any activation of the threat circuitry will result in a psychological state which inhibits any likelihood of engagement.

Some of the domains described above which might lead to an Activation Event (AE) have been shown to vary between individuals and it would therefore follow that organisations would also need to understand an individual's level of (for example) ambiguity tolerance or equality sensitivity in order to predict the extent to which that individual might be activated positively or negatively by any specific reward or threat.

We propose the following model for understanding the primary causes of, and responses to, Activate Events:

**Relatedness** – the sense of safety and security we get from being with “people like me”.

**Equity** – our perception that we are fairly rewarded for our efforts relative to others.

**Advancement** – our ability to achieve, grow or make progress in something we perceive as important.

**Control** – the extent to which we feel we can personally influence circumstances and events.

**Transparency** – being able to assess situational risk and intent in order to deal positively with ambiguity.

**Status** – our perceived relative importance to others

When a person (or group) is immersed in work, which they find motivating and rewarding, we might describe them as being in a state of “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). With an appropriate level of challenge, they are likely to remain in this state until they encounter an Activation Event (AE) arising from either a perceived reward or a perceived threat to one of the REACTS domains. The initial approach / avoid response is automatic and subconscious however, the emotional reaction follows almost immediately and can be felt consciously. An example of this would be the discomfort we might experience walking alone down a dark lane, late at night. We may find difficulty in describing exactly what's activating our threat response but the emotion it provokes, ‘fear’, is very real to us.

We will deal more with the consequences on these Activation Events as they relate to work-related engagement in a future section but firstly it might be helpful to understand the nature of our emotional response.

## Emotional Activation

According to the much cited work on Emotional Intelligence by Daniel Goleman, there are eight basic emotions (the prime colours of the emotional landscape): Five defensive emotions of **fear, anger, disgust, shame and sadness**, two positive, attachment emotions of **joy/excitement and trust/love** and one ‘potentiator’, **surprise** which can trigger a switch from the defensive to the attachment emotions or vice versa.

Research has shown that the positive psychological state activated by an approach response, as described above, will lead to one of the attachment emotions whilst not surprisingly the defensive emotions are activated by our threat response. A state of intrinsic motivation (Deci, 1995) is dependent on a positive emotional state; we will be intrinsically motivated to engage with something which activates our internal reward mechanism. In order to engage with something once our threat response has been activated, we'll require an extrinsic motivator to provide the ‘push’ needed to overcome the fight or flight response.

The most common extrinsic motivator in an organisational context is of course money which is often used to encourage people to do things they aren't otherwise inclined towards. When intrinsic motivation is missing, money is also the reason many people give for their dis-satisfaction e.g. “I'm not being paid enough for this...” The extrinsic motivation is transactional by nature; i.e. the motivating effect lasts only as long as the motivator is in place whilst intrinsic motivation forms the basis of long term positive emotional engagement.

This concept of transactional and emotional engagement was introduced and discussed in the CIPD Research Insight; ***Emotional or Transactional Engagement – does it matter?*** (May 2012).

There is growing evidence that all emotions are evolutionarily adaptive; i.e. they have a role in natural selection and survival. It was originally believed that only negative emotions (fear, anger, disgust etc.) had specific action tendencies associated with them (Frijda, 1986); e.g. fear is linked with the urge to escape, anger with the urge to fight and disgust with the urge to expel.

## A State of Flow

Positive emotions contribute to achieving a state of “flow” (Csikszentmihayli 1990) where an individual is fully absorbed in their work and perceives a task as being intrinsically motivating, aligning perfectly with our earlier definition of engagement.

The ‘happy’ chemicals released by the brain enhance our feelings of well-being. For example; the emotion of trust causes a release of oxytocin which causes us to feel positive resulting on more open, collaborative behaviour.

Distrust on the other hand results in a threat response which causes the release of cortisol, reducing blood flow to the higher executive brain functions, making us feel stressed and suppressing our immune system.

When these emotions are experienced the body reacts by mobilising the autonomic support necessary for the most appropriate action; increased blood flow to muscles, increased heart-rate, increased adrenaline and cortisol. Exposure to these emotions has been shown to inhibit cognitive process and narrow behavioural options as well as being detrimental to health in the long term.

More recently, it has been proposed that positive emotions such as joy, interest, pride and love also have associated specific action tendencies (Fredrickson, 2001) and that they all share the ability to broaden people's momentary thought-action repertoires and build their enduring personal resources, ranging from physical and intellectual resources to social and psychological resources. In other words, the brain's response to positive emotions is to broaden our thinking, bringing more options to mind and extending the range of our behavioural response – we become more creative, more curious, more collaborative, better at solving problems and generally more successful. We are more inclined to 'engage' with the stimulus creating the emotion in the first place.

## THE BROADEN AND BUILD THEORY OF POSITIVE EMOTIONS

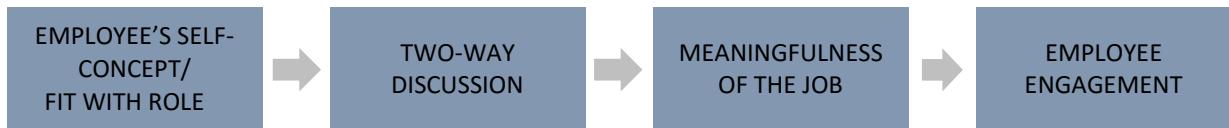
THE THEORY SUGGESTS THAT POSITIVE EMOTIONS, ALTHOUGH FLEETING ALSO  
HAVE MORE LONG LASTING CONSEQUENCES... POSITIVE EMOTIONS ARE  
VEHICLES FOR INDIVIDUAL GROWTH AND SOCIAL CONNECTION: BY BUILDING  
PEOPLE'S PERSONAL AND SOCIAL RESOURCES POSITIVE EMOTIONS  
TRANSFORM PEOPLE FOR THE BETTER, BUILDING PSYCHOLOGICAL RESILIENCE  
AND GIVING THEM BETTER LIVES IN THE FUTURE.

Fredrickson, 2001

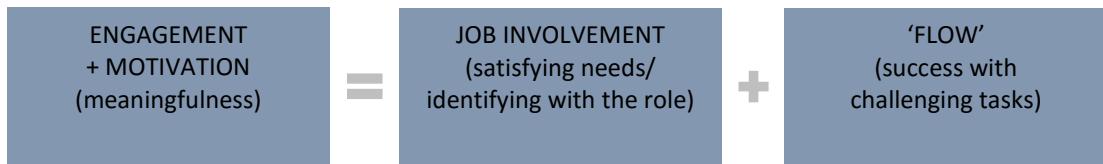
So far we've shown that a positive psychological state is a pre-cursor to a positive emotional state leading in turn to intrinsic motivation (the brain's way of encouraging us to do more of something because it makes us feel good). Conversely, a negative psychological state will provoke one of the defence emotions under which state we will require a strong extrinsic motivator in order to push us to behave in a way that is naturally less rewarding (or punishing). It is the rationalisation of these emotional states (how we make sense of our feelings) that then encourages us to behave in a particular way.

## What motivation theory tells us about creating a state of flow

According to the Kingston Report (Kerstin et al, 2010), meaningfulness is ‘the most important driver of engagement for all employee groups’ (p.24). Research by May et al (2004) shows that meaningfulness depends primarily on the fit between self-concept and the role, so the implication is that this should form the basis of two-way exchanges between line managers and their staff – it’s a very direct way of creating the right environment to foster engagement.



So how to measure self-concept relating to work? The relevance of intrinsic motivation has been noted by numerous researchers. For example, Chalofsky (2003) refers to the continuing importance of traditional theories of work motivation in emphasizing the centrality of the job itself as a source of meaning in the workplace. Similarly, May et al also explain that engagement is most closely associated with job involvement (Brown, 1996) and ‘flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Job involvement results from ‘the need satisfying abilities of the job’ and ‘the degree to which the job situation is central to the person and his or her identity’ (Lawler & Hall, 1970), and flow is defined in terms of successful experience with challenging tasks.



In fact, the common theme running through decades of research on intrinsic motivation is *identifying with the nature of the task* and *encountering appropriate challenge*, or put more simply, *what you want to do* (satisfying needs) and *how you want to do it* (the goals you will set yourself). Together they represent self-concept relating to work – basically, seeing the job as what you should be doing.

## How to assess work motivation

The evidence from modern day neuroscience relating to unconscious triggering of our approach / avoid response is particularly intriguing when viewed in conjunction with the work of motivation theorists dating back to the 1930s. For example, the pioneering work of Henry Murray (1938) proposed that motivational drivers often lie dormant within the individual until ‘fired up’ by an appropriate environmental trigger. Hence people high in achievement motivation may produce only mediocre performance in college exams, but in the longer term work environment they will outperform others of equal ability when presented with a realistic challenge. People low in achievement motivation will either choose less challenging situations or much more challenging situations where there is little chance of success in order to avoid blame for failure.

Attempts at assessing motivation began with asking people to write stories about ambiguous pictures into which they would ‘project’ their unconscious drivers, but increasingly sophisticated psychometrics can achieve the same objective by presenting respondents with questionnaire items that are quite different from the implications of their scores. Tapping into unconscious drivers this way makes it possible to define the kind of work situation in which the individual will identify with the nature of the task (relating to needs) and encounter appropriate challenge (relating to goals). The output from this assessment can then be used to activate reward circuitry in the brain by aligning what employees want from the work situation with what the organization requires – their intrinsic drivers are made conscious through the positive experience of ‘being where you want to be’.

Factor analysing the ‘big three needs’ (Achievement, Affiliation, Power) produces seven needs to indicate what is most important to individuals in the work situation (what they want to do). Each of these has some bearing on the importance an employee will attach to the REACTS domains:

**Achievement** – controlling own area of expertise (Control)

**Independence** – finding own best way of doing things (Relatedness less important)

**Structure** – having a framework within which to operate (Transparency)

**Affiliation** – gaining other people’s views (Relatedness)

**Systems Power** – getting involved in broad ranging activities (Transparency less important)

**People Power** – making good use of others (Status)

**Personal Power** – having a position of authority and influence (Status)

Assessing the way individuals like to operate (how they want to do it) involves three fundamental dimensions of career striving relating to the goals they will set themselves. These also have bearing on the importance an employee will attach to the REACTS domains:

**Getting things moving** (short-term striving) – confident vs careful (Transparency)

**Delivery** (medium-term striving) – goal-focused vs cautious (Control)

**Personal success** (general orientation) – delving into new areas vs consolidating (Advancement)

Assessing REACTS domains in conjunction with these dimensions, a clear picture emerges of how employees are likely to respond to activation events. For example, rating Relatedness as an important factor may be combined with rating Affiliation as less important than having a specialist role (Achievement dimension) and the opportunity to manage other people (People Power). Considering all factors together therefore helps to predict exactly what employees need from the work situation in order to stay in flow.

*Between stimulus and response lies a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom... Forces beyond your control can take away everything you possess except one thing, your freedom to choose how you will respond to the situation. Victor Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning*

## Cognitive Activation

Although we may not always be fully aware of it, our decisions and actions are determined by the way in which we interpret, or make sense of, how we feel about things. Let's look at that in action:

If I'm given a task which activates my brain's reward mechanism (for example by enhancing my perception of my status), I feel instantly more emotionally positive and naturally drawn (intrinsically motivated) to the work. The internal rationalisation (if I was aware of it) would go something like – "I feel really good about this; it makes me feel important and the more I do the better I feel. I should do more..." If however I'm given a task that activates my brain's threat response (for example I might believe the objectives aren't clear which might make success uncertain), I'll experience one of the defence emotions (I may be angry or fearful at the lack of transparency) and my behaviour would be based on my instinct for survival. If however I'm paid a large sum of money to complete the task the rationalisation might go something like – "I don't really like this, it feels very risky but hey, I'm being paid a load of cash to do it so I might as well give it a go".

Under these circumstances my survival instinct is still primed; I'm on the lookout for danger and I'll proceed cautiously. I'm not really committed to the task, so I'll only do what has to be done in order to earn the money which is the only thing motivating me to continue. Remove the money and you remove my commitment... I may of course have other non-financial reasons for committing to something in an otherwise threatening environment, but these are likely to be ***self-serving*** rather than ***self-actualising*** (Corbett & Salvato, 2004).

So cognitive activation is the point at which an individual makes a (usually) conscious decision to behave in a particular way; they make the choice whether to engage or disengage with something. If they're in a positive state, intrinsically motivated by their work then that's what they'll engage with however if they're in a negative state extrinsically motivated by money (for example), then it's really the money they're committing to or engaging with.

## Locus of Engagement

Our own research in this area has caused us to conclude that, assuming a positive psychological and emotional state, there are six things that an individual can engage with (or commit to) each of which represents a separate 'locus' of engagement:

1. Their **Work** – this is the focus of much of the research into engagement.
2. Their **Colleagues**
3. **External Agencies** – this could include partners, clients, customers, suppliers etc.
4. A **Greater Cause** or 'meaning' or 'purpose'. This could include a single change or programme of change.
5. Their **Line Manager**
6. The **Organisation** as a whole which might include senior leadership, vision, values and purpose.

In the ideal situation, the organisation benefits most when commitment (or engagement) is balanced across all six loci; in such circumstances an individual thinks and feels positively about each separate locus and makes a conscious decision to engage or commit openly with each.

Our research has shown however that under certain circumstances an imbalance across these six loci, or an overemphasis on a single locus can actually be detrimental to the organisation, even although it may appear (using traditional measures) that individuals are still 'engaged'.

## Physical Activation

Whilst engagement, or commitment (to something) is a cognitive, internal and personal decision, it is manifested in the workplace through behaviour. So the conscious decision of an individual to engage, be neutral or to actively dis-engage from work is played out through their consequent behaviour which can be either beneficial, or harmful, to the organisation. Individual behaviour is determined by the psychological, emotional and cognitive states which precede action, and by the locus of any commitment arising from these states. Where the preceding states are positive and balanced across a number of loci this is likely to lead to engagement beneficial to both the organisation and the individual concerned. Where the preceding states are negative however, or where the locus of engagement is imbalanced, we are likely to see behaviours which are detrimental to the organisation. In such circumstances the outcomes are also far less predictable.

For example, imagine a charity or voluntary organisation where the focus of an individual employee's commitment is to a 'greater cause'. Such people are driven by strong value systems and the organisation is often no more than an instrument through which they can serve the purpose they believe in. As long as they perceive the organisation's purpose as being aligned with their own, they will appear committed to the organisation which employs them. However, if at any time they perceive the organisation to be in conflict with their own commitment, then they are likely to (consciously or unconsciously) work against the organisation's intent. This has been felt by many so called third sector organisations since the financial crisis of 2008 drove an increased need for commercialisation of operations. The need to operate as a 'business' conflicts with individual beliefs about how to best serve the 'greater cause' resulting in a resistance to the changes that need to be made, even though not making those changes threatens the very existence of the organisation.

Another example might be where an employee receives their psychological and emotional nourishment (and therefore their intrinsic motivation) from a source outside their own organisation (an External Agency). This is not uncommon with sales staff or more senior Account Directors who spend more time with their client than they do with their own employer. If the commitment to the external agency is sufficiently strong, then there is a likelihood that the individual will weigh decisions in favour of the external agency, to the detriment of their own organisation. Such people are often said to have 'gone native'.

## Fire & Rescue Service Case Study

In 2015 we completed a study with one of the UK's Fire and Rescue Services where we also witnessed this effect in action.

Data collected through survey, focus groups and interviews showed a high level of individual commitment to both Greater Cause (keeping people safe and putting out fires) and to Colleagues (people like me; in this case my immediate team).

The result was a culture which felt almost tribal in nature with relatively small groups working closely and extremely effectively together; strong bonds built on high levels of trust, all focused around a common sense of purpose. Any attempt by the organisation to restructure the teams or re-define job role was perceived as a threat and was resisted both overtly but also in more subtle ways.

The consequence was an apparent resistance to change which undermined the organisation's strategic objectives and which frustrated senior leaders. By traditional measures, people appeared 'engaged' however their behaviour demonstrated a reluctance to work in the organisation's best interests.

Time and again we've witnessed this 'dark side' of engagement play out in reality; where there is an over focus on one particular locus and where that focus reaches a tipping point, it can very quickly shift any benefits away from the organisation in favour of something else, possibly to the significant detriment of the parent organisation.

What we're describing in the above sections is a fairly logical progression down a positive or negative sequence of psychological triggers, emotional responses, cognitive processes and subsequent action. Where the progression is positive then behaviours associated with 'engagement' naturally follow and this is likely to be in the best interests of the organisation and the individual. However, the opposite is also true; dis-engagement is predicated on triggers which initiate a defensive, extrinsically motivated response. It's easy to see how the resulting behaviour can detrimentally affect not only the performance of the organisation, but may also have a real and lasting impact on both the psychological and physical well-being of the individual.

## Outcomes

An interesting and relatively recent development has been the increase in focus directed at improving employee well-being rather than trying to build engagement; there appears to have been a recognition that many of the organisational benefits associated with engagement actually arise from the personal benefits to individual health and well-being (reduced absence, greater resilience, improved health and lower stress). There is however increasing evidence which demonstrates there's no need to consider the two outcomes independently of each other (engagement and well-being), indeed it is probably detrimental to do so.

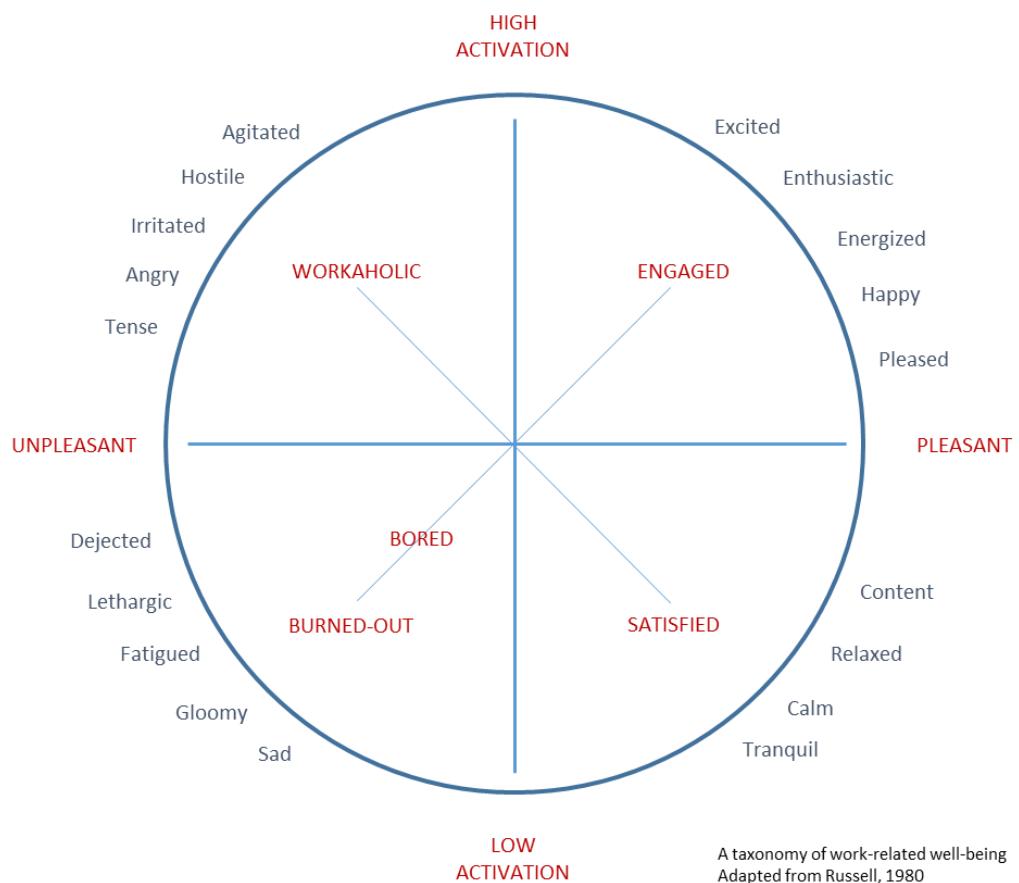


**"THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EMPLOYEE HEALTH AND EMPLOYEE COMMITMENT AND ENGAGEMENT IS MULTI-FACETED. INDEED THERE IS RESEARCH EVIDENCE THAT SUGGESTS A TWO WAY, POSSIBLY SELF-REINFORCING RELATIONSHIP; HEALTHY EMPLOYEES ARE MORE COMMITTED AND MORE COMMITTED EMPLOYEES ARE MORE HEALTHY"**

Bevan 2010

Whilst we can state that the same psychological, emotional and cognitive antecedents which underpin engagement, also provide the basis for personal health and well-being, it is still important to remember that the outcomes are different. Healthy employees are undoubtedly good for an organisations performance but some of the behaviours associated with engagement do not arise from good health alone (e.g. creativity and collaboration). In other words, whilst the foundations of engagement and well-being are the same, additional consideration must be given in order to achieve the full benefits associated with engagement. I can be healthy, but not engaged.

In A *Circumplex Model of Affect*, Russell (1980) defines a bi-polar taxonomy of emotional states which has more recently been applied to the working environment to describe the full extent of work-related well-being (Schaufeli, 2014). The model helps to explain why positive emotions lead to engagement whilst negative emotions lead to workaholism and burn-out. The actual behaviours presented by someone who's engaged versus someone who is a workaholic might at first glance appear similar (they both appear committed and hard-working) however the motivations and outcomes will be very different. In the case of engagement, motivation will always be intrinsic and based on the psychological positivity necessary for health and well-being, whilst a workaholic will be extrinsically motivated and coping with negative (defence) emotions and psychological threats.



*"The growing currency of engagement has generated a large number of studies from academics, consultancies, and organisations that look at the impact of high levels of engagement on outcomes for the business or organisation. This research, together with anecdotal evidence, exists across a wide range of industries and suggests there is a strong story to be told about the link between employee engagement and positive outcomes. In particular, there are a number of studies that demonstrate that private sector organisations with higher levels of employee engagement have better financial performance, and high levels of engagement are associated with better outcomes in the public sector."* Engaging for Success (The MacLeod Report), 2009

## Positive Outcomes arising from a state of Engagement

In the table below we've listed some of the more commonly quoted positive organisational outcomes arising from high levels of engagement. These are based on scientific and empirical studies, many of which have been independently carried out over a significant time-period. We've also listed in the same table the personal outcomes associated with the psychological and emotional states necessary for engagement to exist.

Organisational Performance	Personal Well-being
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lower absenteeism</li> <li>• Higher employee retention</li> <li>• Improved quality and reduced errors</li> <li>• Increased employee effort and productivity</li> <li>• Increased sales</li> <li>• Higher profitability, earning per share and shareholder returns</li> <li>• Enhanced customer satisfaction and loyalty</li> <li>• Faster business growth</li> <li>• Greater flexibility and adaptability</li> <li>• Greater organisational resilience</li> <li>• Higher levels of safety</li> <li>• Better collaboration</li> <li>• Higher levels of commitment</li> <li>• Improved creativity and innovation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lower stress</li> <li>• Greater personal resilience</li> <li>• Job satisfaction</li> <li>• Greater sense of happiness</li> <li>• Contentment</li> <li>• Better psychological and physical health</li> <li>• Healthier / less illness</li> <li>• Longer life</li> <li>• Improved family and social context</li> </ul>

CIPD guidance suggests that “*engagement is important for performance but that it unlikely to be sustainable unless it goes hand in hand with well-being*”.

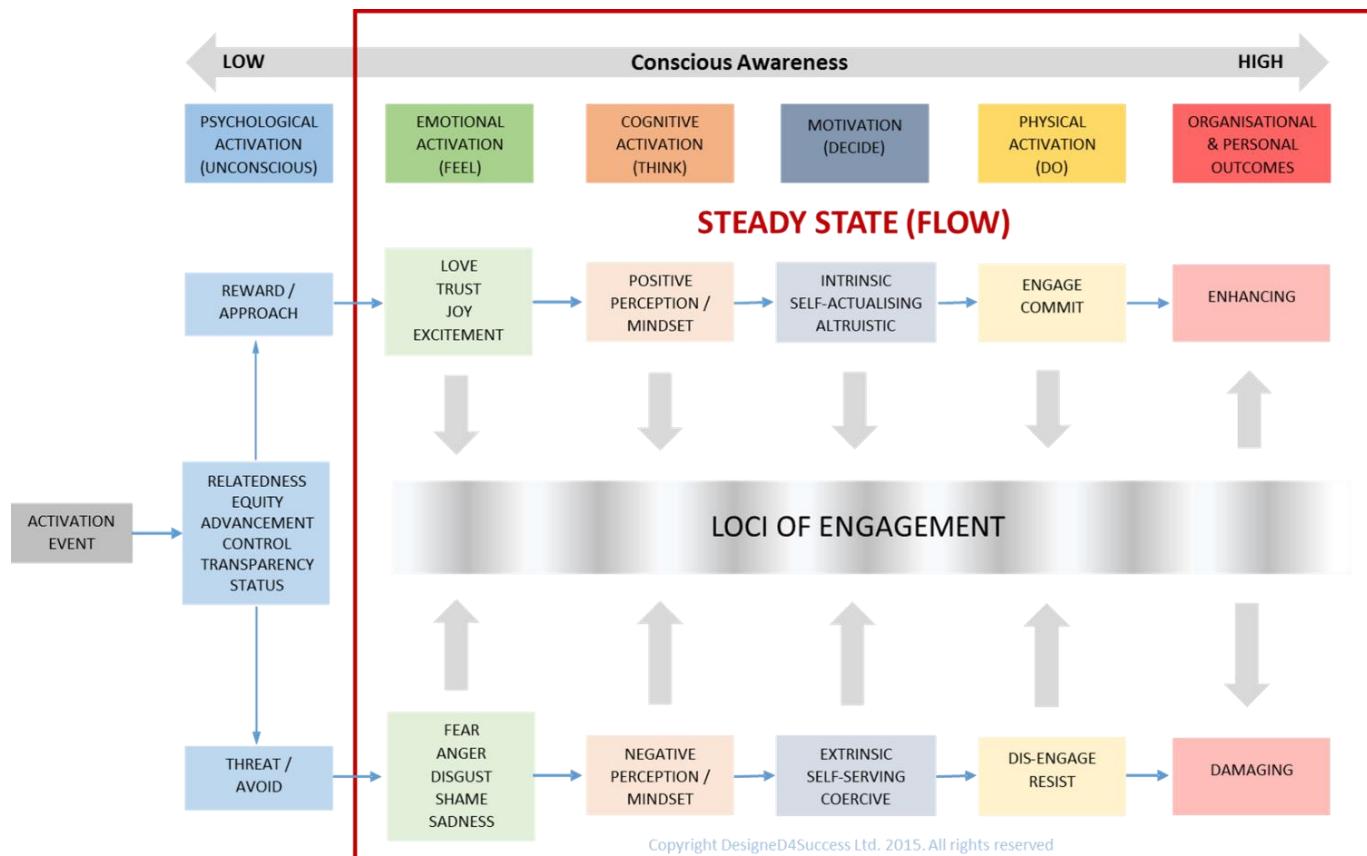
In our integrated model the link between engagement and well-being is rooted in a positive psychological state; there is now a significant body of evidence suggesting that this is the only state in which real engagement can exist, and that it is also critical to psychological and physical well-being. It is no longer sufficient to view engagement as **being** a positive psychological state, it must be preceded by events or circumstances which initiate the reward circuitry in the brain encouraging the “approach” response which leads ultimately to full engagement. Although this positive psychological state may at first be unconscious, it provokes a range of positive “attachment” emotions which broaden both cognitive and behavioural options and which are critical for engagement.

We also now understand that people can engage with different things and for different reasons leading us to conclude that traditional methods of building engagement will ultimately fail to deliver their promised results. You may already have experienced this in your own organisation; an engagement “programme” initiated for all the right reasons and which seems to be doing all the right things, fails to deliver the expected outcomes. We’re not arguing that some of the interventions associated with ‘engagement programmes’ won’t have value in their own right, however they won’t necessarily build the levels of engagement that they set out to achieve, or do so in a sustainable manner.

## The Personal Response to Activation Events

Our research suggests that our response to “Activation Events” will determine the extent to which we either engage or disengage with whatever initiates the approach/avoid response (the locus of engagement); this response will be both individual and personal but is dictated by millions of years of evolution. In other words, although we cannot avoid or control our initial response, we can learn to understand and control how we make sense of events, and therefore how we choose to react in the longer term. It is how we react and our subsequent behaviour that determines the outcomes for ourselves (at a personal level) and for the organisation. In modern organisations our daily lives are filled with events many of which are unexpected and out-with our control; understanding the deep psychological and emotional impact of these events on ourselves and others can help to improve outcomes associated with well-being and engagement.

This can be illustrated by refining the Integrated Model proposed earlier in this paper:



In the above model, the Activation Event initiates the subconscious psychological response that leads ultimately to an individual and personal decision (choice) to engage or dis-engage with a specific locus of engagement. This could be any of the loci proposed in previous sections, which might also include a single change (large or small), or programme of change. The model shows how a positive activation (Approach) is likely to lead to positive organisational and personal outcomes, whilst a negative activation (Avoid) will almost inevitably be harmful for both the individual and the organisation. Understanding the nature of this very human response to events, can help leaders and managers overcome some of the challenges associated with organisational life, securing better outcomes for their people and the organisations they serve.

## Implications for organisations

So what does this mean in practice? Our initial observations across several organisations suggest four primary implications for organisations trying to improve individual engagement, work-related well-being and organisational performance:

1. ***The drivers of positive engagement begin earlier than current models and interventions account for.*** This has serious implications for both how we measure engagement and how we set about building it. Traditional models largely ignore the psychological activation and therefore don't address issues which might be inhibiting engagement further down the line. You can do many things to improve job design and physical working conditions but if psychological threat mechanisms are being activated in some way (even unconsciously), it's highly unlikely that they'll help to build sustainable improvements in positive engagement. It will therefore be necessary for organisations to find a way of measuring and addressing the psychological drivers of engagement as well as the more traditional drivers.
2. ***Engagement is both personal and individual.*** This requires organisations to understand and accept that engagement "programmes" are unlikely to succeed in delivering the highest levels of engagement; they might be successful in situations where there is very low engagement initially or where there are endemic problems effecting the whole workforce, but once these have been addressed and resolved improvements will only be made by understanding and improving engagement at an individual level.
3. ***When people are positively engaged with their work, they enter a state of "flow"*** By drawing on over fifty years of research into work motivation, we have shown in this paper the ten dimensions that define self-concept relating to work (what I want to do & how I want to do it). When properly balanced for each individual, these dimensions are the most critical drivers of work-related engagement. When employees identify with the task and encounter an appropriate level of challenge, they will be "in flow" or positively engaged with their work. In order to achieve this state for each employee the organisation and its leaders must:
  - a. Understand what's important to each individual
  - b. Ensure they are in a job with which they can identify and which challenges them appropriately
  - c. Where this is not possible, make small adjustments to the tasks and/or environment in order to bring the work closer to the ideal

4. ***The organisation and its leaders need to understand what impact Activation Events may have on individuals in order to maintain them “in flow”.*** We have shown that Activation Events which negatively trigger the approach / avoid response may interrupt the state of flow, resulting in dis-engagement and detrimental consequences for the organisation and the individual. Activation Events are inevitable in modern organisations, however if leaders understand which of the REACTS domains are being activated and the extent to which they are likely to impact each individual, then they can:

- a. Where possible, prevent the Activation Event from occurring in the first place
- b. Understand the impact of different Activation Events on each individual and make appropriate adjustments
- c. Balance the impact of negative Activation Events by creating positive Activation Events for each individual. For example, for someone experiencing a status threat we could either reduce that threat, or attempt to balance it by activating a reward response in one or more of the other domains; perhaps by providing greater transparency and/or control.

We further identify two secondary implications which should be considered when trying to build engagement at an organisational level (i.e. when engagement is poor across the whole organisation):

- 5. ***Different people can be engaged with different things at different times.*** As we've discussed throughout this paper, the accepted definition of engagement is increasingly associated with task, work, or job as this is when it has most measurable benefit to the organisation. But our own research has shown that people can be engaged (or committed) to other things; we've identified six clear loci of engagement which traditional measures of engagement tend not to differentiate between; people are either engaged or dis-engaged. Only by understanding what people are actually engaged with can organisations make changes and influence behaviour in a way that has positive outcomes for both the organisation and the individuals concerned.
- 6. ***Not all “engagement” is necessarily good for the organisation in the long term.*** Whilst engagement with something other than task, work or job might produce benefits for the individual we've found that an imbalance across several loci of engagement can create tensions which result in behaviour detrimental to organisational interests. This may not be a result of a conscious choice; it may be an unconscious “defence” of whatever we're engaged with most. For example, if people are more engaged with their team rather than their work, then attempts at re-structuring may be resisted. This has consequences for how organisations approach change and further supports the need to understand where people are deriving their positive activation (their locus of engagement).

To discuss what these implications might mean for your organisation or to participate in the ongoing research programme please contact the authors at [info@designed4success.co.uk](mailto:info@designed4success.co.uk)

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