

**‘IT’S NOT ROCKET SCIENCE’: EMPLOYEES’ LIVED
EXPERIENCES AND THE ESSENCE OF EMPLOYEE
ENGAGEMENT**

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my students, past, present and future.

You are my inspiration for this journey.

May you all have the opportunity to fearlessly pursue your passions.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this dissertation is to better understand how employees perceive and experience engagement and participate in its meaning-making process. While employee engagement has been primarily explored within the business, the human resources, and management disciplines, public relations research has only recently taken an interest in furthering its understanding.

Within these disciplines, the functional perspective has dominated employee engagement research, which has potentially limited theoretical developments. In response to the current literature being inundated with a rational, functional approach, the following dissertation attempts: (1) to examine employee engagement from an array of organizational voices using phenomenological methods; (2) to examine how employees contribute to the meaning-making process of employee engagement (32 participants); and (3) to inductively understand the presence of internal communication in the reconstruction of employee engagement.

The phenomenological approach is the most appropriate methodology to study employee engagement experiences because phenomenology is concerned with what it means to feel and experience the phenomenon and uses participants' everyday lived experiences to uncover the meaning-making associated with the phenomenon.

The dissertation developed the zones of engagement, which offer a new way to conceptualize employee engagement in public relations, shifting to a deeper comprehension and understanding. The six zones of engagement include: (1) employee engagement experiences occur from non-work related experiences at work, (2) employee

engagement is freedom in the workplace, (3) employee engagement is going above and beyond roles and responsibilities, (4) employee engagement occurs when work is a vocational calling, (5) employee engagement is creating value, and (6) connections build employee engagement experiences.

The findings from this dissertation show that employee experiences align to the initial personal engagement model (Kahn, 1990). Specifically, the psychological conditions of meaningfulness and safety emerged as important factors in defining the employees' lived experiences. Also, this dissertation offers a new definition of disengagement. Last, dialogue is repositioned as the precursor to employee engagement instead of the product of engagement, suggesting a reconceptualization of a dominant public relations theory. This dissertation extends understanding of employee engagement meaning-making and provides insight for practitioners who develop public relations strategies for internal audiences.

Keywords: public relations, employee engagement, internal communication, dialogue, zones of engagement, phenomenology

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Within the field of public relations, the concept of engagement has only recently begun to be more thoroughly and systematically investigated. The 2014 special issue of *Journal of Public Relations Research* focused on different sub-disciplines of engagement, demonstrating public relations recent scholarly interest in engagement with scholars such as Taylor and Kent (2014) calling for public relations research to better refine and develop processes that move the field toward measuring engagement in general. Although employee engagement was not specifically featured in this issue, scholars have started to articulate the link between public relations, specifically internal communication, and employee engagement (e.g., Men, 2012; Ruck & Welch, 2012; Welch, 2012).

Most of the literature on employee engagement in public relations focuses on the organization as the unit of analysis, using a top-down, hierarchical approach to examine the phenomena (e.g., Karanges, Beatson, Johnston, & Lings, 2014; Karanges, Johnston, Beatson, & Lings, 2015; Men, 2012). In other words, if an organization does X then employees will be engaged. For example, studies have identified that organizational leadership and internal communication influence how employees perceive the organization, which ultimately impacts employee engagement (Men, 2012; Welch, 2011). Despite some advances in theoretical development, the phenomenon of employee engagement is still underdeveloped in terms of understanding the antecedents and

outcomes (Saks & Gruman, 2014). This could be the result of most employee engagement research in public relations and in other disciplines, including human resources and management, using a functional perspective, where employees are simply seen as a means to an organizational end. This orientation undermines the complexities associated with the phenomenon of employee engagement and communicating to internal audiences. This approach assumes a normative ideal of management and organizational processes, applying a rational lens to how the phenomenon of employee engagement operates in organizational environments.

In addition, another issue with engagement research in public relations is that employee engagement has not been considered a complex phenomenon that should be studied from the lived experience of employees to better understand how employees perceive and reconstruct their employee engagement experiences. In taking a phenomenological approach of capturing numerous organizational voices, some of the meaning-making processes associated with employee engagement are illustrated, highlighting the interplay between communication and lived experiences. The findings from this dissertation offer insights and suggestions into how internal communication practitioners can use the meaning-making of participant experiences to develop and disseminate content related to employee engagement.

Justification of the Dissertation

As previously mentioned, the functional perspective has dominated employee engagement research. Despite 25 years of research, the phenomenon is unfortunately under-theorized and definitionally challenged (Saks & Gruman, 2014). One suggested

reason for this limitation is that most research assumes an organization or management perspective and has not spent ample effort examining the phenomenon from the employees' perspective. Wollard (2015) challenges researchers to gather actual human experience data, investigating beyond forms of measurement to better understand the employee engagement experience. The employee engagement research stream mostly uses survey methods that serve as benchmarks for comparison (e.g., Jin, 2010; Men & Stacks, 2013; Wang, Tsui, & Xin, 2011). Valentine (2014) suggests that employee engagement is a localized construct, open to multiple interpretations, yet most research singularly focuses on the measurement and antecedents of the phenomenon without capturing the actual employees experience. In response to the problem of the current literature being inundated with a rational, functional approach, the following dissertation attempts: (1) to examine employee engagement from an eclectic array of organizational voices using phenomenological methods; (2) to examine how employees contribute to the meaning-making process of employee engagement; and (3) to inductively understand the presence of internal communication in the reconstruction and perceptions of employee engagement.

The phenomenological approach is the most appropriate methodology to study employee engagement experiences in a non-functionalist manner as well as non-descriptive manner. Phenomenological epistemology uses the participants' everyday lived experiences as a way to uncover the meanings and meaning-making processes associated with the phenomenon under investigation. The purpose of phenomenology is to build knowledge based on everyday life experiences (Berger & Luckmann, 1966),

which in this case would be to build knowledge from meaning associated with employee engagement experiences in the workplace. The phenomenological method approach relies on the long interview as the main form of data collection. For this dissertation, 32 participants were interviewed about their employee engagement experiences. The findings from data collection offer a complex lens in understanding employee engagement from multiple, unique perspectives and insight into how communication contributes to the construction of meaning-making processes associated with employee engagement.

Once the participant reconstructive narratives were taken and analyzed together using the gestalt approach, patterns of experience emerged from the data, which formed the zones of engagement. The result is six emergent themes or zones that illustrate the essence of employee engagement and provide a deeper comprehension and understanding. The themes include: (1) employee engagement experiences occur from non-work related experiences at work, (2) employee engagement is freedom in the workplace, (3) employee engagement is going above and beyond roles and responsibilities, (4) employee engagement occurs when work is a vocational calling, (5) employee engagement is creating value, and (6) connections build employee engagement experiences.

Through participant reconstructive narratives, it became apparent that meaning was created through communication. Communication inductively emerged from the data, which influenced how employees perceived and reconstructed the meaning associated with their employee engagement experiences. Participants suggested that employee

engagement begins with dialogic communication. The themes that inductively emerged regarding communication include: (1) dialogue exchanges create context; (2) successful dialogic exchanges require listening; (3) communication is most successful when done face-to-face. In addition to dialogue, internal communication also emerged from the data as another form of communication that constructs the meaning associated with employee engagement.

The findings from this dissertation demonstrate that employee experiences align to the initial personal engagement model proposed by Kahn (1990). The psychological conditions of meaningfulness and safety from the original employee engagement model (Kahn, 1990) emerged from the data as important factors in defining the lived experiences of employee engagement. Employee engagement is more than just job resources and is instead about employees feeling a sense of belonging within the organization. In addition, this dissertation offers a new definition of disengagement. Last, this dissertation repositions dialogue as the precursor to employee engagement instead of the product of engagement, suggesting a reconceptualization of a dominant public relations theory. This dissertation extends understanding of employee engagement meaning-making and provides insight for practitioners who develop public relations strategies for internal audiences.

Structure of the Dissertation

The following dissertation begins with an extensive review of the literature related to the phenomenon under investigation, employee engagement. The literature review chapter also includes the purpose of the dissertation and the proposed research

questions grounded in literature relevant to the phenomenon. The third chapter provides details regarding the methodological approach, phenomenology, and includes information related to sampling, data collection and data analysis. The fourth chapter includes extensive findings derived from the research questions, and includes multiple examples from participants and figures that represent the findings. The fifth chapter features the discussion section, which highlights this dissertation's contribution to the field of public relations and how employee engagement theory has been extended. Also included in this chapter are relevant insights for practitioners who oversee the development and dissemination of internal communication related to employee engagement. The final chapter concludes the dissertation and discusses the limitations while providing suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of the following literature review is to conceptualize employee engagement. The literature begins with an overview of engagement research in public relations and then transitions specifically to employee engagement, examining the foundational theories, definitions, antecedents and contributions from public relations and other disciplines. Also included in the review of literature is employee engagement's connection with public relations and internal communication. The detailed review of the literature highlights the gaps in research, which helps build the case for the purpose and scope of this dissertation. The purpose of the dissertation concludes this chapter along with the proposed research questions.

Engagement in Public Relations

Engagement research in public relations began over two decades ago as an embedded concept and since has been examined in relation to other concepts such as corporate social responsibility, social capital, employees and dialogic theory (Taylor & Kent, 2014). Stoker and Tusinski (2006) argue that engagement has the potential to be the next paradigm for the field of public relation, serving as an ethical approach to the practice of public relations.

Johnston (2014) suggests that engagement is an important component of organizational life used to deconstruct the meanings and values that result from communicative interactions among diverse audiences. Engagement allows organizations to become more cognizant of power dynamics and shift toward the more idealized, co-

creational perspective. Botan and Taylor (2004) propose that the co-creational approach values a setting where all organizational members contribute to the meaning-making process. Stoker and Tuskinski (2006) state that engagement offers organizations the opportunity to honor the multiplicity that comes from communicating with different audiences and provides organizations the ability to understand and accept the differences that make diverse audiences unique.

Despite scholarly calls for the potential and possibilities associated with engagement research, the concept is sporadically found within the public relations literature, and the concept is seldom operationalized (Stoker & Tuskinski, 2006). Taylor and Kent (2014) propose that engagement is an ideograph or a word that is unclear, concrete and ephemeral all at once. On the surface, engagement seems easily understood, but as the term is unpackaged, the complexities associated with it are presented. Engagement as an ideograph may be the primary reason for engagement's lack of agreed-upon conceptual and operational definitions. However, the different contexts in which engagement is studied help convey more about the concept and its implications for public relations research.

Engagement Research Streams in Public Relations

Engagement is often studied in conjunction with social media as a means to understand the communication disseminated on platforms such as Facebook or Twitter (e.g., Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Men & Tsai, 2013; Yang & Kang, 2009). For example, Smitko (2012) looked at engagement with donors through the use of Twitter and found

that the donor engagement results from building strong relationships, which can result from the participatory environment found on a site like Twitter.

Engagement has been studied under the umbrella of CSR, in which CSR is viewed as a type of organizational engagement. From a CSR perspective, engagement is when an organization is operating transparently and offers opportunities to be publically scrutinized (Golob & Bartlett, 2007). In addition, engagement is understood as corporations acting responsible for the communities and stakeholders it serves. For example, Wang and Chaudhri (2009) determined that companies in China connect engagement with initiatives such as protection of the environment, conservation of energy, and consumer rights.

Civil engagement is another context engagement is studied in public relations to better understand how engagement can serve and build communities. Sommerfeldt (2013) argues that engagement is an essential component for a civil society, and social capital is built through engagement of diverse groups, which results in the promotion of democracy and a fully functioning society.

Employee engagement is also a dominant research stream for engagement in public relations, which is the focus for this dissertation. The next section will address the foundational research studies of employee engagement before transitioning to other fields that have contributed to the growing body knowledge of employee engagement.

The Foundational Management Contribution

From an extensive literature review it can be determined that the first employee engagement study, conducted by Kahn (1990), was in the field of management and the

study used an ethnographic approach to look at the moments in which employees chose to bring themselves to their particular work setting and exercise engagement. Two research settings were chosen, an architecture firm and a summer camp, and the author used participant observation, document analysis, and in-depth interviews to collect data. The unique research contexts led to the development of a theory that articulated the difference between personal engagement and disengagement and what psychological conditions influence a person's choice to be engaged (Kahn, 1990). The dimensions of psychological conditions that lead to personal engagement in an organizational setting are meaningfulness or the sense of a return on the investment of being engaged, safety or the sense of being able to be authentic without fear of negative consequences, and availability or the sense of having the physical, emotional and psychological resources for participating in engagement (Kahn).

The preceding conditions guided the development of Kahn's (1990) initial employee engagement definition as the "harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances" (p. 694), which he later added to the concept with the psychological presence component (Kahn, 1992). Meaningfulness, safety and availability mediate psychological presence, and the outcomes associated with being engaged including individual performance, experience and organizational growth (Kahn, 1992).

Kahn's (1990) model illustrates how work elements such as tasks and roles, social systems such as relationships and organizational norms, and individual distractions such

as physical and emotional energies lead to meaningfulness, safety and availability, which results in psychological presence and the person experiencing moments of personal engagement. Depending on the outcomes of the engagement experience, the system or organization provides feedback where negative outcomes are linked with punishments and positive outcomes are linked with reinforcements (Kahn, 1992). The system feedback initiates the entire process of employee engagement, demonstrating its cyclical nature.

Kahn's model and definition has influenced decades of employee engagement research and the development of definitions, an investigation into the antecedents and an articulation of the values associated with employee engagement with some research aligning with the original theory and other research agendas taking on a new path. Kahn's research has mostly influenced the fields of management and human resources. The next three sections illustrate the different aspects of employee engagement's theoretical development spawning from Kahn's initial model and definition.

The Human Resources Contribution

Although Kahn's proposed model was published in the management literature, the field of human resources has made a commitment to employee engagement scholarship over the last 10 years (Saks & Gruman, 2014). Human resource scholarship has worked to develop an additional definition of employee engagement (Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma, & Bakker, 2002) and the Job-Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demeroui, 2007) with both the definition and model having roots in the burnout literature since employee engagement is viewed as the opposite of job burnout (Gonzalez-Roma, Schaufeli, Bakker, & Lloret, 2006; Schaufeli et al, 2002). Schaufeli et

al. (2002) define employee engagement as “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” (p. 74), with the opposite of being engaged is experiencing job burnout. The JD-R model is used to demonstrate the two processes that lead to job burnout including the high demands of a job and a lack of job resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

The Schaufeli et al. (2002) definition differs from Kahn’s in that Kahn’s definition highlights personal agency where employees take it upon themselves to bring their complete selves into the role while Schaufeli et al. do not include the agency piece. The definitional difference makes Kahn’s definition more definitive and substantial in understanding the dimensions of employee engagement because it captures the power of the employee (Saks & Gruman, 2014).

The JD-R model and the model’s measurement scale Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) have been the most popular testing mechanism (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006). However, the scale and model mostly focus on measuring job burnout and leave out the agency component that was foundational to Kahn’s initial theoretical conception. In equating employee engagement with job burnout, the phenomenon gets further and further away from the original theory and the lines between job burnout and employee engagement become blurred, which creates problems for understanding how the two concepts differ.

Saks and Gruman (2014) argue that the disconnect with Kahn’s original theory has led to various conflicting definitions, scales with limited statistical significance, and limited theoretical development. The authors’ suggest returning to the original model,

definition, and theory framework to move scholarship substantially forward. Yet, ultimately what is most problematic is that the human resources literature uses a functional perspective and framework to define employee engagement by focusing on the different variables that contribute to job performance. By adopting a co-creational lens that relies on meaning-making from all actors and steers away from the simplistic, functional approach that has dominated most of the employee engagement literature up to this point, public relations' co-creational perspective has the potential to extend current employee engagement research.

Management Definitions of Employee Engagement

Employee engagement focuses primarily on how psychologically present employees are when performing an organizational role (Men, 2012); and how cognitions, emotions, and behaviors contribute to job performance (Gruman & Saks, 2011). Johnston (2014) suggests that engagement is the process of meaning-making between organizations and target audiences and in this case, engagement centers on the construction of meaning between an organization and its employees. Kahn's (1990) definition focuses on how employees physically, cognitively, and emotionally express themselves during role performances. Welch (2011) provides a concise definition of what she calls "organization engagement" that includes the preceding concepts: "a dynamic, changeable psychological state which links employees to their organizations, manifest in organization member role performances expressed physically, cognitively and emotionally, and influenced by organization-level internal communication" (p. 337).

The preceding definitions primarily focus on employee engagement as the facilitator of role or job performances and how employees can connect with their positions or organizations, with only Johnson (2014) focusing on the social constructive nature of engagement but this particular definition is not specific to employee engagement. The other definitions provide an end goal for employee engagement and do have merit as they provide some of the different components that need to be explored.

However, it is possible that limiting employee engagement to role performance prevents full understanding of the concept and the meaning behind employee engagement. Although an increase in role performance may be the inevitable goal or result of employee engagement because it impacts organizational results, employee engagement needs to be examined from a nonfunctional perspective to uncover the complexity of the phenomenon and extend understanding. The following section provides a rich description of employee engagement antecedents that have developed from the more functional stream of literature.

Antecedents of Employee Engagement

Although D'Aprix (2009) asserts that employee engagement is potentially a personal choice for each individual employee, several key drivers of engagement have been suggested by research thus far. Working conditions and job resources, leadership and perceived reputation have all been identified as influencers of employee engagement.

Working conditions and job resources

Working conditions and job resources have received the most attention in employee engagement scholarship (D'Aprix, 2009; Hynes, 2012; Saks & Gruman, 2014).

Resources include an organizations' commitment to career development and implementation of reward strategies (D'Aprix, 2009), which is based on job performance (Ruck & Welch, 2012). Support and recognition from management and peers, learning opportunities and performance feedback are additional valuable resources (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008). The working conditions should reflect a culture where employees feel as though their thoughts and opinions about the organization or their position will be heard (Society for Human Resource Management, 2006). Employees need to be able to express their voice and feel as though they can identify with the organization's strategy, goals and values (Ruck & Welch, 2012). Working conditions and available resources lead to the development of employees' emotional well-being, which results in a more engaged workforce (Hynes, 2012).

Leadership

Leadership matters for employees because most often, employees leave bad bosses, not bad organizations (D'Aprix, 2011). Employee engagement can transition the role of supervisor from manager to coach whose main responsibility is to provide resources that support employees (Gruman & Saks, 2011). Scholars have identified transformational leadership and transactional leadership as the two primary leadership styles that may impact employee engagement (e.g., Jin, 2010; Men & Stacks, 2013; Wang et al., 2011).

Transformational leaders are invested in building relationships with employees, provide intellectual stimulation, inspire motivation and have the ability to successfully communicate the organization's mission, vision and objectives to employees (Jin, 2010;

Wang et al., 2011). Transformational leaders also possess charisma, are able to be empathetic and have a genuine concern for the needs of each individual employee (Jin, 2010).

On the contrary, transactional leaders are more concerned with maintaining daily operations through rewards and threats, with no concern for an emotional approach to leadership and relationship development (Men & Stacks, 2013; Wang et al., 2011). In a national survey of practitioners in public relations, the participants preferred the transformational leadership style to transactional, and favored more empathetic leaders (Jin, 2010). The transformational leadership attributes will have a positive affect on employees' attitude and in turn, job performance (Wang et al., 2011).

The most important leader for an employee is the direct supervisor who plays a primary role in articulating the organization's vision and strategy, providing feedback, and supporting individual employee needs (D'Aprix, 2011; Therkelsen & Fiebich, 2003). The internal communication between management and employees should support the aforementioned leadership attributes, which leads to the development of meaningful relationships and employee engagement (Karanges et al., 2015).

Perceived reputation

The employees' perceived reputation of the organization also plays a role in employee engagement (Men, 2012). When employees positively perceive the organization's reputation, their commitment to the organization's values, mission, goals and objectives is reinforced (Men & Stacks, 2013). For example, in an online survey of 157 employees from Fortune 500 companies found that both the organization's reputation

and CEO's credibility impacted employee engagement (Men, 2012). How employees felt about the organization was determined by their perceptions of the CEO's credibility and competence, and when employees have more positive feelings of admiration, trust and respect, they were more willing to engage and invest in role performances (Men). Therefore, how employees perceive an organization determines if they are willing to engage.

Although defining employee engagement and exploring the antecedents that lead to an engaged workforce are helpful, demonstrating the value of employee engagement helps make the case for why investing in research to explore the phenomenon is worthwhile. The next section discusses the value of employee engagement and identifies the human resource contribution to theory development as the primary field in employee engagement scholarship.

Value of Employee Engagement

The overall value of employee engagement is that it impacts organizational outcomes. Employee engagement is valuable in that it connects the organization with stakeholders beyond customers and the commercial chain of value (McKie & Willis, 2012). Additionally, employee engagement serves as a mediating variable between the organization's practices and its overall effectiveness, including the bottom line (Welch, 2011). It can be used as a measure that extends beyond the typical assessments that focus on financial indicators, further developing the way organizations measure the communication efforts that impact business development (Meng & Pan, 2012). Employee

engagement results in an increase in job performance, innovation and competitiveness, which increases organizational effectiveness (Gruman & Saks, 2011; Welch, 2011).

Since employee engagement has been framed as the antecedent of job performance, Gruman and Saks (2011) offer a new perspective for fostering and managing engagement that results in an increase in job performance. The model begins with a *performance agreement* that details clear expectations of employees' accomplishments; the initial phase is important because negotiation of job goals is used to develop employee engagement. The second part of the model focuses on *engagement facilitation*, which includes job description, support from supervisors, executive leadership and training to develop engagement. Last, the *performance and engagement appraisal and feedback* component concentrates on the role justice, trust, and performance appraisal play in employee engagement.

When Gruman and Saks' (2011) model is applied, the result should be improved job performance, which ultimately contributes to the success of the organization. Although a positive relationship exists between employee engagement and work outcomes, specific causality is unclear with the best predictors and circumstances of engagement remaining unclear (Saks & Gruman, 2014).

Public Relations and Employee Engagement

Employee engagement is a socially constructed component of organizational life (Reissner & Pagan, 2013; Valentin, 2014). At its core, employee engagement is constructed through discourse and social interaction among all actors in an organization. Two types of communication, discursive and direct, support employee engagement

(Reissner & Pagan, 2013), with discursive communication promoting understanding and value sharing. The sharing of values is fundamental to any form of engagement (Taylor & Kent, 2014). Discursive communication supports the reciprocal nature of employee engagement (Reissner & Pagan, 2013), which is also a necessity for social construction. For example, if management provides opportunities for employees to exercise their voice and identify with the organization, these typifications or habitualized cultural products aid in the development of employee engagement, since employees now have the opportunity to participate in discourse and social interaction.

When employees have more to say and receive more information, a greater chance they will opt to engage with their position and organization exists (Ruck & Welch, 2012). If an organization relies solely on direct communication without the discursive component, employee engagement will not be constructed because the discursive piece is missing; employee engagement cannot be facilitated by the organization pushing information as the sole communication mechanism. Therefore, new approaches to internal communication should focus on dialogue and content rather than volume and channels (Ruck & Welch, 2012), which could facilitate the co-creation of content among employees. With a greater focus on dialog and co-creation, employee engagement is enriched as a social construct foundational to organizational life. The following section further explores dialogue and its connection to engagement.

Dialogue and engagement

Martin Buber (1956) is considered to be the founder of modern dialogue, suggesting that dialogue provides an opportunity to not see the “other” as a means to an

end, but rather a valuable equal. Buber transitions the conversation between two or more individuals from I-You to I-Thou, which emphasizes that everyone involved in the communicative behaviors are assumed to be equals and should be treated as such. Buber emphasizes the reciprocal nature of dialogue, a mutual respect for the other, and suggests that communication exchanges should be grounded in openness.

Several public relations scholars have taken Buber's dialogic conceptions and applied it to the field of public relations as an opportunity to develop dialogue as a theoretical foundation (e.g., Botan, 1997; Pearson, 1989), challenging the symmetrical models of communication and shifting the focus to dialogic communication (Botan & Taylor, 2004). Following their initial article that addressed the use of dialogue to build relationships on the internet (Kent & Taylor, 1998), Kent and Taylor (2002) were the first to provide the five principles or tenets that set the theoretical foundation for dialogic theory in public relations. This ignited a public relations research stream that focused dialogic theories as a means to challenge the functional perspectives and equalize the power distance between the organization and its stakeholders (Botan & Taylor, 2004). Most of the research focuses on mediated relationships between websites and/or social media and different stakeholder groups (Taylor & Kent, 2014), and minimal research has added to the discussion of dialogue building interpersonal relationships, which was the other focus of Kent and Taylor's 2002 seminal piece.

The first tenet proposed by Kent and Taylor (2002) is *mutuality*, which acknowledges that organizations and their stakeholders are indistinguishably connected. Collaboration underpins mutuality by providing a space for all individuals in the dialogue

to advocate for their positions and encouraging the other to seek an understanding of how the opposing position(s) were reached. In a collaborative environment, reality is seen as socially constructed and no absolute truth exists. Therefore, every viewpoint should be considered laudable and all participants in the dialogic exchange should be acknowledged and treated with equal respect.

The second tenet is *propinquity*, which advocates for an exchange rooted in rhetoric. The dialogic exchange is also reciprocal in that organizations consult publics in matters that may be of interest, and publics have the means to communicate their positions back to the organization. Both parties need to exercise presence, giving their entire selves to the dialogue. Communication should happen during or before issues arise rather than after, with the goal of using the dialogic exchange as a means to moving the relationship forward.

The third tenet is *empathy* and refers to the supportiveness that is necessary for dialogic exchanges to succeed. Part of valuing the other means trying to understand the other and see the world as they do. In this process, one acknowledges the others point of view and does not ignore their stance. Participants in dialogue are treated as colleagues and value a communal orientation where everyone comes along side one another.

The fourth tenet is *risk* because everyone who genuinely participates in dialogue is taking on some form of risk. Risk acknowledges that dialogue is often unprompted and unplanned and emerges from individual beliefs and attitudes. To take a risk and experience a dialogic exchange requires some amount of vulnerability from participants because the exchange demands self-disclosure and the removal of personal, protective

layers. What the other reveals must be accepted and should be seen as a unique display of individuality. This creates an opportunity for growth, change and the foundation of an interpersonal relationship based on individual differences, not in spite of the differences. Gutierrez-Garcia, Recalde and Pinera-Camacho (2015) say that the changes that occur in dialogic exchanges can lead people to reassess and challenge their existing belief patterns, which cultivates creative thinking and different ways of behaving.

The last tenet is *commitment* and recognizes both parties obligation to the dialogic exchange. Dialogue is genuine and places the relationship above all else despite potential disagreeing positions. The goal is work toward common understanding and interpretation. Dialogue is not an agreement but rather an understanding of the others' points of views.

Despite the many benefits of dialogue, Theunissen and Wan Noordin (2012) caution against alienation that may occur when successful dialogue only occurs between two groups, leaving a third group out of the conversation. Organizations and stakeholders engaged in dialogue need to be conscience of who is being left out of the conversation. Despite this particular risk, dialogue approaches are required for constructing and supporting fully functioning societies (Taylor & Kent, 2014).

The next section provides an overview of internal communication, a key construct in developing employee engagement, which falls under Kahn's work elements as an influencer of meaningfulness, safety and availability.

Internal communication

Many scholars have espoused the importance of internal communication as a strategic element under the umbrella of public relations that impacts workplace

efficiencies and operational success (e.g., Dolphin, 2005; Kim & Rhee, 2011; Welch & Jackson, 2007), with some authors calling for specialized education on internal communication due to the complexities surrounding communicating with internal audiences (Welch, 2012). In addition, corporate mergers, downsizing, and other major organizational changes have spawned scholarly interest in internal communication (Stein, 2006). Internal communication can be defined as transactions between different individuals and groups at different organizational levels in different areas of specialization (Dolphin, 2005), and can range from office gossip to formal communication (Welch, 2012).

Welch and Jackson (2007) expanded the transactional definition of internal communication by developing an employee-centric definition that differentiates different internal audiences by defining internal communication as the strategic management of interactions between audiences within an organization across a number of interrelated dimensions including line manager, team peer communication, project peer communication and internal corporate communication. To support this definition, they developed an internal communication matrix to illustrate this multidimensional approach, which features the communication flow and types of communication at each dimension. This employee-centric view of internal communication transitions the concept away from solely seeing communication as a transaction from management to employees.

Internal communication and employee engagement connection

Several scholars have addressed the association between internal communication and employee engagement, suggesting that communication is the catalyst of employee

engagement (e.g., Karanges et al., 2014; Reissner & Pagan, 2013; Welch, 2012). Internal communication fosters employee engagement by serving “internal stakeholders’ core (trait) communication needs, as well as surface (state and attitude) communication needs” (Welch, 2011, p. 336). Internal communication facilitates interactions in the workplace, which leads to meaningful relationships and optimized employee engagement (Karanges et al., 2015). Specifically, internal communication that encourages employees to share their thoughts and suggestions leads to greater employee engagement, especially when prompted by an employee’s direct supervisor (Karanges et al., 2015).

In associating internal communication with employee engagement, the role of communication is transformed into something new (Mishra, Boynton, & Mishra, 2014). For example, Reissner and Pagan (2013) conducted a real-time case study of a private-public partnership organization, with data collection using interviews and focus groups with both management and employees, to determine how employee engagement is generated through direct and discursive communication activities. The authors conclude that employees have to actively respond for employee engagement to be generated, and both the organization and the employees have an active role in creating employee engagement.

Employee engagement is not a straightforward process and the process of engagement involves a give and take between management and employees through communication activities (Reissner & Pagan, 2013). Therefore, when internal communication is geared toward strengthening organizational identification and group

membership, it builds perceptions of support and inadvertently leads to employee engagement (Karanges et al., 2014).

Limitations of internal communication and employee engagement scholarship

Internal communication has predominantly been viewed as a management function used to communicate on behalf of the organization or management to employees (one public) with the goal of indoctrinating employees to the organization's goals and objectives (Vercic, Vercic, & Sriramesh, 2012). Both the organization-public relationship stream of research in internal communication and most of the early communication preferences research view internal communication from a functional perspective. From the functional perspective, communication and publics are viewed as tools or as a means to achieve an organizational end, with the dominant focus on techniques and production of organizational messages (Botan & Taylor, 2004). For Vos (2011), the functional perspective is limited in its ability to identify multiple motivations among actors, not seeing actors as powerful in their cultural settings, and focuses primarily on the cause instead of the effect.

Although public relations research has been encouraged to move more toward examining how communication serves as a meaning-making process (Botan & Taylor, 2004), internal communication often resides in the functional perspective as a command-and-control tool, where employees and communication serve as a control mechanism as a means to control to ensure the advancement of organizational goals. Internal communication should be about facilitating the treatment of employees as having intrinsic value and not simply a means to an end (deBussy & Suprawan, 2012). The co-

creational approach goes beyond achievement of an organizational goal and identifies publics as partners in the meaning-making process, which has been touted to serve as a long-term theoretical approach for public relations (Botan & Taylor, 2004). Despite the advances in internal communication scholarship, the co-creational approach is still nuanced.

It is important to note that part of the limited theoretical development may be due to the issue of simplifying internal audiences to a single public. Public relations research has been criticized for treating publics as a single entity (L'Etang, 2005). Although Welch and Jackson (2007) present an internal communication matrix, research tends to look only at the internal corporate communication aspect of the matrix by solely focusing on one-way communication from management to employees that focuses on corporate issues, goals, objectives and activities (e.g., Mishra et al., 2014; Stein, 2006).

In addition, the boundary of who constitutes the internal audience is more fluid than previously defined. Today an “employee” can be anyone from a consultant to a part-time staff member to a full-time staff member to a volunteer to an intern and so on. The complexity surrounding defining the internal audiences requires specialized internal communication approaches to meet the needs of the different audiences (Whitworth, 2011). Welch (2012) called attention to the fact that employees have different communication preferences, which further supports the notion that employees cannot be considered a single public.

Simplifying employees to a single public dismisses the value of the internal audiences and the complexities associated with communicating to these key constituents.

Although some studies acknowledge the power of employees and highlight the complexities associated with defining the employee publics (e.g., Gallicano, Curtin, & Matthews, 2012; Ruck & Welch, 2012; Welch, 2012), public relations research still has gaps to fill in regard to treating employees as a single public and understanding how to define the internal audiences.

Most public relations scholarship also views employee engagement from a function specific focus as well (e.g., Men, 2012; Ruck & Welch, 2012; Welch, 2011). From this perspective, employees are viewed as a means to an organizational end. The primary focus is on the production of messaging to get employee buy-in on organizational goals and objectives to advance organizational objectives. The public relations employee engagement literature does not focus on internal communication as part of the meaning-making process between internal audiences to develop employee engagement, but rather sees internal communication as a technical tool to produce organizational messages to achieve employee compliance (e.g., Gill, 2015; Karanges et al., 2014; Mishra et al., 2014). For example, Gill (2015) argued for the use of corporate storytelling as an approach to develop internal communication and the internal reputation and as an employee engagement strategy to achieve employee acquiescence. Although emphasis is placed on dialogue, the ultimate purpose is for employees to take ownership of the corporate stories told by management and to pass on the information to external audiences (Gill, 2015).

Welch's definition of employee engagement also takes a functional, organizational perspective, using the term organizational engagement to articulate how

management communication can influence the physical, cognitive and emotional conditions that are necessary for engagement (Gill, 2011). Even though internal communication is the key facilitator of employee engagement (D'Aprix, 2011; Reissner & Pagan, 2013), internal communication still resides in the command-control approach (McKie & Willis, 2012), so it is not surprising that employee engagement has yet to move past the functional perspective, which has dominated much of the foundational public relations literature (Botan & Taylor, 2004).

Purpose of the Dissertation

The overall purpose of this dissertation is to examine the phenomenon of employee engagement from the employees' perspective using a phenomenological methodological approach to better understand how employees experience employee engagement and participate in their unique and eclectic roles in the meaning-making process of employee engagement. While employee engagement has been primarily explored within the business, the human resources, and management disciplines, public relations research has only recently taken an interest in furthering its understanding.

Employee engagement provides an opportunity for public relations scholars to broaden the internal communication theoretical base and the strategy behind communicating with internal audiences (Ruck & Welch, 2012). In addition, Johnston (2014), and Taylor and Kent (2014) offered engagement research as a way to challenge functionalist public relations foundations to arrive at a more co-creational perspective. The co-creational perspective goes beyond achievement of an organizational goal and identifies audiences as partners in the meaning-making process (Botan & Taylor, 2004).

However, current public relations research continues to privilege the organization and management perspectives, primarily from a functional approach (e.g., Karanges et al., 2015; Mishra et al., 2014), providing only one vantage point of the employee engagement phenomenon. Employee engagement should be examined from different perspectives to bring many organizational voices into the conversation, and not just management, to provide rich insights into the phenomenon of employee engagement. Specifically, this dissertation seeks the unique understanding of the phenomenon of employee engagement across all organizational voices regardless of the employees' employer. Changing the focus and widening the "lens" to capture a myriad of eclectic organizational voices, not just management employees, will expand the public relations scholarly understanding of the employee engagement phenomenon.

Research Questions

The following research questions are proposed to guide data collection and analysis to investigate the experience of the phenomenon to illuminate the essence of employee engagement. Appropriate for the study's phenomenological approach, each word is deliberately chosen and rooted in literature as a means to guide the research process and to ensure that the study answers the question (Moustakas, 1994).

RQ1: How do employees perceive and reconstruct their experiences of employee engagement?

RQ2: How do employees perceive and reconstruct their experiences in the meaning-making of employee engagement?

The “how” denotes an openness to anything that emerges about the phenomenon of engagement throughout the course of the interviews. This approach aligns with the nature of qualitative and phenomenological research that does not seek to determine a causal relationship but rather participants’ share their experiences with the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

“Employees” identifies the participants recruited for data collection and included in the sample. This term helps bind the study to the individual level of analysis with each employee serving as the unit of analysis. The word “perceive” acknowledges that the engagement experience is understood through the employees’ perceptions and understandings. Participants disclose what employee engagement is and what it means to them based on their experiences. Further, perceive acknowledges that individuals have varying perceptions based on their own personal experiences. Since employee engagement has been assumed to be a straightforward process (Reissner & Pagan, 2013), understanding each participant’s experience could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the unique aspects of engagement that have yet to be identified and addressed.

In using the word “reconstruct,” participants provide a play-by-play of their employee engagement experiences. Reconstructing allows the participant to describe in detail their experiences with the phenomenon. Most public relations scholarship views employee engagement from a function-specific focus (e.g., Karanges et al., 2015; Men, 2012; Mishra et al., 2014), seeing employees and their engagement as a means to an organizational end. However, some scholars suggest employee engagement is a co-

creational process where meaning-making occurs between all organizational members (e.g., Johnston, 2014; Reissner & Pagan, 2013; Taylor & Kent, 2014), and not just between an organization or top management and employees. In seeking to understand how employees reconstruct their engagement experience, this study answers the call for future research to explore the mechanisms of employee engagement (Reissner & Pagan, 2013).

“Experience” is used to highlight that the purpose of data collection will be to capture the narratives of how participants perceive and describe employee engagement in their everyday lived experiences.

“Employee engagement” highlights the primary or main phenomenon in which this dissertation seeks to understand—exploring employees’ perceptions and descriptions of employee engagement in their everyday lived experiences in the workplace to arrive a unique understanding of the phenomenon across all organizational voices.

The second research question includes “meaning-making” to capture the process of meaning-making associated with employee engagement. In asking about the meaning-making process, the role of communication, specifically internal communication, will potentially be uncovered. Meaning derives from the communicative performances, creative, interactive events, practices, and routine behaviors that occur in specific contexts (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). When performances and practices are taken together, meaning is constructed and understood through communication. In phenomenology, as participants begin to perceive and reconstruct their own experiences through reflective

behaviors, the experiences themselves begin to adopt specific meanings (Moustakas, 1994).

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

A phenomenological approach is the most appropriate methodology to study the perceptions and descriptions of employee engagement experiences for the purpose of this dissertation. Phenomenology is the ideal method to build foundations of knowledge from everyday life experiences (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), which in this case would be to build knowledge from the meaning-making associated with employee engagement experiences in the workplace. Phenomenology has been primarily used in healthcare and education research, yet this approach has tremendous value in public relations research, especially in understanding how employees experience organizational activities (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). Since phenomenology captures the lived experiences of participants, the goal is to avoid the trap of “empty theorizing,” which results from being unconnected to the lived organizational experiences (Mir & Mir, 2013, p. 97).

Phenomenological Approach

With roots in psychology, the phenomenological tradition has influenced many streams of qualitative research and is attuned to the meanings of the things themselves, removed from everyday routines (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). Phenomenological epistemology is concerned with what it means to feel and experience the phenomenon, and uses the participants’ everyday lived experiences as a way to uncover the meanings and meaning-making processes associated with the phenomenon being studied and interpreted.

The phenomenological tradition captures the experience of the individual to better

understand his or her socially constructed life-world since this approach assumes that individuals do not exist independently of others but rather live in a shared world produced through relationships that exist between space and time (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1990). According to Moustakas (1994), the participants' perceptions of an experience are the primary source of knowledge, in which every perception adds value to understanding the experience of the phenomenon under investigation. Although people may have different experiences, some experiences are assumed to be similar, which helps arrive at the essence of the phenomenon. The idea is that the phenomenon of employee engagement within the context of the work place provides a shared experience for participants. However, the multiple realities that emerge from the data provide variation and insight, which is gained from understanding the potential reasons behind the variations.

The primary data collection tool for phenomenology is the long interview or in-depth interview, which seeks to understand phenomena as they are and how they consciously appear to participants through their experiences (Merriam, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). Descriptions of the experience are captured in the long interview through the use of a semi-structured interview guide and are then thematically analyzed in a way that uncovers the essence or structure of the phenomenon (Merriam, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological reduction aids in the data analysis process as it encourages the researcher to continually return to the experience to isolate the phenomenon, which results in a complex description of the essence of the phenomenon (Daymon & Holloway, 2011; Merriam, 2009).

Background and Role of Researcher

From a qualitative epistemological perspective, knowledge of social reality emerges from the fundamental interdependence that exists between researchers and their participants. Interpretive researchers do not use methodological instruments in a void; they are the instruments (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). They cannot separate themselves from what they know, since they see themselves as shaped by their own lived experiences. The investigator and the object of investigation are linked such that who they are and how they understand the world are a central part of how they understand themselves, others and the world (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Therefore, knowledge claims are inevitably positioned and partial as a reflection of both the researcher and participants' lived experiences and based upon the interpreted data through rigorous analysis.

As a doctoral candidate in the College of Communication and Information in the School of Advertising and Public Relations at the University of Tennessee, and given my experience and knowledge with the subject matter, I arrive at the research setting with my own perceptions and experiences. Although this knowledge cannot be removed, it can be bridled during the different stages of the study to ensure I stay open to the participants' own experiences to conceptualize new contributions to or extend scholarship. Bridling is an approach used to ensure a rigorous data collection and data analysis environment for all reconstructive narratives (both participants and researcher) to be heard and carry equal space (Vagle, 2009). A more detailed explanation of bridling will be provided later in this method section.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is an awareness that emerges from paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and practicing non-judgment of the experience throughout each moment (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Mindfulness is a new approach to qualitative research to incorporate non-judgement, patience, a beginners mind, trust and acceptance of the research process. The intent was to set aside prior knowledge and understanding to eliminate surface-level findings, arriving at nuanced findings that led to refining the theoretical understanding of established employee engagement theories.

Prior to the dissertation, I completed an eight-week Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) training (Kabat-Zinn, 2003), which was part of a semester long mindfulness course. Throughout the dissertation process, I participated in 10-30 minute meditations before data collection and completed memos about feelings, thoughts and sensations before, during and after the interviews. The memos allowed me to exercise a deeper self-reflexivity. For example, when dealing with a participant who said they preferred not to give any specific details related to their answers, I was not rattled by the participant's lack of detailed responses and remained committed to the interview experience instead of backing away. Using a beginners mind, which is showing up to a situation with no assumptions and as if it was the first time, was necessary after this type of interview to provide the best opportunity to treat the next interview as a new and unique experience.

Also, in five cases, participants declined to be audio-recorded, and this information was not always provided in advance. I had to be active and present in the

moment to both engage in the conversation and take notes at the same time. The mindfulness meditations helped capture the participant's thoughts and experiences in instances absent an audio recorder. Mindfulness meditations helped balance diligently listening and taking notes, while not getting distracted if I felt as though I missed an important reflection from the participant—if a missed reflection was important, chances were it would surface again. It helped to stay content and move on when only able to capture some of the conversation and not remain attached to what was missed. Mindfulness also helped after the interview in going back through the notes and filling in some of the blanks or gaps based on my recollection of the interview in a manner that would not have been as rigorous without paying attention on purpose and being present in the moment.

Distractions can be a hindrance during interviews and take away from the conversation with the participant. In some of the memos, I made notes about the distractions that arose during the interviews. Distractions included an email ping, looking at the clock to see how much time has passed, taking notes, background noises or thoughts. To avoid being distracted, I used my mindfulness to practice non-attachment to the things that may occur throughout the course of an interview, recognizing that some are out of my control. This allowed me to focus and keep coming back to the conversation in the present moment. For the distractions that were in my control, once recognized, I made changes in my data collection processes to protect the interview space for both the participants and me.

The mindfulness practice encourages the process of not labeling the sounds, feelings, sensations or anything else for that matter that may arise over the course of a meditation. The practice of not labeling was helpful throughout the data collection process. In the beginning, I would be inclined to want to label an interview as “good” based on the length of time we spoke or how well the participant articulated their narratives. I would label an interview as “bad” if it was short or if the rapport building was not as good as it was with other participants. However, the interviews that were initially labeled “bad” in the beginning, were not actually that bad once I reviewed the recording alongside the interview transcript.

One interview in particular stands out, where the participant was a female executive who did not have much time for the interview. Her answers seemed short and not as detailed compared to other participants. But after reviewing the transcript and recording, the interview was rich with details even though she spoke frank and to the point. In the end, the interview did not hold up to the initial label I assigned to it. From this moment on, I tried to exercise the practice of not labeling interviews and accepted the conversations as a contribution to data collection without assigning or labeling interviews with a particular quality.

Sampling Procedures

Participants in the study are from the U.S. and work in U.S. based organizations. Therefore, employees are the unit of analysis and defined as individuals employed in the U.S. and receive a wage from a U.S. based organization, including both for-profit and government organizations. The primary concern is to understand the phenomenon of

employee engagement, so the sample is based on a theoretical sampling procedure to successfully build out the emergent categories and themes related to the phenomenon and not limit the sample to functionalist characteristics of pre-defined employee categories. In focusing solely on the phenomenon and recruiting participants who can bring a richer understanding, the binary categories of non-management and management are avoided to develop theoretical insights beyond the functionalist perspective. The sampling procedures are broken down into two waves starting with purposive and snowball sampling approaches and then moving to a theoretical sampling approach, which guided most of data collection. The two-wave approach is described in more detail in the following sections.

Initial sample

A tenet of phenomenology is to recruit participants that have a personal and intimate experience with the phenomenon, which in this case would be employee engagement (Daymon & Holloway, 2011; Moustakas, 1994). A purposive sampling approach was used, which is a direct reflection of the study's purpose and guides the researcher in identifying research participants from whom the most can be gained, often referred to as information-rich cases (Merriam, 2009). Since this study used the individual level of analysis with each employee as a unit of analysis, the initial purposive sampling approach sought out employees who have experiences with employee engagement. These participants acted as informants who spoke knowledgeably about the phenomenon and served as key resources in recommending others to the study (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). These participants were then asked to recommend other employees to

the study who may have different experiences as part of the snowball or network sampling approach. Snowball sampling asks key participants to refer the researcher to other information-rich cases (Merriam, 2009). Whether or not the recommended participants are in the same organization does not matter since this study is examining the phenomenon from the individual, rather than organizational level of analysis.

Theoretical sampling

The second wave of sampling used a theoretical sampling approach, where the analyzed data guided the recruiting of additional participants (Merriam, 2009). Theoretical sampling does not require all participants to be identified ahead of time since participants are sought out following and concurrently with ongoing data collection and analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Merriam, 2009).

As data collection continues and themes begin to develop, the researcher identifies exceptions or variations to the emergent findings (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Merriam, 2009). Contradictions were sought out and there was a commitment to remain open to anything that arose from the data. To aid with theoretical sampling, a visual memo or spreadsheet was used to track variances in the phenomenon. It was important that the final sample included a variety of perspectives to ensure maximum variation. Maximum variation seeks diverse instances of the phenomenon by hunting for opposite or disconfirming variations (Merriam, 2009). Any patterns that emerged with great variation are of particular interest in discovering the structures of the phenomenon (Patton, 2002).

Table 1 offers a description of participants and includes pseudonyms, gender, position, location, years with the company, and industry. The table illustrates sample variance to demonstrate the depth of the study. In total, 32 participants were involved in the study, 13 women and 19 men from 12 different organizations. Participant names are not used in the results section to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Instead, participants are referenced based on pseudonyms, which are included in the demographic information table. In using a pseudonym and stripping away the participants' position and organization in the actual reporting of the findings, the findings encapsulate the employee engagement experience phenomenon from the employees' perspective and remove the functional labeling.

Data Collection

The phenomenological interview used in data collection is an informal, interactive process with open-ended questions (Moustakas, 1994). An IRB approved, semi-structured interview guide with non-directive questions was used to elicit responses from participants in regard to their feelings and experiences with the phenomenon of employee engagement. Interviews took place during summer and fall of 2016 and were conducted via phone, except for one interview conducted in person. Phone interviews were conducted at researcher's office at the University of Tennessee or the researcher's home office in Knoxville, Tennessee, out of sight and hearing of other individuals. Data collection took place over 102 days and ended once the data had resulted in theoretical saturation where the study's categories were fully developed (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Table 1. Participants

#	Pseudonym	Gender	Position	Location	Years with Company	Industry
1	Katrina	F	Engagement manager	Tennessee	5 years	Entertainment
2	Shelly	F	Field Trainer	Tennessee	17 years	Entertainment
3	Jane	F	Vice President	Tennessee	18 years	Entertainment
4	Daniel	M	Account Executive	Colorado	10 months	Cloud Technology
5	Marty	M	Account Executive	Colorado	3 years	Cloud Technology
6	Amber	F	Line Manager	Ohio	10 months	Aviation
7	Joe	M	Senior Executive	Ohio	20 years	Aviation
8	Dale	M	Comm. Leader	Ohio	2 years	Aviation
9	Lance	M	General Manager	Arizona	18 years	National Retail
10	Chris	M	Transportation Manager	Florida	28 years	National Retail
11	John	M	Order Filler	Arizona	2 years	National Retail
12	Justin	M	Vice President	New Jersey	19 years	Investment
13	Tricia	F	Vice President	New Jersey	21 years	Investment
14	Catherine	F	Vice President	New Jersey	2 years	Investment
15	Jessica	F	HR Manager	New Jersey	25 years	Investment
16	Tom	M	Driver	Florida	3 years	National Retail
17	Josh	M	Senior HR Manager	Maryland	4 years	Aerospace
18	Gerry	F	Analyst	Connecticut	10 years	Aerospace
19	Harriet	F	Analyst	New Mexico	10 years	Aerospace
20	Ron	M	Engineer	Connecticut	24 years	Chemical
21	Dylan	M	Owner	New Jersey	26 years	Home services
22	Vicky	F	Software Developer	Texas	20 years	Security
23	Bart	M	Vice President	California	34 years	Security
24	Doug	M	Director	California	31 years	Security
25	Ryan	M	Manager	Maryland	36 years	Security

Table 1. Participants (continued)

#	<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Years with Company</i>	<i>Industry</i>
26	Matt	M	Vice President	Virginia	30 years	Security
27	Faye	F	Receptionist	New Mexico	6 years	Hospitality
28	Kent	M	General Manager	New Mexico	6 years	Hospitality
29	Edward	M	Internal Comm. Lead	Tennessee	5 years	Government
30	Natalie	F	Safety Lead	Tennessee	35 years	Government
31	Rebecca	F	Public Affairs Officer	Tennessee	12 years	Government
32	Dallas	M	Police Officer	Boston	28 years	Safety

Participants were asked to sign the IRB-approved informed consent that confirms they are comfortable with the interview process including the option of being audio recorded to aid in transcription. The IRB-approval letter and informed consent can be found in Appendices of this dissertation. All recordings and transcripts were kept in a password-protected computer. All informed consent forms were stored in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's office. Participants had the right to decline being recorded. In five cases, participants declined audio recording and the researcher took notes throughout the interview to the best of her ability to be able to capture the data. The notes were stored and protected in the same way as the transcripts in a password-protected computer. All participation was voluntary, and participants had the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. For interviews, a date, time and location for the interview were established based on the participants' preferences. In total, interviews lasted between 28-67 minutes, totaling 1,281 minutes or more than 21 hours, with the

average interview lasting approximately 40 minutes. During and after the interviews, memos were used to record observations from the interview (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Memos were recorded in an Excel spreadsheet and kept on the researcher's password-protected computer.

Confidentiality and anonymity were protected in a several ways. First, interviews were conducted out of hearing range of others who might overhear the conversation and be able to recognize identifiable information. Second, printed transcripts were never left unattended in common spaces for others to read or review. Third, pseudonyms were used in the presentation of the findings and company names or identifiers were not used. Last, the sample Excel spreadsheet, which included several pieces of identifying information, was housed on the password-protected computer and not shared with anyone.

Due to the nature of eliciting open-ended responses from participants, data collection consisted of participant interviews with a focus on reconstructing narratives throughout the interview. The interview began with a social conversation to build rapport and to create a relaxed environment (Moustakas, 1994). Next, grand tour questions were used to prompt participants to share about their professional background and to guide or educate the researcher on the participant's professional history. Following the opening grand tour questions, memorable-tour questions or a "standout experience" questions were used that focused on an experience with employee engagement and then describing the experience in full (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 203).

After these initial questions, a series of more detailed questions were used to capture a comprehensive account of the participant's experience with the phenomenon

(Moustakas, 1994). This line of questioning focused on the use of experience or example questions for going deeper into the participants' employee engagement experience (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). When necessary, floating prompts were used to obtain more elaborate responses from the participants (McCracken, 1988). For example, prompts asked participants questions like what happened before/after/then, who was involved, or asked participants to provide an additional example of a counter experience. Probes were also used, including the echo probe by softly repeating what the participant just said or the silent probe of waiting quietly for the participant to continue talking (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). In addition, different lines of questioning were developed as tools to stimulate participant responses. For example, narrative questions asked for the participant to share a story about a time when they had an employee engagement experience were used or feeling questions were used to elicit more elaborate responses. It was important to lead participants to discuss the phenomenon but refrain from leading the participants to discuss specific meanings; participants were encouraged to present descriptions from their own lived experiences (Kvale, 1995). The interview guide that was used to navigate the interview and conversation is in Appendix 1.

Table 2 presents the connection between the aspects of the research questions and the questions from the interview guide. Specific questions asked in the interview guide relate to how employees perceive their experience of employee engagement and specific questions identify how employees describe their experience of employee engagement. In addition, questions allowed participants to share meaning-making of the experience. Table 2 illustrates how the guide was used to clearly answer the research questions.

Table 2. Interview guide connected to research questions

<i>Research questions section</i>	<i>Questions from guide</i>
<u>Perceive</u> their experience of employee engagement	*What comes to mind when you hear the term employee engagement? **Has that term come up at all in your current job or a previous job or have you heard it used somewhere else? **How have you heard employee engagement discussed? **What feelings do you remember having during that experience? **How do you feel now as you recollect that experience? **What do you remember thinking during that experience? **What do you think now as you recollect that experience?
<u>Reconstruct</u> their experience of employee engagement	*Think about the last time you may have experienced employee engagement in your job. Can you tell me about that specific experience? **Is there a specific event or interaction you experienced? **What happened before the experience.... after the experience? **Who was involved with that experience...anyone who particularly stands out? *Now, can you compare that experience to another one that is dissimilar? Can you tell me about that specific experience?
Process of <u>meaning-making</u> associated with employee engagement	**How would you say the described experience affected you? **Are there any incidents connected to that experience that stand out to you? **Did anything change for you based on that experience? *Do you recall a time talking about employee engagement with someone in your workplace, outside of your work or at home? **What was that experience like? How did you describe employee engagement in that experience?

Notes: *Denotes memorable-tour question **Denotes prompt

Data Analysis

In phenomenology, data analysis follows the hermeneutical spiral process, moving from the individual parts, which in this case would be the individual interview transcripts, to the whole, which would include all of the transcripts to generate a holistic picture. The hermeneutical orientation takes a gestalt approach, in which the whole is worth more than the sum of the individual parts (Thompson et al., 1990). In other words, an entire transcript tells more of a complete narrative than an individual line. The same goes for all of the transcripts, in which the sum of all data gets closer to the essence of the phenomenon than each individual transcript would.

Phenomenological reduction is arguably the most important part of data analysis in which the phenomenon is isolated by continually returning to the experience to arrive at the meaning or essence of the phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). This reduction is accomplished through bridling exercises, horizontalizing and thematizing (Moustakas, 1994). Bridling suggests that preconceived notions are set aside so the data is analyzed without biases (Merriam, 2009); bridling will be discussed in more detail as part of the data analysis approach. Horizontalization is the process of laying out all of the data for examination and treating each piece of data with equal weight (Merriam, 2009). Any piece of data that speaks to the experience of the phenomenon is highlighted while irrelevant or repetitive statements are removed, which leaves only the textual meanings of the phenomenon, referred to as horizons (Moustakas, 1994). The horizons are then organized and clustered into themes, resulting in a full depiction of the phenomenon and its meaning.

Transcription began after completion of the first interview. The researcher transcribed the first three interviews, with the remaining interviews transcribed by a transcriber. A transcriber was hired and asked to sign the transcriber's pledge of confidentiality prior to having access to the audio recordings. The transcriber is a professional transcriber who had been used before and came recommended by colleagues. The transcriber was asked to complete verbatim transcripts including all utterances and displays of emotion. After receiving the completed transcripts, transcripts were uploaded to a Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), NVivo for Mac. Using NVivo helps organize the data throughout the analysis stages and maintain the integrity of the data. The transcripts were read, which totaled 309 pages, while simultaneously listening to the interviews to ensure accuracy. Data analysis began after the initial two or three interview transcripts had been uploaded to NVivo.

Data analysis included seven stages. At **stage one** of analysis, a bridling exercise was conducted or an interview to identify current knowledge and biases. Bridling derives from the concept of bracketing, which provides the means for the researcher to set aside (not remove) preconceived notions about a phenomenon through bridling exercises to truly capture the experience from the participant's point of view (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). Vagle (2009) suggests that fully setting aside one's thoughts about a phenomenon is impossible and therefore, offers the concept of bridling as the better alternative to bracketing. Bridling encourages the researcher to hold back influential knowledge by identifying what information or preconceived notions may influence data collection and

analysis. A bridling exercise was incorporated into the method as the first step in the data analysis. For the bridling exercise, the dissertation committee chair conducted the interview using the same interview guide that was used in the study to identify any existing biases and understanding. This exercise was also used to pre-test the interview guide.

Following the bridling exercise, **stage two** consisted of listening to each audio recording alongside the transcripts to check for accuracy but also to have a deep understanding of the interview as a whole and the participant's individual experience. At this stage, the transcripts were housed in the NVivo software to prepare for stage three. Formal coding or horizontalizing began at **stage three**. Every word, statement or sentence was treated with equal value and those with relevance to the phenomenon were given a code and irrelevant information was not coded. Codes assign symbolic meaning to the information in a study and serve as a means to organize the data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The open coding process resulted in 118 initial codes, all of which were relevant to the research questions. **Stage four** included collapsing repetitive codes and pairing related codes together. The collapsing process resulted in 31 codes, which further developed the emerging themes.

Following the aforementioned stages, **stage five** consisted of clustering the horizons or codes into themes. The clustering of codes into themes was completed in Excel so that the themes could be visually represented together with participant quotes and to keep focused on the essence of the phenomenon. In stage five, eight themes emerged, which were supported by textual descriptions from the transcripts to provide

examples of the emergent themes. Six themes emerged for research question one and two major themes emerged for research question two.

Stage six included the use of imaginative variation, which requires viewing the data from various angles to constantly see the phenomenon differently (Merriam, 2009). Daymon and Holloway (2011) suggest continually asking: ‘How do the descriptions reflect the participants’ experiences?’ and ‘Have I unconsciously influenced the descriptions with my own biases and preconceived notions?’ According to Moustakas (1994), imaginative variation helps recognize hidden themes or contexts of the phenomenon and is supported by examples from the data that vividly illustrate the structural description of the phenomenon. To complete imaginative variation, the original transcripts were reviewed and compared to the descriptions of the emergent themes, while continuously asking questions of the data.

Stage seven is where the final synthesis of the meanings and essences of the phenomenon develop (Moustakas, 1994). To do so, a unified statement of the meaning of the phenomenon, employee engagement, was created to articulate the complete narrative based on the participants’ experiences. The synthesis illustrates the meaning of employee engagement and its universal qualities, conditions and structures, and its essence at this particular time and place (Moustakas, 1994). The essence of employee engagement was supported by participant quotes and illustrated through a figure. All seven stages of data analysis are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3. Data analysis stages

<i>Stage</i>	<i>Action</i>	<i>Description</i>
1	Bridling exercise	An interview was conducted between the researcher and the dissertation committee chair using semi-structured interview guide.
2	Listening for accuracy	Each audio recording was listened to alongside the transcripts to check for accuracy and to develop a deep understanding of the interview as a whole and the participant's experience. Transcripts were in NVivo.
3	Horizontalizing	Formal coding began. Every word, statement or sentence was treated with equal value and those with relevance to the phenomenon were given a code and irrelevant information was not be coded.
4	Collapsing codes	Repetitive codes were collapsed together.
5	Clustering	Codes or horizons were clustered together into themes, which were supported by the textual descriptions from the transcripts to provide examples of the emergent themes.
6	Using imaginative variation	Data was viewed from various angles to constantly see the phenomenon differently. Questions were asked of the data to help recognize hidden themes or contexts of the phenomenon. This is supported by examples from the data that vividly illustrate the structural description of the phenomenon.
7	Synthesizing the essences	The synthesis of the meanings and essences of the phenomenon was developed through the use of a unified statement of meaning that articulates the complete narrative based on the participants' experiences.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in phenomenological research is unique in that it moves though and with the researcher's relationship with the phenomenon, not simply just the researcher, the participant and the text, but in the intentional relationships that tie together the participants, the researcher and the produced text (Vagle, 2009). Lincoln and Guba (1985) established credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability and integrity as checks for trustworthiness.

For this particular dissertation, the five criteria offered by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were used to establish trustworthiness. First, *credibility* ensures that the data is representative of the findings. Giving participants the right to refuse participation or being audio recorded was used as a credibility check to capture the best recollections of participant perceptions and experiences. Memoing was also used for a credibility check, which is where brief or long narratives are written to document reflections and thinking processes (Miles et al., 2014). Memos were written following an interview to record immediate interview themes. Mindfulness was incorporated into memoing as a way to attune to the present moment and research experience with curiosity, awareness and openness. Using mindfulness with memoing eliminated operating in an autopilot state with an undisciplined mind, which potentially could lead to the mind becoming an unreliable instrument (Hart, Ivztan, & Hart, 2013). Last, an extensive audit trail kept the data organized and helped support the steps followed for data collection and analysis.

The audit trail was necessary due to the amount of data and information pertinent to the dissertation and included the use of Excel and electronic folders to document the

steps for data collection and analysis. Files were made for data collection, data analysis, and IRB. Each folder held important information and documents relevant to that phase of the dissertation. Another example of the audit trail included the sample spreadsheet. The spreadsheet was created to capture participant names, company, position, location, tenure with company, contact information, communication exchanges, interview length, and number of transcript pages. To protect confidentiality and anonymity of participants, this sample spreadsheet is not included in the dissertation. Memos were also recorded into two spreadsheets; one was for capturing initial thoughts and emerging themes and the other was for mindfulness memos. This extensive audit trail made locating data or relevant information seamless and kept the research process organized.

Second, *transferability* is the extent to which findings from the study can be applied to other contexts. Theoretical sampling was used to ensure transferability. Transferability was also met by using complete verbatim transcripts in data analysis. Thick descriptions from the interviews were also used in the presentation of themes. Third, coherent themes were reported from all of the transcripts, which aids in dependability of the findings. *Dependability* assumes that the findings represent a unique place and time and values consistent findings across the data.

Fourth, *confirmability* was sought with some dissertation committee members serving as debriefers. The committee members were used in several debriefing meetings to review themes as they emerged in comparison to the data, which helped confirm the findings. Last, to maintain *integrity*, the researcher was committed to professionalism in the research setting and during interviews, and strived to be empathetic to the

participants' experiences and their associated feelings and emotions. Integrity was also met through the commitment to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity for all participants. Table 4 provides an overview of the trustworthiness checks used for this dissertation. The table is adapted from Flint, Woodruff, and Gardial's (2002) table that focused on the trustworthiness criteria and method for addressing the criteria in both interpretive and grounded theory.

Table 4. Methods used to establish trustworthiness

<i>Trustworthiness criteria</i>	<i>Method used in the dissertation</i>
Credibility	• Gave participants the right to refuse being audio recorded • Completed memos after interviews • Mindfulness meditation and memos were used before and after interviews • Able to demonstrate an extensive audit trail
Transferability	• Relied on theoretical sampling • Used verbatim transcripts and thick descriptions in data analysis
Dependability	• Coherent themes were reported across transcripts
Confirmability	• Completed several debriefing sessions with committee members
Integrity	• Committed to professionalism and empathy during interviews • Committed to confidentiality and anonymity

Following the completion of the dissertation and degree, participants will be given an executive summary of the research process and findings. This provides a thank you to the participants for their contribution to the study and serves as an opportunity for them to learn from and potentially implement the insights and recommendations within their own organizations.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Research question one asked how employees reconstruct and perceive their employee engagement experiences. When all of the participant reconstructive narratives are taken and analyzed together, patterns of experience emerge from the data, which form the zones of engagement. The zones of engagement are not intentional patterns or places where participants are purposefully acting in concert, but instead are places where meaningful experiences occur, which provides the complexity, richness, and texture that develops the essence of employee engagement. The themes that emerged from the data to form the zones of engagement suggests that even though employees had their own individual experience, when all of the experiences are taken together in the gestalt approach, patterns emerge. The result is six themes or zones of engagement that lead to the essence of employee engagement.

The zones of engagement derive from Heath's (1993) approach to meaning, where zones of meaning are created as interpretive frames by which organizations and their key stakeholders create meaning. These zones of meaning are rooted in a rhetorical perspective to better understand and explain how meaning is created (Heath). He derived the zones of meaning from Burke's (1966) research in that meaning is both created and articulated through what he called "terministic screens." Terministic screens provide a channel for people to filter and form their interpretations of reality and exercise corresponding behaviors based on the interpretations. Once these terministic screens, or

perceived and reconstructed patterns of reality, become observable through actions and discourse, Heath (1993) suggested, they have become zones of meaning.

Heath's zones of meaning have mostly been applied to crisis and risk contexts (e.g., Albu & Wehmeir, 2014; Palenchar & Heath, 2007), but this meaning-making approach is applicable when considering employees as a stakeholder group and how the reconstructed patterns of reality from zones of meaning. These are the zones of engagement, the places in which employees behaviors and conversations create the shared organizational reality of employee engagement. Zones of meaning also help to identify reality links of group perspectives based on collective individual experiences, which supports targeted communication efforts (Heath & Palenchar, 2000; Palenchar & Heath, 2002), such an organizational internal communication programs.

The emergent themes include the following: (1) employee engagement experiences occur from non-work related experiences at work, (2) employee engagement is freedom in the workplace, (3) employee engagement is going above and beyond roles and responsibilities, (4) employee engagement occurs when work is a vocational calling, (5) employee engagement is creating value, and (6) connections build employee engagement experiences. Below each theme is discussed in detail and supported by participant quotes.

Employee Engagement is not related to Actual Work

Participants shared reconstructive narratives that focused on experiences that did not relate to the job role or function within the organization. Most of the literature talks about job resources and the availability of those resources (e.g., work conditions, job

resources, organizational reputation), with little to no mention of non-work related antecedents of employee engagement. Participants did not share or recall experiences that discussed the job resources identified in previous research. The stories shared by participants focused on experiences not related to actual work such as support during tough times, sending out holiday cards, leadership support, finding common points of interest with leadership and community service. Participants assumed the non-work related experiences to be employee engagement.

One detailed narrative exemplifies the non-work related experience that was described as employee engagement. Participant John shared his employee engagement experience that occurred when his mother passed away.

When I lost my mother, I you know received a card with all the management and not just the management but they had offered a card for all of my fellow associates to sign and had a lot of encouraging messages in there and just to see that, again, knowing how busy we are, that time was taken for me and it was sent to me, low and behold, that wasn't the end of it. Then I received flowers on top of that. I received a lily which I still have to this day, it was a potted lily, and again with another small card from the management team and you know I had lost various family members at previous employers and, again, it was more of a focus on, "When are you returning to work?" Yes, there were the brief condolences that are, I think, social graces, "Sorry for your loss but let's get back to work. Let's focus on this" whereas here, it was a personalized thing that I was encouraged to take as much time as I needed and then upon my return, you know everybody was

understanding and I didn't feel pressed or pressured to speak of it, but I was made aware that there were more than one set of ears in this building that were open to listening to me and supporting me and aside from that, that the company had other resources if I needed help to deal with my loss and my grief.

Chris also recalled a time when one of his employee's daughter passed away and how he and his fellow employees did their "best to ensure that we took care of our [employee] and his family," and how he continued to support the employee even after the initial passing of his daughter. This reconstructed narrative was considered an employee engagement experience.

Doug shared a narrative that focused on how he sent out a holiday card to his employees as a chance to share personal information. He said:

My daughter got married last August, so of course when you get married, you have the nice family portrait of you and your kids and my wife wanted to go do that as a Christmas card and I was extremely uncomfortable. I was like ah I don't know. This is too touchy-feely for me. Can't I give them a picture of the Christmas tree? Again I think is someone going to look at it and go "Wow, he makes too much money because the dress is too nice." Anyway, all those thoughts you have. It was interesting, the feedback I got from that is people really enjoyed me sharing something of my family.

Edward talked about an engagement experience with a vice president, where they found a point of common interest, which helped humanize the leader. He said:

So I'm wearing my Cubs lanyard and it's a huge site. I'm walking around the plant trying to get to another building and I walk past this guy, this VP, and he says, "Oh, you're a Cubs fan" and so we had this five minute conversation about the Cubs. He told me how he grew up near Chicago, Illinois, and I told him where I grew up... And I had gone a year and a half thinking I didn't like him, that he wasn't personable, he didn't get it, I made all these assumptions I had made based on the lack of the relationship, the lack of engagement with him. And that's a stupid little tiny example but, to me, it's kind of actually the illustrative of the whole point here.

Jane recalled when she initially joined the company and how her supervisor took the time to show her and her husband around the city to get them acquainted with where they would be moving. She said:

When I first got here, after I interviewed, my husband came and my director showed us around [city]. The organization wanted your spouse to see where you are moving. After I got here, my director got me comfortable with [city]. It was very nice because he didn't have to take that time to do that and pay that personal attention. Even though it was just for a couple hours, it always stuck with me.

Justin also shared a reconstructed narrative that focused on employee engagement as "activities that volunteer to help like at the VA hospital or some of the resume writing and mock interview workshops we've put on for transitioning service members."

These examples demonstrate that part of the employee experience is being treated as a human, not a worker or asset, and this helps lead to employee engagement. When

employees felt engaged they often reflected upon a time or experience when someone acknowledge who individually they were outside of their role within the organization. Kahn (1992) suggested that employees should be treated with care since psychological presence, fundamental to employee engagement, is a gift from employees to organizations. The non-work related employee experiences shared by participants suggests that part of employee engagement is cultivated by a system that treats each employee like a person and recognizes the human element embedded within organizations since social beings comprise the very makings of organizations.

Employee Engagement is Freedom in the Workplace

Participant reconstructed narratives touched on the idea that employee engagement was rooted in having freedom in the workplace. This experienced freedom provided employees opportunities to explore and experiment with projects or assignments that related to their job responsibilities. In other cases, participants used the freedom as a means to develop projects or assignments beyond what was required of them or not even related to their actual job roles. Freedom also featured a level of trust that allowed participants to make mistakes and see these mistakes as opportunities to learn and not be punished.

Katrina shared her experience in creating a new program for employees that was beyond her roles and responsibilities. The organization did not receive any benefits from the program and the program's sole purpose was to provide a creative outlet for employees. The freedom to develop this program was one of her primary reconstructed narratives shared regarding her employee engagement experiences.

Two years ago we wanted to start doing fun things...I remember staying up and working late on the internal short film competition. I had to call other short film competitions and see what they did. I started from the ground up to create this program for our field, then I had to write the rules, releases, had to create how we are going to market this to our 22,000 employees across the company...a lot of stuff that had to happen, last year was a great success, will kick off in July this year and the winners go to movie chain conference in Vegas. Last year, I went and chaperoned. The program is never stopping, never a lull in the program. I knew it was going to fall on my plate, and I have to be ok with that, it's about our culture, I knew that we had film lovers and aspiring directors, we get nothing out of it and it costs us a lot of money, but it's just for fun.

Tricia shared her experience in creating an ally program for members of the LGBT community in her workplace. Part of the program offered employees the chance to place LGBT-friendly mouse pads on their desk to demonstrate their commitment to being an ally. The participant shared how this program led to employees sharing stories of how this helped LGBT employees be more open in the workplace, and for those employees who are parents support their children in the process of coming out about their sexuality. This whole program was beyond the participant's roles and responsibilities in the traditional sense but was the experience she shared related to employee engagement experiences, demonstrating that the freedom to take on a passion project beyond what was asked of her cultivated a deeper sense of employee engagement.

The presence of trust also led to freedom in the workplace in that participants were trusted to do their work and to be successful in doing so. In other words, earned trust from management or supervisors cultivated anonymity in roles and responsibilities, which helped participants feel empowered. Vicky explained that the earned trust helped her feel like management wasn't watching every move she made and trusted her to get the job done. Shelly suggested that when management trusts employees to successfully carry out work tasks, employees "will do good work for you." Josh shared his experience of being trusted by his direct supervisor, which helped create an employee engagement experience.

My boss promoted me and, leading up to that, there were a variety of times where he would tell me things like how much he valued me on the team, that he trusted my judgment. I remember a point where he said, "You don't need to keep coming to me and asking if it's okay to do this and okay to do that on your projects. I trust you. I trust your judgment. Most of the time, when you come talk to me, the thing you're thinking about doing is something I would've recommended you do. You can stop doing that." He didn't say it as a criticism. It was almost like a pushing me out of the nest a little bit.

This sense of freedom experienced by participants also created space for making mistakes. Gerry shared that the trust between her and her boss led her be more confident in decision-making even if the decision was not the correct one. Trust created a freedom from perfectionism and suggested that it was okay to make mistakes on the job, which created confident decision-making.

I earned her trust. I think that was a big part of it. Before, there was always that ‘mother may I?’ I guess you would say, but after that, you know she kind of loosened the reins a little bit and said, “Okay no, you go. Go ahead. You don’t need to ask before you go. I trust you to make the right decisions. Keep me in the loop but you don’t need to wait for a decision.” So I think it gave me that push to, rather than always be waiting on an answer from her, she wanted me to make the decisions having confidence in, if it’s not 100% right, it’s in the right direction. But I felt empowered to be more in charge of my own work.

Catherine also had a similar experience where the autonomy created by her supervisor led to a freedom in the workplace that allowed her to practice trial and error until she got it right. She said:

The way that she allowed me to do some trial and error, the way that she trusted me and my different point of view, even though it wasn’t an area of expertise, the way that she was supportive but not micromanaging, really enabled just exceptional work. I remember feeling, “Oh my goodness, I’m not sure if I can do this” and then her saying, “You know what, you can. You’ve got this. Don’t worry about it. I don’t need to see this. I don’t need to review this. You’ve got this. You’re good.”

Freedom in the workplace provides employees the opportunity to take risks in decision-making and develop passion projects. Oftentimes, the passion projects described by participants were beyond their traditional job roles and required more of their time and resources to complete them. However, since the projects fulfilled a passion, participants

were comfortable putting in the extra effort. This leads to the next zone of engagement, which is going beyond roles and responsibilities and is discussed next.

Employee Engagement is going Beyond Roles and Responsibilities

Participant narratives demonstrated that employee engagement experiences are also when employees choose to go above and beyond the roles and responsibilities required by the job. The perception is that being engaged is the expectation that employees should be willing to do more than what is expected of them, where completing the required job responsibilities is not enough to be engaged. Participants discussed that to be engaged, an employee must be willing to do more or what Ryan referred to as “being proactive.” Tricia recalled that employee engagement is going “above and beyond in their day to day job.” Katrina talked about in the sense of “making the extra effort,” and labeled the person not willing to make the extra effort as disengaged. Dallas shared his perceptions about going beyond job responsibilities:

When employees are engaged in their day to day activities and trying to do the best thing for themselves, the folks they’re working for and with, and the company, and taking that to the next level, whether it’s working extra hours or taking the time to dot the Is and cross the Ts, um taking the initiative before someone tells you to do something.

Another participant, Lance, shared a similar sentiment and talked about going above job tasks as discretionary effort or employees flexibility in being able to do more than is asked of them:

One of the things we're really focused on is a term we call discretionary effort.

Okay so we can get by and we can survive at this level of performance but what is going to get us to individually provide that discretionary effort and do a little bit above and more than what is required? That's where we get to that extraordinary level. That's something that really we try as a company, we try to focus on, is getting our people to that discretionary effort level.

Since participants suggested that being engaged is about going above and beyond what is required by the job, disengagement would be labeled as just doing the bare minimum or only the basic job requirements. Disengagement is discussed next as a sub-theme under the going above and beyond zone of engagement.

Disengagement

Disengagement emerged from the data in relation to the theme of going above and beyond roles and responsibilities. Just as employees who demonstrate behaviors of going beyond their job responsibilities are engaged, employees who simply do what is required of them demonstrate disengagement. From the participants' perceptions, disengaged employees do just enough to get by and do not take an initiative to take on more responsibilities than required. The disengaged employees do just enough to get by and not raise any red flags. As Doug said, "They are just coming in for the paycheck, which would be a tough existence." Tom talked about management that never goes above and beyond as being disengaged. Ryan explained that disengagement might be found in whether or not employees contribute to meetings and find solutions to problems and said, "If you just bring up the problems but you don't have solutions, then you're not really

helping,” and he connected that particular experience to disengagement. Justin also referred to “doing the bare minimum” as disengagement.

The reason and explanation for disengaging and just doing the bare minimum at a satisfactory level was often in response to a negative situation. Catherine shared her own experience in being disengaged:

I struggled with was the lack of inspiration for myself mostly from leadership and the lack of excitement about the work because it was so disjointed...I did just enough because I’m an overachieving Type A perfectionist, but just enough to kind of get by and feel good about myself and not get my hand slapped, but I didn’t go above and beyond and I didn’t really care, frankly. And I remember thinking like, on a scale of 1 to 10, my engagement is hovering around like a 3 or 4.

Catherine did contemplate leaving the organization following the negative experience, but was able to take on a new role instead. Josh almost left as well after experiencing a negative work encounter that fueled his disengagement, but ended up staying with the organization. He said, “For a little while, I thought pretty hard about leaving and even took some steps toward leaving because I did not feel valued. I felt actively disliked on a certain level, although she treated me okay personally other than that, that thing. So I almost quit.” Lance did in fact leave after the negative experience and feeling disengagement.

Disengagement has consequences for both employees and the organization, and in most cases, the employee is toying with leaving the organization in response to

disengagement experiences. This would make sense given that some participants suggested that employee engagement is rooted in an employee's intent to stay. Ron said that employee engagement experiences should, "help [employees] feel like it's a good work environment so that they won't leave." Therefore, some participant employee engagement experiences suggest that the outcome is not productivity but instead employee retention.

Work as a Vocational Calling

Participants reconstructed employee engagement by using passion or vocation as a way to describe the experiences. Employee engagement is about finding passion in the work and seeing the job as a vocation, which means being engaged is not about punching a timecard and earning a living, but instead it is the transition to seeing the job as more than just a job. Doug said that employee engagement, "is passion and people wanting to be involved and people you know enjoying their work and wanting to get a sense of accomplishment. So I always look that if somebody's passionate or somebody cares about what they're doing, they're engaged." Katrina suggested that at some point the organization would not be able to pay an employee any more money or that employee tangible rewards will somewhat max out. So for her to continue to experience employee engagement requires tapping into that passion. Passion also leads to enjoyment in the daily activities required by the job. Justin claimed that, "Enjoying what you're doing ties into if you're engaged or not. If you're engaged, you probably enjoy it. If you enjoy it, you're probably engaged. So it's sort of, to me, you can't really have the one without the other." Vicky said that just showing up for the paycheck or punching the timecard is not

an ideal way to live, which is understandable since so many of everyone's waking hours are spent working. Vicky said:

They're not just there to get their paycheck. That's for me, that's a terrible way to exist. I don't want to just come to work and just sit and wait for the day to be over. So it's kind of, I guess for me, engagement for me really is a difference between having a career and having a job. If somebody's really focused on their career, they're really getting a lot of enjoyment out of it and really getting a lot of benefit and not just showing up.

To create that passion and make it more than a job requires an understanding of the job and the organization. Having a good understanding of the mission of the organization and how the employee fits into the mission helps the employee feel like it is more than just a job. Understanding and information leads to the development of purpose and passion in work, which creates employee engagement experiences. Bart said:

I think it's the process of trying to make sure this is more than just a job, that people feel they have a place in the organization, that they understand the mission. They understand what we're trying to accomplish and it gives them a sense of purpose. I think that's an important part, as opposed to just be doing the work and...not really knowing where they're going.

Organizations can also have formal programming to help develop passions for employees. Tricia talked about formal, internal groups created by her employer that help cultivate opportunities for employees to foster their passions. She said:

They're a place where people can do something they're passionate about. They can also learn skills that they may not have the opportunity to in their day job. So for instance, if you're in a call center and you're just taking phone calls, you may never have the opportunity to do any kind of project management or marketing or something to those lines, but if you join a [group] and take an active role in that, you can do those type of things.

In addition, part of the job being an actual vocation is embodying what it means to do the work. Dallas said, "I find the most effective team members, to me, are people that it's not a job, it's actually a vocation. You don't do police work. You're a police officer. That's who you are. You don't do marine infantry landings. You're a marine. You don't do social work; you're a social worker." In other words, an engaged employee takes on her or his job identity that creates a reciprocal connection between the work identity and vocational calling, where the two work together to create a meaningful employee engagement experience.

Employee Engagement is about Creating Value

For some participants, employee engagement is experienced as a process that is focused on creating value for employees. Participants suggested that value is not created from formal human resources programing, but instead happens more organically in different, individual ways. Bart said:

I hate to treat it like a formal program...it's hard when you turn it into a program and start trying to measure it by numbers because people look at it like "Wow, that's just a number thing" and it's really not. It's hard to explain. But I think

that's the only thing I don't like is when we try to turn everything into numbers but, as engineers or as leaders, we have to measure everything because that's how we see if we're shifting or changing and I think that's the only downside in my mind. It becomes more like a mathematical equation than it is about a process.

For some employees, value is created through tackling challenging work or being in a position that aligns with one's talents. In overcoming the challenges and succeeding in a particular position or role, peers, supervisors and/or the organization recognize employees for the work being accomplished or challenges overcome. Employees also create value from seeing the impact of their work both at an organizational level and community level. In other words, employees see how they are making a difference for their organization, contributing to its goals and objectives, and how they are potentially impacting the community in which the organization resides. When challenges, recognition and impact of work are taken together, the experience creates value for employees and cultivates moments of employee engagement. Figure 1 illustrates the process of creating value for employee.

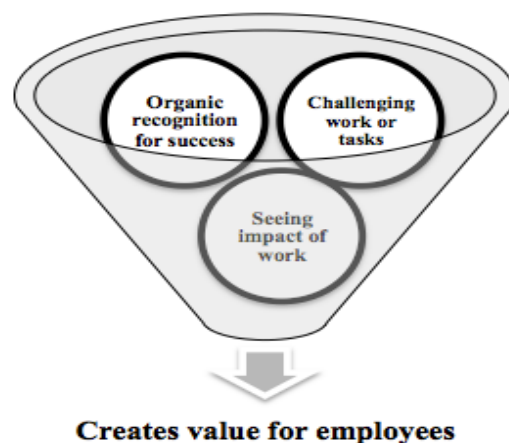


Figure 1. The process of creating value for employees

Participants used reconstructed narratives to explain how value is created for employees, which leads to employee engagement experiences. Jessica suggested that when it comes to employee engagement, “it’s really about creating value.” One dimension of cultivating value is providing employees with work or tasks that are challenging. To demonstrate the challenging work or tasks, Catherine shared, “So I would probably say one time where I really felt engaged in everything that we were doing, for me, when I go back, the ones that popped in my head are when there was challenging work and a problem to solve.” Ron also shared a narrative about how his experience in solving problems for a big client created a valuable experience for him, which in turn led to him experiencing employee engagement. Ron said:

I got sent up to England. We have a customer up in England. And it was one of those, “Ron, you need to go this Friday. Ron you need to be there by Monday,” type of thing. Because we had a big customer who had problems with one of our [products] and they actually couldn’t use it and they’re a really important customer and they were basically shut down. So we were out there and I met the people at the [location] you know and basically within about a week, we figured out what happened and we had, obviously we had to let the customer know what happened, and it took basically another six months to correct everything and to kind of clean up from the pain that was caused, but I liked it a lot. I really liked everybody at the [location]. It was interesting. You know I felt like I was doing something valuable as opposed to just filling out sheets and some of the work

processes that we have to do and you know actually helped [the customer] too.

And they were appreciative.

Gerry recalled a narrative that focused on being faced with a challenge at work and how this experience created value for her. She said:

I put together a team of technical people, people on our team, security people, the vendor, to try to understand where our issue was. And after answering questions and looking at data, we were able to identify the issue and working with all of the experts, we were not able to have a solution. It was a hiccup with the vendor-supported tool and they weren't going to be able to have a fix in place. So rather than going back with, "We don't have an answer," I knew that wasn't an option. So I really got to think outside of the box on how can we solve this problem? I was able to propose that solution, present it to my manager, get her approval, present it all the way up to the Vice President, got their approval, and was able to get all of the invitations out in less than three hours, which it was three days and we hadn't even sent a quarter of them yet. So it was great to meet that deadline of, by first thing in the morning on Thursday, everybody had their invitations. So I remember at that time, I was working a lot of hours but I felt so engaged that the work I was doing was worthwhile because I was empowered. It was a challenging problem to solve.

Recognition for successfully accomplished work is another dimension that constructs value for employees. Chris said, "I need that reinforcement too that I'm doing a good job." Lance talked about being appreciated and said:

That is the spark or the gratification or the recognition that drives engagement, say ‘Hey, what you do, what you’re doing is important. It’s appreciated and it supports what we’re trying to accomplish.’... That subtle pat on the back encourages me, encourages me to try to pass that down to others, you know just even if it is just a kind word and just understanding how impactful that is.

After Ron shared the previous narrative, he talked about how the recognition from his peers created value for him. He said:

I think my reputation outside of this facility increased and with all of my buddies I worked with, so that was good. So people started asking me for more help on things, so that was actually really good. See that’s real employee engagement and that’s how you get people to be motivated and like what they’re doing. You value them. You put them in a good spot typical to their talents you know obviously you believe in and that’s why people get excited about working here, not all the fluff that’s in the emails and all that stuff.

Jessica said her employee engagement experience is about being recognized because “the work is important and meaningful and impactful.” Employees also want to be recognized for the work they do, which helps instill the idea that they are valuable. Recognition is valued when it happens organically and is not treated as “checking the box” by management. Participants who were both supervisors and non-supervisions suggested that recognition from the organization, management or colleagues helped create that value, especially when it occurred in a spontaneous way. Those participants who do have supervisory positions acknowledged their role in creating value for

employees and took responsibility for that part of the process. Dylan put it succinctly by saying, “We value them, that we consider them more than just somebody who shows up at a given time and then leaves at a given time... You’re important to us and we want to take good care of you.” Tom also shared a narrative about acknowledging and appreciating how an employee took pride in keeping the workplace safe, suggesting that the recognition made a difference for the employee.

The last dimension of creating value that emerged from the interviews focused on how value is cultivated from seeing the impact of the work both at an organizational level but also within the communities the organization resides. Gerry said employee engagement experiences are related to the fact that, “the work you are doing is making an impact and you understand how it’s making an impact and you feel like you are integral to the success of the company.” Justin talked about employees making a difference through their work in the communities in which they live by “harnessing the passion of [organization] employees” and wanting to “improve the communities in which we live and work.” The community-level impact creates a sense of value for an employee that leads to employee engagement experiences. As an employee of a safety and community-based organization, Dallas sees immense value in the work the organization does to better the surrounding communities and recognizes how that helps create value, which leads to employee engagement experiences.

Connections Build Employee Engagement Experiences

For participants, employee engagement is embedded in the building of connections in different areas of the workplace. Connection is an in-vivo term used by

several participants and was therefore chosen to help explain this emergent theme. Connections were not described in the sense of being an intersection between two things but rather, connections enabled or created a bridge to employee engagement experiences. Edward said, “Employee engagement is all about connection and I don’t think you build connections with programs or HR initiatives necessarily.” Through the reconstructed narratives, participants described connections with the company (mission), work tasks or other employees, which created a channel to employee engagement experiences. Some participants discussed connections to one, two or all three factors, demonstrating that although connections is a meaningful part of employee engagement, the drivers of connection that develop through employee engagement experiences are based on individual or personal preference. Gerry said, “You do need to look at everything to understand what really kind of drives that connection for each individual.”

A few of the participants discussed building connections in the emotional sense. Participants suggested that personal, emotional connections could help employees feel more engaged or enrich their employee engagement experiences. Lance said:

The level of connection, what we’re trying to accomplish, is there a sense of belonging and belief that what we’re doing is good? I think it’s kind of an emotional tie... there’s people associated with doing work and people have emotions. People are living, breathing, human beings and at the core of every human are emotions, are feelings. I think that’s very very important.

Other participants mentioned the connection to the actual company, its mission, and work tasks as part of their employee engagement experience. Catherine said that

employee engagement experiences are rooted in the “close connection to the company and the work.” John talked about the connection to the company as part of his employee engagement experience. He said, “I felt SO connected and I still feel connected with this company to the point of it’s no longer just about money.” Matt also mentioned his connection to the work or what he calls the business, because of how exciting it is. He said, “I think you know it’s about making sure that people are connected with what’s going on in the business to me, mostly and that itself drives them in the direction of wanting to know more, wanting to be further engaged because it’s exciting. It’s an exciting business we’re in.” Kent also talked about how exciting it is to work for the company because of all of the unique things the organization is doing. Jessica also talked about being, “personally and intellectually connected with the place of work.” Justin discussed being “connected to the enterprise, per se, and some of the much larger goals and objectives that we have at that level?”

Building connections was also recalled in the sense of being connected to others within the organization. Some participants referenced that employee engagement is about building connections with other employees, and experiencing collaborations and working together as a group. Joe said that employee engagement, “is tapping into people’s spirit, tapping into their desire to be part of something greater. It’s tapping into their natural energy. They want to be a part of teams today. People want to work together.” Justin shared a story about collaborative teamwork that contributed to his employee engagement experience:

So it was very enlightening to see that everybody was so openly participating and people weren't feeling like they're getting their toes stepped on if something they were doing was being talked about as an area that needed to be improved. It was very much, "Let's collaborate and figure it out. Let's put it all on the table and then figure out how we put it back together" and it was a great experience.

Dale also shared how his employee engagement experience actually led to the development of connections with colleagues in other departments:

It helped us become more connected and helped strengthen that network. It also, I did feel more excited, more positive about being in this program, you know especially my track. I'm the only communicator in the [program], so I don't work with any other [program members] on a regular basis in my job. In my communications job, so I'm the only one, so without events like that or activities that I interact with other [group members], it tends to get a little lonely all by myself. So that made me feel more connected, more excited about being a part of that program, and yeah, motivated to engage more, to volunteer for things, to reach out to fellow [employees], fellow members, you know others who are in this program, to offer help if they need help or if I need help, to not be afraid to ask them to be more engaged or if I have questions and need them to help me out or just to share experiences and share this journey.

Dale's reconstructive narrative suggests that a reciprocal relationship exists between connections and employee engagement. In some instances, connections with other employees, the company or work tasks lead to employee engagement. However,

employee engagement experiences also contribute to the development of connections. Doug recalled, “I really looked at that as some of those engagement things to establish a relationship with people and again, sometimes how difficult it is, you would think it would be real simple.” Below is Figure 2, which demonstrates the different contributing factors that build connection and the reciprocal nature between connections and employee engagement.



Figure 2. Building connection and employee engagement

Building connections with others does suggest that the company culture or work environment influences the employee engagement experience. Daniel said, “Being engaged in, at [organization] is going to be quite different from being engaged in a door to door sales position because being engaged at [organization] means I’m engaged with my environment that I’m in and that means my neighbor, people who I work next to.” Daniel’s comments insinuate that being close to someone in proximity contributes to the employee engagement experience and helps cultivate the connections with colleagues. For some participants, being able to connect with other employees contributes to employee engagement. Tricia suggested that building connections helps create a “really good support network that is behind you to help you go forward in your career.” For others, leadership plays a role in creating connection as part of the employee engagement

experience. Leaderships' role in building connections that create employee engagement experiences is discussed next.

Role of leadership in building connections

Participants perceived the role of leadership as a contributing factor in creating personal connections. Josh spoke from a non-leadership position and said that when it comes to building connections related to employee engagement experiences, “a lot of it is your boss.” Catherine said, “Engagement is directly contingent on leadership and I know in my experience, I've tended to take jobs for the leaders I wanted to work for as opposed to the actual function of the job itself. I have found myself in different roles doing different work that I never really set out to do or even had an interest in but because of the leaders in charge of that space.” Edward had similar thoughts and expressed that employee engagement “starts from that close relationship with the supervisor.” John said that for leadership, employee engagement is “being genuinely informed and interested in the lives of their associates and their people.... the management team and the upper levels of management, not just your direct managers, but how engaged are the senior management in the company in the lives of the associates, not just the business.” Jane said, “How do we connect with them so that they love what they do, how do we engage them because what they do is not glamorous.” The more engaged management is with employees, the more likely connections will develop that lead to employee engagement experiences.

To establish connections between leaders and employees, participants suggested that management should be invested in creating opportunities for connection with

employees. Marty talked about “sitting down one on one with each one of your employees. That is the initial step is getting together.” Chris shared how he demonstrates his openness as a leader to establish personal connections with his employees:

They should be able to come to me with any kind of concern, any kind of idea, and I want to make sure that they always feel open. I will tell you right now, the door to my office is closed, which is very untypical of me only because it's easier to talk to you so somebody won't walk in here and/or hears the conversation, but my office door is never closed unless it's a private conversation with an individual. Even if I'm on a conference call, unless it is just some things that are being talked about as a company that are high level or need to know level, I'll leave the door open. I think any associate that has the right to know what's going on in our company to the most part, but I want to ensure that they feel open and there again, I'm the representative. I'm the person that ultimately is [the company] to them. I mean, I want to make sure that they feel comfortable that I work for them and it's not necessary that they work for me but I am there to help them any kind of way. If we're not open-minded and we don't have that door open all the time to our associates, if we're not out every day talking to them, after a while, we're just an entity and a company and we're not personable.

Shelly recalled an experience with a previous leader that cultivated connections among employees. She said, “She ended up doing our monthly meeting at a state park. We started by doing our normal meeting stuff. Then she said we needed to do team building stuff, and she forced all of us to work together and participate in the team

building activities. We ended up learning things about each other, working together and building connections.”

Bart also shared a narrative that described the role of leadership in creating connections for him. He said, “I think my manager at the time went you know out of her way to try and include me with her staff...I realized that she was trying to give me kind of a home where I had, where I could feel like I was part of the team rather than just being an outsider sent in to fix something.”

A few participants did suggest that training managers to develop connections with employees and be advocates for employee engagement is tough because it is not always part of the traditional leadership requirements. For example, Rebecca discussed her concerns about leaders who are hired for subject-matter expertise but lack the relational skills:

You have to remind people that employee engagement is not their manager skillset. It’s not their expertise but [employee engagement] has to be a conversation beyond lip service and platitudes...it’s not rocket science, it’s about people and people won’t forget how you make them feel. Especially companies that are run by brains but not emotional people, people are engaged with what they feel from you and you need to help them have a human connection, that’s how they experience employee engagement, not how they hear employee engagement.

Edward shared similar concerns to Rebecca about promoting a leader who does not understand the building connection aspect of employee engagement:

Over the years, people do really well in the engineering field and then a management position comes open and hey that person has been performing really well, we promote him. And they might be great engineers and they are good people but there's that leadership communication component that I, I'm very biased, but would argue would be just as important or even more important in a lot of cases than the technical aptitude in a management position.

In conclusion, connections with colleagues, leadership, work tasks and the company create employee engagement experiences. The employee engagement experience can also enrich the previously established connections, demonstrating a reciprocal relationship.

Zones of Engagement

Below is Figure 3 that illustrates the zones of engagement. The venn diagram shows how the employee engagement experience may contain all six zones. The sections that overlap demonstrate the places where employees experience two or more zones of engagement. The figure suggests the complexity of employee engagement and how different dimension may be experienced in tandem. Furthermore, as discussed above, each zone is complex even when it stands alone and should be therefore, strategically addressed.

To demonstrate how different zones work in tandem to make up the employee engagement experiences, three participant experiences in whole will be used to support the data. Phenomenology relies on the gestalt approach in that the whole is worth more than the sum of the individual parts to arrive at the essence of the phenomenon and in this

case would be the whole transcript instead of one line or one experience. First, Catherine shared reconstructed narratives that captured three zones: freedom in the workplace, creating value through challenging tasks and connections to both the company and leadership. Second, Justin's experiences illustrated the zones of non-work related experiences, work as a vocational calling, creating value based on seeing the impact of the work, and having connections to both the organization and colleagues. Last, Katrina shared reconstructed narratives that demonstrated freedom in the workplace, going above and beyond job responsibilities and work as a vocational calling. These three participant examples help exemplify that employee engagement is not just one thing, but rather many elements that reconstruct their experiences as illustrated in the zones of engagement. Some experiences may be defined by one zone of engagement or more, but the zones do not operate in silos as they all contribute to the employee engagement experience.

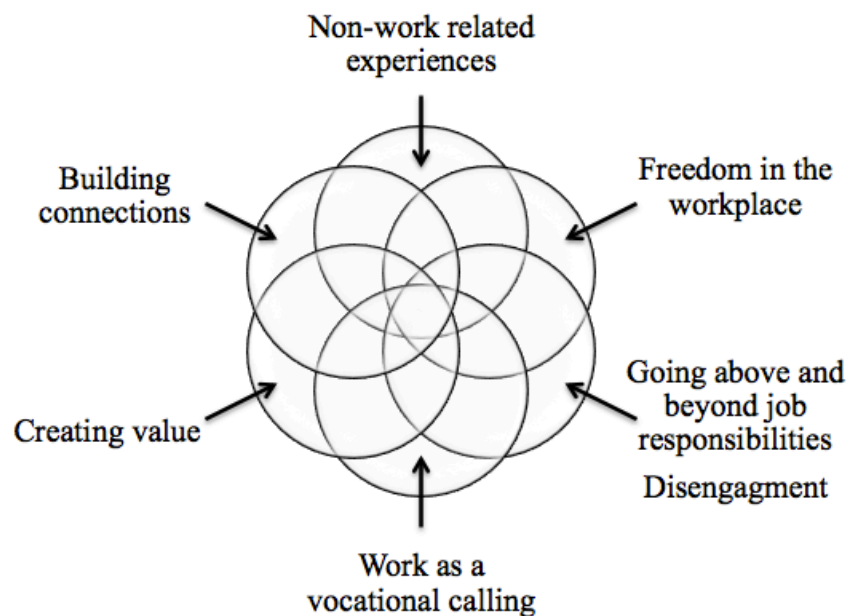


Figure 3. Zones of engagement

Participant Reconstructed Meaning-Making of Employee Engagement Experiences

The second research question sought to answer how participants reconstruct and perceive the meaning-making of employee engagement experiences. As participants shared reconstructive narratives, it became apparent that meaning was created through communication. Communication inductively emerged from the data and none of the interview questions specifically addressed the role of communication. This demonstrates the value of communication for participants since it was brought up even though it was not included as part of the interview guide. Communicative behaviors with other organizational members influenced how employees perceived and reconstructed the meaning associated with their employee engagement experiences. Participants suggested that employee engagement starts with communication; specifically employee engagement begins with dialogic communication. The themes that emerged from the data focused on how the dialogue exchanges create context for communicative parties and require communicators to listen, which demonstrates a commitment to the communication exchange. In addition, dialogic communication is most successful when done face-to-face and people share physical presence with one another. Internal communication, as a formal communication tool, also emerged from the data as another form of communication that constructs the meaning associated with employee engagement. Below is a discussion of dialogue and internal communication, which emerged from the data regarding the second research question that sought to understand how participants assign meaning to employee engagement experiences.

Employee Engagement Starts with Dialogue

Many of the reconstructive narratives recalled by participants were rooted in communication exchanges that were dialogic in nature. The public relations theory of dialogue proposed by Kent and Taylor (2002) incorporates five overarching tenets that include: *mutuality*, or the acknowledgment of relationships that occur within organizations; *propinquity*, or the spontaneity of the communication exchanges; *empathy*, or the supportiveness of those involved in the communication; *risk*, or the recognition that all relationships involve some form of risk; and *commitment*, or demonstrating an investment in the dialogic exchange. In dialogic theory, engagement is understood as a feature of propinquity that leads to dialogue.

However, in this dissertation, participants suggested that employee engagement starts with dialogue. For example, Marty discussed how communication initiates the employee engagement experience and said, “Communication has always been something that to me I stress first and foremost. Without communication, you have nothing. So that’s where it all starts.” Rebecca also discussed how employee communication rooted in dialogue leads to employee engagement. She said, “Dialogue or conversation, not a top down monologue, not talking at people but meeting people where they are...I think good employee communication gets to genuine engagement.” Dialogue not only contributes to the construction of employee engagement but it also helps maintain employee engagement. Jessica said, “You know I think part of it is just keeping that dialogue going and talking to people about what the experience is like for them, what are the gaps, what are the concerns, and just trying to be mindful.”

Dialogue is an important dimension of employee engagement as it helps create and maintain such experiences. One of the reasons employee engagement starts with dialogue is because dialogic communication creates context. The emergent theme of dialogue creating context is discussed next.

Dialogue creates context

Dialogue provides an opportunity to create context for those employees who participate in dialogic exchanges and this communication leads to meaning-making. Creating context among employees allows for personal connections to be established, which has the potential to enrich employee engagement experiences. Creating context is about talking to others on their terms in a way that is meaningful to them. Dialogue is about meeting people where they are, on their terms (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Joe said, “So for me, I made it a point to engage, to engage real time, to have a two-way conversation and to do it in a way that it was on everybody’s terms. There was no my terms, it was their terms.” John talked about how employee engagement and dialogue helps “develop that rapport, but just being invested and knowing how’s your family doing, if you have kids, and knowing those things and asking about those things.” Doug shared a reconstructed narrative about his employee engagement experience with an employee that was rooted in dialogue. The dialogic exchange offered an opportunity to use communication to create context, which helped increase his knowledge and understanding of the employee:

I was in Florida with one of my managers. I kind of had, I’d worked with him but not closely. We went out to dinner because we were both out there. Had a great

time, talked about our families and everything, and it was interesting when we were done, he said, “It was probably one of the first times I've gone out to dinner with my boss and not talked work.” I looked and said, “Well, that’s interesting but why would we talk work? Right? We’re out to have dinner and have a nice time. It doesn’t always have to be about work. I really enjoyed hearing about your father, this or that.”

Edward provided suggestions about how to use dialogue to create context. Once context is established through dialogic exchanges, the conversations can then transition to address work issues. However, Edward suggested that communicating with employees about their interests provides information into who they are, which can then enrich and enhance conversations related to work:

Go talk to your employees. You know ask them what they did over the weekend. Ask them about their kids. Go by their workplace, you know notice a picture in their office or whatever, and ask them about it. Have that conversation and start to build on a personal level, so that, again, if something has to be done or said or asked on a work level, that is so much easier if you’ve got that personal relationship.

Chris shared a story with similar sentiment about the value in creating context before dealing with work issues. The idea is that dialogic exchanges that recognize and value the other can help create meaningful employee engagement experiences. He said:

When I talk to them, I’ll ask those open-ended questions and they’ll teach me a lot. I know probably more about tractors than I ever thought I would. Still

couldn't work on one, couldn't fix it or know a darn thing about one, but I definitely understand the language that they're talking more so than I did ever before, just because I truly get down to the nuts and bolts and once I get that foot in the door and I can talk to them about the things that they worked on, then that also opens up the door that they'll talk to me about other things, whether it's their personal life or work life or, "Hey, I just like to go fishing every Saturday." I'll talk to you about fishing if that's what you want to talk about.

Dialogic exchanges create employee engagement experiences because the dialogue provides context, understanding and insight into the other. For the dialogic interaction to be fruitful and informative requires active listening to demonstrate that the other is being heard. Listening emerged from the data as important component of dialogue and is discussed next.

Listening

Participants advised that successful dialogic communication requires the communicative partners engaged in the exchange to actually listen. The experiences described in the narratives featured listening and feeling heard as responses to the communication behaviors that contribute to the meaning-making of employee engagement. For example, Daniel jokingly said, "You know you have two ears and one mouth for a reason, right? So just to listen." Vicky said, "Everyone wants to be included in conversations. Who wants to talk to a person when they're not listening to you right?" Dallas said, "That's part of listening to people. Right so, a lot of what we want to say to people, we really need to listen more to what people are saying to us and then we're

shaping our message with their thoughts in tow.” Joe said, “When people feel like they’re being listened to, more comes. More goodness comes. And so in doing that, I never really forgot that right because you see people standing taller at the end of the day because they feel like their opinions matter.” Marty recalled that listening is about:

Knowing your people’s ‘why’ and that’s ah, in my opinion, that’s a pretty deep thing to try and understand but it’s really digging down and finding out more about that person, like I said. You may ask somebody, “What’s your why? Why did you come to [company]?” “Well for the money” but is it really the money though? Thinking about it further and further. Why the money? Of course, everyone has a job because they need to make money to live but why? Peel that layer back. Is it because I like expensive things or whatever? Okay, why do I like expensive things? Something like that, keep peeling back the layers to really understand your people and what makes them tick.

The benefit of listening and creating opportunities for people to feel heard is that this form of dialogic exchange creates openness and transparency because employees know their ideas and thoughts are valued. When employees know they are being heard, they are more likely to speak up. For example, Tricia said, “I think people are not just, ‘Hey, I have an idea. I’m not just going to sit with my head down. I’m going to bring it up to my supervisor or I can go talk to my two level up VP.’ There’s much more openness and sharing.” Dylan also shared the benefits of ensuring employees feel heard. He said, “It nurtures the ability for your employees to really want to sort of always look to have their creative juices flowing, to use that expression...nurturing all the things that,

to me, I want to see in the business...that ‘Hey, what I think, my input matters’.” Natalie shared a narrative about when employees voiced safety concerns and how the situation was handled, which showed employees they were heard by management:

We had several accidents due to ice and conditions and uneven sidewalks because they are old. So you have cracked sidewalks because it is old and there was concern over the number of accidents. So we created safety measures to identify unsafe sidewalks and talked with craft safety reps. We also have a people-based safety organization and had a discussion with employees in an all hands meeting where we would talk about the items and brought the safety issues to their attention. It was a good open discussion. Everyone felt heard.

Along with listening and ensuring employees feel heard, face-to-face communication also had a role in shaping dialogic exchanges. Participants valued face-to-face communication and shared how it contributed to the meaning-making associated with their employee engagement experiences. The emergent theme of face-to-face communication is addressed in the following section.

Face-to-face communication

Face-to-face communication emerged as an important theme associated with dialogue that contributes to employee engagement meaning-making. Other studies have determined that face-to-face communication is the ideal form of internal communication (e.g., Stein, 2006; White, Vanc, & Stafford, 2010), but the communication is still functional, from the top down and lacked the co-creational approach. The face-to-face communication shared by participants resembled more of a dialogic exchange; in

dialogue value is placed on mutual understanding and exercising presentness in the exchange (Taylor & Kent, 2014). Participants recalled and shared the opportunities in which they communicated face-to-face and how those exchanges impacted their employee engagement experiences. John recalled, “That personal follow-up and that handshake and that direct contact let me know that the company really cares... When you take the time to actually speak with your people, look them in the eye versus a phone call, it shows that they’re investing more than just the minimum.” Harriet talked about face-to-face communication with her direct supervisor and how those conversations create employee engagement. She said:

I’ll meet with my manager weekly, one-on-one, but maybe once a quarter, we go out of our way during these one on ones to talk about, “Are you happy with the role you’re in? What are your goals for the company? What kind of stretch assignments can I give you that would help you to develop in the areas you want to develop in?” It’s been those kinds of conversations and having the managers go to bat for me when I need them to, that’s when I feel employee engagement and I am truly engaged most at work when that kind of conversation is going on.

Doug shared a narrative that captured how face-to-face communication provides opportunities to connect with employees. He said, “I reach out to the sites to make sure if there’s issues people want to talk about with me face to face or there’s things that people want to show me, kind of hard to show in our work where somebody’s done a successful project and it doesn’t really come across on an online meeting, so I try to get out there and touch and see the folks.”

In a few cases, participants suggested that the face-to-face communication experiences were actually employee engagement experiences. For example, Amber shared an employee engagement experience that included the general manager, where she and the manager meet bi-weekly, face-to-face. She said:

I have a really recent example with the general manager for the part of the business I'm in, with me being fairly new to the business, he requested to get on my calendar once every two weeks, to sit down face-to-face for an hour. Actually he has blocked off time to um just see how things are going, to see if I'm being challenged enough with the work that I've been given, to see what's going well, what's not going well, to talk about training and development opportunities. So that, to me, is really great. So I have not just my boss, but the general manager, GM, for the whole segment of the business somewhat concerned or invested in how I feel about the job and what I'm doing or what I'm not doing.

Daniel also described a reconstructive narrative that highlighted face-to-face communication with his supervisor as an employee engagement experience. He said:

He made it a point to make a one on one with us for 15 to 20 minutes or take us to lunch. He ended up taking me to lunch and you know I was, first and foremost, very appreciative that he was taking the time to do something like that because it showed me he obviously cared where we wanted to go. So his main thing was to introduce himself to us, let us know what his plans are for us, but also hear out where we wanted to go. He had asked me at that time when we had lunch on our

one on one, what my goals were, where I saw myself, and when I wanted to see myself in those goals. And so we went through that.

Marty also talked about his face-to-face communication exchanges with his mentor as employee engagement. He recalled:

He was my mentor and he still is... When I met him in our new hire orientation, there was a connection there and we just really hit it off and I saw how successful he was and, I of course, you want to be top of anything, you've got to learn from the best and, in my eyes, he was there. Probably for that next year, every week, I had a one on one conversation with him and he really was someone that challenged me to do more and made sure that I was always bringing something to the table. His one on ones took it a little bit further than just talking. There was an action item at the end of it always that we could bring up in the next one to talk about that was being accomplished, that I was taking the steps moving forward in the right direction in my career.

Some of the face-to-face communication exchanges were pre-arranged events for work teams dispersed in different locations, and these opportunities were labeled as employee engagement experiences. Vicky shared a narrative about an event she plans to create face-to-face communication opportunities for her team. She shared:

I have a large group and they're kind of scattered everywhere. Like I said, I have some here, some in L.A and some there. So each year I do try to at least somehow bring them all together and have a planning session and really it's more for us to have a face to face opportunity...Usually it's like a two to three day thing. It's for

two days, I think, two and a half days. And so I feel like those activities are really important for driving engagement.

Dale also recalled a time when a face-to-face communication event was planned to inspire employee engagement. He said:

It's been a while since we've gotten us all together physically and geographically in the same room or same area and there have been some changes in the programs, some big changes, and the program had grown a lot. There was a lot more of us, new people to the program. And let's get them all together. So [my boss] asked me to put it all together. So I organized this offsite and it was a full day of activities. You know we had speakers come in. We had discussion panels. We had several [group members] get up and brief their current roles and rotations, assignments. And so there's an education piece there. People got to learn about others and learn about the business and we had our CEO, he came and spoke as well. So it was a full day of activities but I would call that definitely in that vein of employee engagement where we saw a need to do that...to inspire them, to get them excited, more excited about being a part of the program, kind of a little rah-rah. This is a really cool thing to be a part of and we should be proud and excited about that.

Justin shared a reconstructive narrative that captured how a planned, face-to-face daylong meeting provided an opportunity for employees to work through some recent challenges and hopefully make changes. He considered this a meaningful employee engagement experience. He said:

We were having some difficulties, some challenges. And we got a group of people together in a conference room here in New Jersey. We flew people in. People came from across the country, at different sites, came to a conference room here in New Jersey and we spent, I'm going to guess it was somewhere between four and six hours. We had lunch brought in and it was kind of a Kaizen session, best practices, lessons learned. The whole goal of it was, how do we look at what's happening today and areas for opportunity to improve and then some real tangible improvements we can make. What was interesting about it was that everybody was there not just because they were told to be there. They were there because they wanted to be there, they wanted to make it better, and you could tell by the level of enthusiasm and excitement in the conversations, that people were there because they wanted to make a difference.

Some group experiences with face-to-face communication provided opportunities for employees to brainstorm and contribute to planning the work. Dylan shared, "Before we even get to the job site and while we're here and brainstorming about everything, I want to hear any questions but also if there's anything that comes to anybody's mind that might be an improvement over what I had thought... There was some really great exchanging of ideas."

Gerry, an employee that works from home all the time, described a time when she was having issues with her boss. When Gerry and her boss had an opportunity to meet in-person, face-to-face, and the experience helped her deal with concerns, which improved the work situation. She said:

We did have a face to face, so I was able to meet my manager and my new director in person and kind of understand and make each side feel human and that probably did impact to a lot of the turnaround. I think the learning and the meeting face to face, all of it started to improve but it was a big kickoff event, so there were a lot of people that I work with that were all able to get together and work through this.

Some participants suggested that the physical presence with face-to-face communication establishes trust, which can lead to employee engagement. The reconstructive narratives around physical presence described organic face-to-face communication that happened naturally as employees interacted. Rebecca said, “Engagement is made possible when walking around [company building]. That is where trust is built...good engagement comes from suits on the floor.” In some cases, it was planned but the approach was informal. Joe also shared a similar reconstructive narrative about physical presence in engaging his staff. He said:

So I made it a point to come in every morning and meet with folks on third shift. No agenda, we’re going to walk around and talk. What I would do is try to be genuine and that is, I don’t have to come out with a bunch of charts and have a formal presentation. Let’s talk about what we have to accomplish this week. How are we doing financially? What are some of the challenges we’ve got? And for me, it was usually almost like the water cooler talks, going around and engaging with people. I would do that every day, every shift, at least spend 20 minutes or so on every shift walking around talking to people... Those daily shift by shift walks

in a plant kind of early in my career taught me a lot about the value of engaging people and, more importantly, about the value of them feeling they have been engaged as opposed to just coming in and receiving orders and you know transmitting or doing.

Being mentally present in communication exchanges also influences how participants make meaning of the employee engagement experience. Since successful dialogic communication occurs when people are in the same space, spending quality time interacting (Taylor & Kent, 2014), those involved in dialogic exchanges over the phone need to exercise mental presence to compensate for the lack of physical presence. Vicky discussed how being present on the phone conversations is often challenging but necessary for rich dialogue:

Who wants to have a conversation when you know that person on the other end is multitasking, which I'm very guilty of that but I'm trying not to. You know checking my email while talking to my employees or something like that. That's a conscious effort right, that's something we constantly have to work on. It doesn't make us a bad person. It's just, you know we're kind of in situations where we have so much to do.

Daniel also discussed how being on the phone requires a certain type of mental presence. He said, "So being present in the moment is extremely important and on the phone, you can be somewhat distracted, looking at something else while still hearing what's going on but you still have to be completely engaged."

Dialogic exchanges that value listening and face-to-face communication create contexts, which lead to meaningful employee engagement experiences. Dialogue is rooted in understanding, meaning-making, and interpersonal interactions (Taylor & Kent, 2014). Building connections, along with creating value and non-work related experiences are three zones of engagement previously discussed. These three zones of engagement are fueled and created by dialogic exchanges. For example, a component of creating value is organic recognition, which would fall under the category of a dialogic exchange that is spontaneous, informal and occurs face-to-face. Non-work related experiences were often rooted in genuine care and interest in another employee. Participants shared experiences that were built on dialogue exchanges between two or more employees. Also, since dialogic exchanges create context, this can aid in the aspect of building connections that focuses on colleagues and leadership. Communicators who practice dialogue are open-minded, demonstrate empathy and patient with the other (Taylor & Kent, 2014). Below is Figure 4 that illustrates the overlap between the zones of engagement and dialogue, which leads to the construction of employee engagement experiences.

Internal Communication

Internal communication in a formal sense emerged from the data without prompting participants to discuss formal internal communication as part of their employee engagement experiences. Internal communication was described similar to what Welch and Jackson (2007) refer to as internal corporate communication.

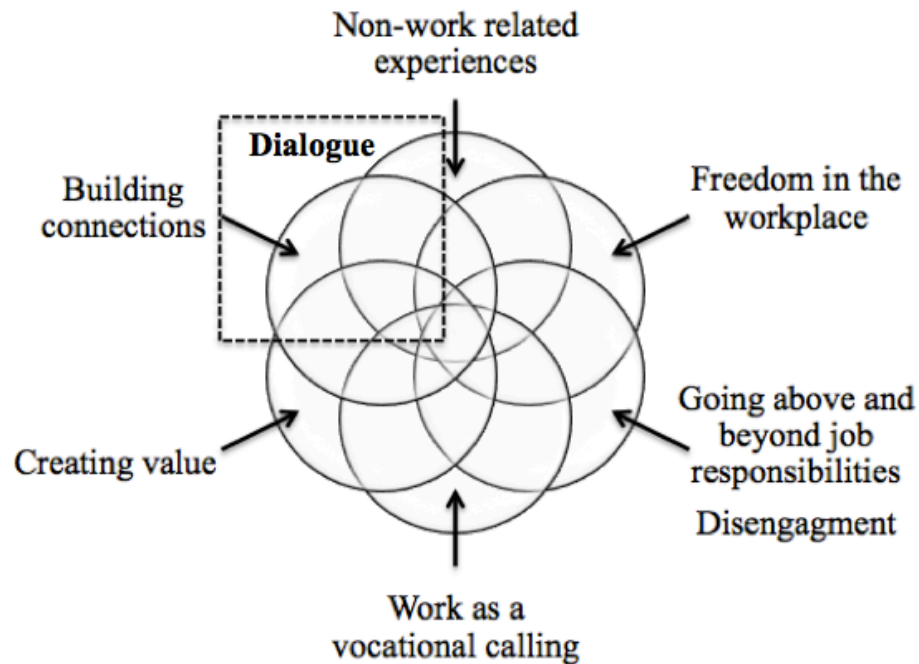


Figure 4. Employee engagement experience

Internal corporate communication is “communication between an organization’s strategic managers and its internal stakeholders, designed to promote commitment to the organization, a sense of belonging to it, awareness of its changing environment and understanding of its evolving aims” (p. 186). Formal communication does contribute to meaning-making, but not to the extent the previous literature would suggest. Dialogic interactions carry more weight in creating meaning and constructing the employee engagement experience, which was discussed previously. However, it is important to discuss the formal tools under the umbrella of internal communication that emerged from the data as part of the communicative routines that advance the meaning-making of employee engagement. Below is a discussion of themes that emerged regarding internal communication tools and how internal communication provides clarity and can serve as a

listening mechanism. The section concludes with how participants perceive and reconstruct the value of internal communication as part of the meaning-making associated with employee engagement.

Internal communication tools

Participants discussed tools from emails to website content and how these tools influence employee engagement experiences. A few participants suggested that employee communication or internal communication was the same as employee engagement, and used the terms interchangeably to describe their experiences. Dale suggested that employee engagement, “would be more you know employee communications, touch points with stakeholders, how you’re keeping people informed, how you’re including them in an inclusive environment in the process.” Amber had similar thoughts about employee engagement and said, “Hearing you know some corporate staff, some sort of message that’s sent down to people throughout the company. So primarily, with I know with [company], a lot of the engagement, so the engagement I’m thinking of like that is done through email, mass emails.” Kent considered employee engagement to be communication among employees and how they interact with each other. Beyond assuming employee engagement and internal communication as one in the same, participant reconstructive narratives included mechanisms for internal communication as well.

One form of internal communication discussed most by participants who brought up internal communication was formal emails from leadership about employee engagement. Some participants found the emails from leadership that focused on

employee engagement initiatives to be disingenuous. For example, Ron said, “It almost seems a little phony for me, a little fake. Let’s talk about how valuable employees are. But if there’s any sign that we’re not meeting our profit goals, you know the next thing you hear is layoffs. So it seems a little, a little phony to me.” Matt also talked about how internal communication regarding the annual employee engagement survey may come across as disingenuous because management is more concerned with getting a particular response rate than actually hearing from employees. He said, “I think that’s a little bit of an artificiality that people roll their eyes at. It should be more of, ‘Here’s the survey. You want to take the survey and have your voices heard, great. If you don’t, that’s okay too.’” Dale said that most internal communication is still rather archaic in terms of solely pushing information and suggested that, “I’ll tell you this, I’ll say I’ve never really seen a really effective channel to do that. Email is very flawed and although a lot of people are still very dependent upon it and use it probably as an engagement tool, I think it’s flawed in a number of ways. One, there’s no personal contact and, two, people get way too many emails nowadays.” Joe also commented on emails and said:

What you’re going to find is when you come into companies, our culture has shifted a bit in that we like to email people rather than talk to people. Right. We like to text people rather than talk to people. That flies in the face of what we’re trying to accomplish, that fundamental technology, and that’s typically a very one on one kind of communication. It’s very impersonal. It does not allow us to oftentimes reflect the spirit or intentions of the particular ask, request, process.

He then offered an opportunity to reframe and transition away from the traditional assumptions of pushing internal communication messaging. Joe said, “Let’s go challenge that. Let’s go face into the fact that while email is an incredibly efficient communication mechanism, it drives the wrong behavior. And let’s go create a workspace that forces people to come together, that creates opportunity for them to come together.”

Despite some of the negative assumptions around internal communication methods, internal communication still provides an opportunity to present clear information as a means to keep employees informed about employee engagement. Tricia talked about how formal emails help inform her about fellow colleagues. She said, “There’s always stories that are motivating and captivating about people’s individual successes. Here’s a person that may be sitting at a desk like four floors away from you that you only saw in the elevator with their head down. Look at the great things they’ve done. They climbed this mountain or they did this great volunteer thing and they led change.”

Participants discussed the importance of clear internal communication and how this form of communication can lead to employee engagement. Internal communication needs to clearly address issues related to employee engagement so employees understand the messages. Dallas said, “You have to have clear communication to have you know effective engagement.” Doug talked about how clarity in communication removes the use of buzzwords or slogans that may cloud or distort the meaning of messages associated with employee engagement. He said:

It is much more important than just sending out a bunch of buzzwords and buzz phrases you know because after a while, they become just that. They're an ad slogan. Whereas if you're saying, "Hey, we're going to extend the cafeteria hours for another half hour on each side because we've received feedback that people were being rushed to get in and out of the cafeteria," instead of just saying we extended the hours, we've told people why we did it and they can connect the dots if that was something that would make their work life easier.

Formal internal communication tools can be effective in communicating messages related to employee engagement, especially when an emphasis is placed on clear messaging. Internal communication can also serve as a formal listening tool. Participants suggested that listening should also be used as a function of formal internal communication. In most reconstructed narratives shared by participants, listening was about gauging the culture and setting benchmarks for employee engagement. For example, Jessica shared, "So people will still get surveyed on average once a year but there will be more surveys and some of them will be representative samples so that we can just have more survey occasions, so it's more of an ongoing listening strategy." Joe also talked about formal listening via internal communication tools:

They're called innovation teams and you know what it is, it's a session where we just sit there and listen. So we have a diverse cross-section of people from around the business. We have particular topics we like to deep-dive into and a monthly, actually every 60 days, the leaders just go in and sit down and listen and talk to them and get feedback. That gets aggregated at a macro level and we

look for themes, we do, we look for themes about leadership. We look for themes about culture. We look for themes about you know innovation, bureaucracy busting, all those kinds of things.

When it comes to internal communication, methods still need to be perfected.

Dale summed it up best when he said, “I guess to my point, the best way to engage depends on where you are and who you’re engaging and in the digital age now, it seems like the more avenues and channels you have, the better, because the more different kinds of touch points you have, the better, because I’ve never seen one that’s kind of an end-all-be-all.” Despite some of the limitations surrounding current internal communication, participants did discuss its value and contribution to the meaning-making process.

Value of internal communication

A few participants explained the value of formal communication and the internal communication departments within the context of employee engagement. Amber said, “So it almost helps everybody to get on the same page or better be on the same page, closer to the same page. So it’s empowering to get that level of communication and engagement from leadership, from the company.” Harriet said, “[The communication department] is a huge piece of the work we do with employee engagement in terms of that survey where we want to make sure that before the survey launches, that we’re getting employees excited about the survey, letting them know that what they have to say about their job and their engagement is important to us.” Natalie also shared that internal communication helps, “explain to people the why... and it explains why people don’t feel engaged because of the rumor mill.” Natalie continued on to share that if information is

not communicated at all, employees perceive that management is not telling the truth. In other words, when employees do not have the appropriate information they tend to fill in the blanks on their own, which is where the “rumor mill” tends to start. Dale shared a similar sentiment to Natalie and said:

We need to get the truth out there and stamp out the rumors because rumors have a tendency to spread and turn into all kinds of different things and get people all worked up, which is difficult to do right because there’s always going to be rumors. People always talk. So in my experience, the best way to do that is to be as transparent as possible and just share as much information as you can, even if there’s a little risk involved, because it’s only when you try to keep things too close hold where something gets leaked out, somebody shares something with somebody and then it’s leaked, then the rumor starts and suddenly you’ve got a bunch of people asking questions or talking about things that probably have misinformation about the actual story or the content.

Rebecca also expressed the value of communication and how important the source is in communicating imperative information related to employee engagement. She said:

I think everything comes down to good communication and HR is the last person you want to hear from. When you think about what would make employees the grumpiest, it usually falls under HR. So sometimes they are not the best to talk about an engaged workforce, because cynically people think they are always going to do something bad... Communications is better at that because they are

trained and HR is not trained and need help changing it from HR speak to employee language...damage from devastating communication is underestimated. It sets it back below to zero.

Bart shared his perspective on internal communication and the value it has in helping employees understand leadership initiatives around employee engagement. He said:

Communications, to me, I think is important for providing context to folks. A lot of times we do something for engagement and people don't connect the dots. I think when we're communicating properly, people will understand, "Oh, now I understand why we're having these team building sessions. Now I understand why we put so much emphasis in employee resource groups" or "Now I understand why one on one interactions you know with your manager..." I think if we just do those things, people don't always connect as to why you're doing it.

Some participants shared their own experiences related to creating and disseminating information to employees. Dale preferred communicating to external audiences and said, "I actually prefer the external engagement, engaging media and external stakeholders and influencers. Maybe that's because engaging employees is more difficult." Previous public relations research on internal communication does align with Dale's perspective and suggests communicating with internal audiences can be challenging since practitioners assume some audiences, like internal stakeholders, to be homogenous or a single public (L'Etang, 2005) and develop content that is management-centric, not employee-centric (Vercic et al., 2012). Communicating to external audiences

can be potentially easier because a lot of research is dedicated to understanding segmentation and the methods to do so. However, Edward shared his thoughts on communication professionals as subject matter experts in communicating to internal audiences, which gets at the complexity of carrying out such communication initiatives:

So we've got subject matter experts right. We've got fire protection engineers and safety analysis engineers and we rely on them to be the experts in these areas and wouldn't have somebody from another area necessarily, even if they're higher up, contradict them because that's why we have them and that's not this person's background and not what they do. I wish people would look at communications the same way, and look at us as the subject matter experts in communicating to employees, in effective messaging and all of those things. The problem is I think there are still so many people who feel like well "Anybody can communicate", right?

In conclusion, internal communication in the formal sense provides a mechanism to help keep employees informed about employee engagement initiatives, especially when the information is presented in a clear way. However, the ways in which to disseminate the information are still somewhat limiting. Participants do perceive a value in formal internal communication as an opportunity to create meaning regarding employee engagement.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The findings from this dissertation provide better understanding and insight into the complexities of the employee engagement phenomenon. Although defined and understood in the human resources literature as the antithesis of job burnout, with most research dedicated to understanding the resources that help prevent such experiences (e.g., Gonzalez-Roma et al., 2006; Schaufeli et al, 2002), this dissertation demonstrates that employee experiences align more to the initial personal engagement model proposed by Kahn (1990). Saks and Gruman (2014) suggest that researchers return to the initial model as a means to develop an agreed upon definition and further theory building. Yet only a few studies have empirically tested and applied Kahn's (1990) theory (e.g., Bryne, Albert, Manning, & Desir, 2016; May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004), and have done so from more of a functional approach.

When the functional approach is stripped from employee engagement, a holistic understanding of employee engagement emerges to form the essence of the phenomenon. The essence is best described and articulated through the zones of engagement, which does not value one zone over the other but demonstrates how collectively they form the employee engagement experience. It also captures Shuck, Rocco and Alboroz's (2011) notion that there are no linear steps or processes that create engaged employees, which suggests the complexity of the phenomenon.

The zones of engagement provide an opportunity to reposition the understanding of employee engagement. In doing so and as already noted, this dissertation finds that

employee experiences align more with Kahn's (1990) original model instead of other resource-demand models provided by the human resources literature. When using the zones of engagement to articulate the employee experience, public relations is able to provide a new way of looking at employee engagement that is rooted in dialogue and internal communication as the mechanisms in which meaning is created. The use of dialogue to create employee engagement experiences denotes a more co-creational approach or understanding of employee engagement. Therefore, employee engagement is experienced in a way that promotes valuing of the other, where employees are not seen as a means to an organizational end.

Zones of Engagement

The zones of engagement illustrate the many data points shared by participants that make up the employee engagement experience. Each zone is an interpretive frame used to create meaning, and the approach stems from the rhetorical perspective to better understand how meaning is constructed (Heath, 1993). Although some participants valued one or two zones over another, the experience of being engaged is comprised of many zones working together, recognizing that the zones fluctuate based on the individual experience. The idea of the zones of engagement also demonstrates the complexity of employee engagement. The concept is subject to numerous, context-based interpretations that are constantly changing, which makes previous research focused on measurements and mediating variables that facilitate engagement somewhat complicated (Valentin, 2014). Bryne et al. (2016) caution against assuming that only leaders or workplace contexts influence employee engagement, but instead that the development of

engagement is impacted by a variety of variables or factors that emerge from unique, individual experiences (Shuck et al., 2011).

Theoretical development for employee engagement has been inconclusive up to this point (Saks & Gruman, 2014), possibly because of all of the moving and unique constructs related to the phenomenon. In addition, individual differences have received less attention in the research even though they are believed to be essential for engagement (Saks & Gruman, 2014). When the understanding of employee engagement transitions to zones, complexity underscores the phenomenon and provides a better illustration of the phenomenon. For example, just as culture is often described on a macro-level to make sense of the beliefs and values, it derives from a micro-level where individuals' interactions and unique perspectives define how the culture is experienced (Shuck et al., 2011). The zones of engagement provide a new way to conceptualize employee engagement in public relations, shifting to a deeper comprehension and understanding instead of descriptive explanations. The zones help illustrate the employee engagement experience. Below is a discussion of the different zones of engagement and how this dissertation moves scholarship forward in terms of understanding the meaning-making associated with employee engagement.

Employee Engagement Experiences are more than Available Job Resources

Participants shared reconstructive narratives that focused on experiences that did not relate to the job role or function within the organization. Most of the literature talks about job resources and the availability of those resources (e.g., work conditions, job resources, organizational reputation, leadership), with little to no mention of non-work

related antecedents of employee engagement. Employee engagement experiences were more focused on support from others during difficult times and opportunities to follow passion projects not relevant to job requirements. These experiences could suggest that employee engagement is fostered when employees have a sense of belonging in the organization (Bologna et al., 2015).

Participants also reconstructed narratives that discussed the value of organic employee engagement programs as opposed to formal programming that addresses job resources provided by an organization. The simplification of the employee engagement phenomenon to job burnout as a reflection of the availability of job resources may provide opportunities to develop measures and predictable models, but it oversimplifies a complex experience.

Scholars have suggested the simplification of employee engagement as a linear process (Reissner & Pagan, 2013) and the focus on employee engagement as a managerial function (Valentine, 2014), limits the understanding of the complexities and unique contexts in which employee engagement is experienced. However, this qualitative dissertation identified some of the meaningful experiences for employees that are beyond basic job resources to arrive at a more complex understanding of how employees experience engagement.

Extending Existing Definitions and Redefining Disengagement

Participants proposed that employee engagement experiences are when employees choose to go above and beyond the roles and responsibilities required by the job. The perception is that being engaged is the expectation that employees should be willing to do

more than what is on their job description. Previous research offers definitions that focus on the opposite of job burnout such as Schaufeli et al. (2002) who define employee engagement as “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” (p. 74). Kahn (1990) defines employee engagement as the “harnessing of organization members’ selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances” (p. 694).

The preceding definitions of employee engagement do address the psychological state in which one may find themselves while experiencing employee engagement, but the actual way it is carried out and demonstrated, as suggested by the participants in this dissertation, is by going above and beyond what is required of them. This proposes that the way in which others feel this state of engagement and others can witness it is when employees are doing more than the expected job requirements. Therefore, although employee engagement is assumed to be a psychological state, the lived experience is when an employee is doing more than is expected of them. Definitions of employee engagement often refer to the impact of that engagement on work outcomes (Valentine, 2014), but the findings from this dissertation suggest that employee engagement is experienced as an actual outcome of going above and beyond the job requirements.

Disengagement emerged from the data in relation to going above and beyond job responsibilities in that employees who simply do what is required of them are assumed to be demonstrating disengagement. Wollard (2015) found only three articles out of 210 that included both the keywords “employee engagement” and “disengagement,” suggesting

that disengagement is a poorly defined term that scholarship knows little about. One reason for this is probably because disengagement is assumed to be experienced as job burnout (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Kahn (1990) offered the first definition of disengagement as the “uncoupling of selves from work roles; in disengagement they will withdraw and defend themselves physically, cognitively, or emotionally during role performances” (p. 694). However, this definition does not necessarily apply to this particular dissertation. Instead, this research offers a new definition of disengagement that needs to be further explored. Disengagement is defined as going through the motions in such a way that an employee carries out the minimum job requirements. This definition highlights the behavioral aspects of disengagement beyond job burnout, which need additional research.

The Resurgent of the Meaningfulness Psychological Condition

Kahn’s (1990) original model discussed the psychological conditions of meaningfulness, safety and availability as the functions that determine whether or not someone is engaged. Meaningfulness deals with work elements that create a return on investment of the self. Safety is showing one’s self without fear of negative repercussions. Availability is the physical, emotional and psychological resources necessary for investing in the engagement role. Employees try to find connection and fulfillment as requirements for bringing their whole selves into their work role (Kahn). Only a handful of researchers have empirically investigated meaningfulness, safety and availability as employee engagement antecedents (e.g., Bryne et al., 2016; May et al., 2004). May et al. (2004) attempted construct validity for the measures and found a

positive relationship between psychological safety and employee engagement. Bryne et al. (2016) found support for the Kahn (1990) definition.

When considering the zones of engagement, the conditions of meaningfulness and safety seem to be most evident in the employee engagement experience. The initial proposed model of personal engagement included meaningfulness as a psychological condition dimension and the return on investment of the committing the self to work experiences (Kahn, 1990). Employees feel meaningfulness when they are valued, challenged, given autonomy, and when goals are provided clearly and succinctly.

Meaningfulness was evident in the zones that focused on work as a vocational calling; freedom in the workplace and employee engagement is about creating value. Participants reconstructed employee engagement by using passion or vocation as a way to describe the experiences. Employee engagement is about finding passion in the work and seeing the job as a vocation, which means being engaged is not about punching a timecard, but instead it is the transition to seeing the job as more than just a job. For some participants, employee engagement is experienced as a process that is focused on creating value for employees. The process includes challenging tasks, organic recognition for successfully accomplishing the tasks, and seeing the impact of the work. Participant reconstructed narratives also touched on the idea that employee engagement was rooted in having freedom in the workplace. This experienced freedom provided employees opportunities to explore and experiment with projects or assignments that related to their job responsibilities. In other cases, participants used the freedom as a means to develop projects or assignments outside of what was required of them or not even related to their

actual job roles. The preceding themes address the psychological aspects of meaningfulness that focus on feeling worthwhile, valued, valuable, challenged and autonomous (Kahn, 1990), and overall suggest employees value more intrinsic factors than extrinsic factors or resources as contributors to engagement.

In this way, the findings in this dissertation support Bryne et al.'s (2016) suggestion that engagement may be more accurately defined as “incorporating meaningfulness rather than being fostered by meaningfulness” (p. 1218). Seeing work as a vocational calling, creating value and having freedom in the workplace is where meaningfulness is experienced as part of the employee engagement experience. These three zones work reciprocally in that when meaningfulness is incorporated, employees experience moments of engagement, and at the same time, these moments create meaningful experiences.

Employee Engagement is Rooted in Psychological Safety

Just as psychological meaningfulness emerged as a factor for participants in their employee engagement experiences, psychological safety did as well. Psychological safety is defined as the “sense of being able to show and employ the self without fear of negatives consequences to self-image, status or career” (Kahn, 1990, p. 705). Previous studies have found psychological safety to have the strongest relationship with employee engagement (e.g., Bologna et al., 2015). For participants, employee engagement is embedded in the building of connections in different areas of the workplace and these connections set the foundation of psychological safety. Connections were not described as an intersection between two things but rather, connections created a bridge to

employee engagement experiences. Connections and relationships are critically important to employees overall work experience (Shuck et al., 2011), and create psychological safety for employees. In addition, research has shown that social ties help improve work performance (Zak, 2017).

Psychological safety emerges from interpersonal relationships with colleagues and management that incorporate openness and trust, which develops emotional resources (Kahn, 1990). Kahn suggested that employees know they can be themselves without risk of negative consequences to self-image or status (1990). Comfort at work comes from being treated as a human being and not just a number on a balance sheet. Keating and Heslin (2015) do caution against having a fixed mindset as a limiting factor in developing psychological safety, encouraging organizations and individuals to look for opportunities to foster more growth mindsets, which leads to more psychological safety in the workplace.

Participants perceived the role of leadership as a contributing factor in creating personal connections, which leads to feelings of psychological safety. Specifically, humility of leadership cultivates psychological safety, which leads to more employee engagement experiences (Walters & Diab, 2016). Shuck et al. (2011) also found that managers play a primary role in shaping workplace climates, and healthy work climates contribute to employees feeling safe in their place of work. This study confirms the previous proposition that an employee's direct supervisor plays a role in developing employee engagement via psychological safety.

Repositioning Dialogue as the Precursor to Employee Engagement

Many of the reconstructive narratives recalled by participants assigned meaning to employee engagement based on communication exchanges. The communication that couched the employee engagement experience was dialogic or discursive and participants suggested that employee engagement starts with dialogue. Kent and Taylor (1998, 2002) introduced dialogic theory to the field of public relations as a theoretical base. Dialogue transitions public relations from the functional approach to a co-creational approach by identifying stakeholders as part of the meaning-making process (Botan & Taylor, 2004).

As the leaders in advocating for a dialogic paradigm, Kent and Taylor have suggested that dialogue is not a process but rather a production of ongoing communication exchanges and relationships (1998). Dialogue values the other and emphasizes meaning-making and understanding as factors that contribute to the co-creation of reality (Taylor & Kent, 2014).

One of the dialogic tenets that contribute to dialogism is engagement (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Specifically, the authors suggest that engagement is a component of dialogic propinquity, where those involved in communication exchanges must be willing to give their whole selves to the encounter for it to be considered a dialogic exchange. Engagement is understood as a necessary part of dialogue, “for without it, there can be no real dialogue” (Taylor & Kent, 2014, p. 390). Engagement is both the process that guides group interactions and an orientation that influences the meaningful interactions (Taylor & Kent, 2014).

Kent and Taylor (1998, 2002) argue that engagement is necessary for dialogic exchanges to occur. However, this dissertation suggests something different based on participant reconstructed narratives, in that without dialogue there is no engagement. Participant narratives suggested that dialogue helped provide context into the other. This highlights the dialogic tenet of *empathy*, which is cultivated through a foundation of trust and support, suggesting that dialogue cannot occur without understanding and supportiveness.

In understanding the other through dialogic exchanges, employees seemed to both accept and recognize the strangeness of the other. The acceptance and recognition of being a unique individual created opportunities for employees to be vulnerable in the workplace despite the fact they were unable to anticipate the consequences of the dialogic exchange. This exemplifies the dialogic tenant of *risk*. Risk denotes that in every relationship some sort of risk is inherent. Whether it is an interpersonal or organizational relationship, uncertainty underpins the relationship, requiring communicators to share information to help navigate this ambiguity. Dialogue compels participants to embrace the unanticipated consequences of the exchange, since the communication is mostly unscripted and unrehearsed.

Participants discussed how successful dialogic communication requires the communicative partners engaged in the exchange to actually listen and be present, even when the dialogue may be held over the phone. This ties to the tenet of *commitment*. Commitment is an allegiance to the conversation at hand, exercising a presence and genuineness in the midst of discourse.

The participants also suggested that dialogic exchanges that were face-to-face contributed most to the meaning-making process. Most of the dialogue theory studies in public relations have focused on web-based exchanges, which limited investigation into the dialogic experiences beyond mediated communication (Taylor & Kent, 2014). However, this dissertation demonstrates that dialogue is most successful when it occurs face-to-face and in person. This contribution suggests that face-to-face is the ideal context for dialogic exchanges regarding employee engagement to occur.

Several studies have demonstrated that face-to-face communication or interpersonal communication is the richest form of communication and is often the preferred format for employees (e.g., Cameron & McCollum, 1993; Stein, 2006; White et al., 2010). For example, White et al. (2010) looked at higher education employees' perceptions of communication channels and found that although information is most often disseminated via email, the preferred method is interpersonal channels like meetings, events or one-on-one exchanges. But what is unique about the findings from this dissertation is that the type of communication that is valued by employees in the meaning-making process is dialogue. Although the previous studies identified the value of face-to-face communication, the communication was more functional in nature and did not include the co-creational approach. Therefore, the findings of this dissertation demonstrate that dialogue, occurring face-to-face, is the ideal context for the communication exchange that leads to the meaning-making of employee engagement experiences.

The Influence of Internal Communication

Participants in this study did discuss formal, organizational internal communication as part of their employee engagement experiences. The empirical evidence from other studies suggests that internal communication would play a primary role in constructing the employee engagement experience and the meaning associated with that experience (e.g., Karanges et al., 2015; Ruck & Welch, 2012). Internal communication facilitates interactions in the workplace, which leads to employee engagement (Karanges et al., 2015). However, organizational internal communication does contribute to meaning-making but not to the extent the previous literature would suggest.

Scholars suggest that internal communication is used to communicate on behalf of the organization or management to employees for the purpose of creating employee acquiescence of the organization's goals and objectives (e.g., deBussy & Suprawan, 2012; Vercic et al., 2012). In this way, internal communication is assumed to be a powerful, motivational tool in aiding employee buy-in, which leads to employee engagement. Yet, the reconstructive narratives in this dissertation did not address internal communication using this command and control language, which suggests that internal communication plays a lesser role in the employee engagement experience than what other studies have recommended.

Participants discussed the importance of clear internal communication and how clearly articulated organizational goals, values, changes, safety issues and procedures can lead to employee engagement. Reconstructed narratives also focused on how internal

communication can help employees understand the mission of the organization and how they fit into the mission so the work experiences feel like a vocation instead of just a job. Research suggests that when employees feel informed and understand messaging related to employee engagement, it enhances their engagement experience (Welch, 2011). Ruck and Welch (2012) determined that newsletters and emails are the most common channels organizations use to communicate employee engagement messages and this dissertation had a similar finding. However, some participants found emails regarding employee engagement to be bothersome and superfluous.

When it comes to formal internal communication regarding employee engagement, participants preferred internal communication that came across as genuine and more organic in nature. Welch (2012) said that employees have different communication preferences, which is evident in this dissertation in that some participants found formal internal communication to be helpful while others found it to be a nuisance. Participants suggested that internal communication still has a long way to go in terms of developing the ideal methods of creating and disseminating messages related to employee engagement. Employees suggested the use of employee-centric communication and scholars have suggested the same (Ruck & Welch, 2012). In developing employee-centric communication regarding employee engagement with strategic dissemination, internal communication moves from tactical to strategic (Vercic et al., 2012). This also challenges the field of public relations to transition away from assuming internal audiences to be a single public and to consider more strategic approaches to communicating with internal audience

Insight for Practitioners

Employee engagement programs are complex and need multiple considerations (Bologna et al., 2015) as demonstrated by this dissertation. The reconstructed narratives provide insight into practices that organizations may consider incorporating to enhance employee engagement initiatives. Below are suggested insights for practitioners who oversee employee engagement programs or manage internal communication.

To begin, understanding the zones of engagement is helpful because it aids internal communication practitioners in coaching those functions that oversee engagement, like human resources, on how to draft the appropriate content that is meaningful to employees. The zones of meaning help practitioners interpret how meaning is created for employees and this meaning-making process can inform messaging and dissemination practices.

Dialogue needs to be promoted in such a way that this form of communication becomes part of an organizational culture. Employee engagement starts with dialogue, which is based on genuine and organic communication practices. Finding ways to develop dialogic exchanges within organizations would lead to more experiences of employee engagement. Opportunities for training in dialogue could enhance the dialogic exchanges that occur on a daily basis. Taylor and Kent (2014) offer the Dialogue Project at Massachusetts Institute for Technology (MIT) as one approach to train leaders in dialogic communication.

Internal communication processes need to be attended to in a way that creates employee-centric communication. This means that internal audiences need to be

researched and understood, which allows communication regarding employee engagement to be specifically tailored. For example, if some employees prefer not to receive employee engagement emails, they should have the option to opt out without punishment. On the contrary, if employees benefit from employee engagement email communication, then it should continue. But a blanket email to all employees to check the employee engagement box is not a beneficial communication practice.

To create alignment between employee engagement and internal communication, employees need to have a good understanding of the mission of the organization and how they fit into the mission. This allows employees to feel like their position is more than just a job and helps cultivate the interpretation that the job is part of a vocation. Therefore, communication should be centered on how employees fit within the mission of the organization and should be disseminated using a medium that is employee-centric.

Organizations and management should strive to create an environment where employees can experience psychological safety. This can be achieved by allowing employees to take risks and make mistakes that serve as a learning opportunity without punishment. Of course, the making of mistakes has to occur within reason where no person or the organization is put at risk.

Along the same lines of creating experiences that support psychological safety, organizations should strive to generate opportunities for creating value, which leads to psychological meaningfulness. These situations should include tasks that challenge employees, organic recognition for the work, and being able to see the work or task come to fruition. If an employee has monotonous, daily tasks where she or he is not challenged,

the findings from this dissertation suggest that the job will not be meaningful for the employee. This may require an imaginative reconfiguration of the roles and responsibilities to find tasks that challenge the employee. Formal programming focusing on developing passion in the workplace can also be developed.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

This dissertation offers insight into the actual lived experiences of employees and their experience with employee engagement in the workplace. In capturing employee experiences from a non-functionalist manner or non-binary perspective of just employee and management, this dissertation provides perspectives and insights into the employee engagement experience that help refine understanding of the established employee engagement theories, models, tenets and concepts. Specifically, the zones of engagement provide an opportunity to re-conceptualize employee engagement and how meaning is created from the experience. The zones of engagement offer an illustration of the essence of the phenomenon of employee engagement.

In addition, the findings from this dissertation suggest that employee engagement is beyond available resources and job burnout, which is how most of the previous literature has understood employee engagement (e.g., Gruman & Saks, 2014; Schaufeli et al., 2002). The zones of engagement also extend existing definitions of employee engagement and help redefine disengagement. Kahn's (1990) original conceptualization of employee engagement included the psychological conditions of meaningfulness and safety, yet most of the literature investigates the psychological condition of availability, the readiness of resources. This dissertation offers insight into meaningfulness and safety and how these psychological conditions contribute to the experience of employee engagement.

At the root of the meaning-making of employee engagement is dialogic exchanges among employees. Kent and Taylor (1998, 2002) have suggested that engagement is required to develop dialogic exchanges. However, this dissertation offers a new conceptualization of dialogue as the precursor to engagement. In addition, scholars have suggested that formal internal communication would be prominent in the meaning-making process of employee engagement (e.g., Karanges et al., 2014; Karanges, et al., 2015; Welch, 2012). However, this dissertation found internal communication to contribute to the meaning-making process, but not to the extent as previous scholarship would suggest. Despite the contributions from this dissertation, there are limitations, which are discussed next in conjunction with future research calls.

Limitations and Future Research

Although this dissertation contributes to the understanding of employee engagement and how communication contributes to the meaning-making process, it does have some limitations. The first limitation is that only one interview was completed in-person and all other interviews were completed on the phone. Previous literature has mixed reviews on conducting phone interviews. For example, Patton (2002) suggests that since qualitative research is highly personal in nature, being able to build rapport and interpret social cues may be difficult while participating in an interview over the phone. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) offer that phone interviews may provide an opportunity for participants to be freer in their responses and suggest that phone interviews should not be rejected as a data collection tool.

One aspect of adding variance to the sample was to use participants in different locations of the country. In-person interviews with participants in different locations would have been costly and the pragmatic decision was made to not travel to participant locations out of state. All participants who were closer to the researcher and able to be interviewed in-person, refused to be audio recorded because of confidentiality concerns, and were therefore, interviewed over the phone to help protect anonymity. The one participant in the same state who was comfortable with being audio recorded completed the interview in person.

The second limitation from this study is that most of the participants were interviewed during their workday and while at work. Most participants mentioned closing the door or were working from home, yet the interview was conducted during work hours. The context in which the interviews took place may have created some situational factors that influenced the participants' perceptions of and experiences with employee engagement. This potentially could have been prevented if the interviews were scheduled in the evening or on the weekend, during non-work hours. Yet interviews were conducted during a time that was convenient for participants.

The third limitation from this study is that most participants who participated in the study were not critical of employee engagement programs and efforts. As part of the theoretical sampling approach, attempts were made to reach participants who did not buy in to employee engagement initiatives, but those participants only represented a small portion of the sample. It is no surprise that the employees who were more excited about employee engagement were most willing to participate in the dissertation, but

incorporating more critical perspectives of experiences with employee engagement could have enhanced the findings.

Since the phenomenon was examined from a holistic perspective using phenomenology, not one organization or industry was examined in depth. Future research should consider examining single cases or conducting a multiple case study within specific contexts to further understand employee engagement in particular organizations or industries.

Participants from this dissertation represented various industries in different locations across the United States. However, all participants were employed by corporate, for-profit and government organizations and did not include employees of non-profit organizations. One participant did suggest that employee engagement is a term found mostly within a corporate context even though he worked for a small business. To pursue this idea, future studies should consider incorporating the non-profit employee engagement experience to enhance understanding of the essence of the phenomenon of employee engagement.

Along the same lines of considering different organization types, future research should consider looking at employee engagement from a global perspective. Only one participant hinted at the globalization of organizations and taking into account language barriers that make the translations of “what engagement is” more difficult. Future research should considering investigating the cultural barriers that impact employee engagement experiences.

Internal communication inductively emerged from the data as a function that contributes to the employee engagement experience. However, due to the nature of the phenomenological methodological approach that relies on the long interview as the primary method of data collection, no formal, organizational internal communication was incorporated into this dissertation. Doing so would have been beyond the scope of this study. However, future research should consider performing interviews of employee experiences and document analysis of internal communication mentioned in the interview. This would extend understanding about the connections between internal communication and its contribution to the employee engagement experience.

The findings from this dissertation uniquely propose that dialogue is the precursor to employee engagement. This is one of the first studies to offer this finding, which would require ample additional research to further explore the ways in which dialogue leads to employee engagement. A future study should consider a case study approach to examine how organizational and employee practices create a culture of dialogue, which would lead to employee engagement. Since employee engagement starts with dialogue, the research should focus more on dialogue to better understand how successful dialogic communication can facilitate engagement.

In addition, the connection between dialogue and engagement needs to be explored in different contexts since this dissertation was focused solely on employee engagement within an organizational setting. The context of employee engagement is unique and may not be evident in other situations like with civic engagement, but future research will have to make that conclusion. In addition, most of the public relations

research has used dialogic theory within mediated communication formats, like social media. Yet the original theory proposed by Kent and Taylor (2002) was not exclusively positioned for mediated communication to external audiences and included other suggestions on how the field of public relations can use dialogic practices. Therefore, additional research should address all of the places dialogue may be occurring within an organizational context, which, as demonstrated by this dissertation, leads to employee engagement.

Disengagement emerged from the participant lived experiences as doing what is required of them by the organization. Future research should further investigate disengagement, including an exploration into organizations where this type of disengagement may be acceptable and considered engagement. In other words, organizations may be successful without a business model that focuses on employee engagement and research could examine how those organizations operate.

Additional themes did emerge from the data as important, but there was not enough data to warrant a report and discussion of the findings. However, those themes provide substantial opportunities for future research. First, only two participants who work remotely all the time were interviewed. Future research should consider a study that explores the employee engagement experience of those individuals who work remotely 100% of the time. Along the same lines, space as in the office layout and how that contributes to employee engagement experiences also emerged from two interviews. Future research should consider how offices spaces contribute or detract from employee engagement experiences. Also, one participant did suggest how the employee

engagement experience is different for millennial employees. Future studies could investigate potential generational differences in experiences related to employee engagement. Last, as technology continues to be ubiquitous, future research should consider how the influence of technology enhances or detracts from constructing employee engagement experiences.

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APPENDICES

Appendix I. Semi-Structured Long Interview Guide

Introduction and Basic Points:

Good [morning/afternoon/evening], as you may know, my name is Laura Lemon, and I am a PhD candidate at the University of Tennessee studying public relations. I am working on my dissertation that focuses on employee engagement. Your experiences will help me to understand more about the employee engagement and allow me to share insights with the field.

(Repeat these points if individuals have questions about the consent forms they have signed)

- Every opinion is valuable and I only want to know your thoughts and opinions.
- Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary. You may choose to skip a question or stop the interview at any time and for any reason with no penalty, especially if you feel uncomfortable with the question or subject. Your information will stay secure. I will not share your personal information, including your name, with anyone else. Unless you prefer otherwise, your name will not be linked to the information that you provide during the interview.
- This interview is being audio-recorded in case I need to listen to it later to clarify something from the notes. This recording will not be shared with others and will be destroyed at the end of this research.
- The interview should take no longer than an hour.
- Do you have any questions before we begin?

Opening

1. Could you tell me a little bit about your professional background, including where you are now?
 - a. What is your current position and how long you have been with the company?
2. Would you share a few minutes of what a “typical day” at work is like for you?

Employee Engagement

3. What comes to mind when you hear the term employee engagement?

PROBES:

 - a. Has that term come up at all in your current job or a previous job or have you heard it used somewhere else?
 - b. How have you heard employee engagement discussed?

Employee Engagement Experience

4. Now that you’ve shared some thoughts about your professional background and employee engagement, I’d like to talk about your own experiences with employee engagement. Think about the last time you may have experienced employee engagement in your job. Can you tell me about that specific experience?

PROBES:

 - a. Is there a specific event or interaction you experienced?
 - b. What happened before the experience.... after the experience?

- c. Who was involved with that experience...anyone who particularly stands out?
 - d. Are there any incidents connected to that experience that stand out to you?
 - e. What feelings do you remember having during that experience?
 - f. How do you feel now as you recollect that experience?
 - g. What do you remember thinking during that experience?
 - h. What do you think now as you recollect that experience?
- 5. How would you say the experience affected you?
 - 6. Did anything change for you based on that experience?
 - 7. Is there anything else about the experience itself that you want to share?

Dissimilar Employee Engagement Experience

- 8. Thank you for sharing the previous example of employee engagement. Now, can you compare that experience to another one that is dissimilar? Can you tell me about that specific experience?

PROBES:

- a. Is there a specific event or interaction you experienced?
 - b. What happened before the experience.... after the experience?
 - c. Who was involved with that experience...anyone who particularly stands out?
 - d. Are there any incidents connected to that experience that stand out to you?
 - e. What feelings do you remember having during that experience?
 - f. How do you feel now as you recollect that experience?
 - g. What do you remember thinking during that experience?
 - h. What do you think now as you recollect that experience?
- 9. How would you say the experience affected you?
 - 10. Did anything change for you based on that experience?
 - 11. Is there anything else about the experience itself that you want to share?

Employee Engagement

- 12. Do you recall a time talking about employee engagement with someone in your workplace, outside of your work or at home? What was that experience like? How did you describe employee engagement in that experience/interaction?
- 13. That's all the questions I have. Is there anything that you feel I left out or did not ask about that would be important for me to know? Perhaps another memorable experience (for whatever reason) regarding employee engagement that you would like to share?

Closing

Is there anyone else you recommend that I talk to about these topics? In particular, is there anyone you recommend I talk to who has a different opinion, perspective or experience than you?

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. Would you be willing to be contacted again in the future should I need to conduct a follow-up interview at a later date? In addition, can I contact you once I have preliminary results from my study to ensure your perspective is represented?

Appendix II. IRB Approval



THE UNIVERSITY OF
TENNESSEE
KNOXVILLE

April 13, 2016

Re: UTK IRB-16-02808-XP

Study Title: An exploration of employees' experiences with employee engagement

Dear Laura Lou Lemon:

The UTK Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed your application for the above referenced project. It determined that your application is eligible for expedited review under 45 CFR 46.110(b) (1), categories (6) and (7). The IRB has reviewed these materials and determined that they do comply with proper consideration for the rights and welfare of human subjects and the regulatory requirements for the protection of human subjects. Therefore, this letter constitutes full approval by the IRB of your application (version 1.0) as submitted, including:

Informed Consent_Employee Engagement – Version 1.0
Transcriber's Pledge of Confidentiality – Version 1.0
Recruitment Message – Version 1.0
LL Interview Guide_Employee Engagement_FINAL – Version 1.0

These documents have been dated and stamped IRB approved. Approval of this study will be valid from April 13, 2016 to April 12, 2017.

In the event that subjects are to be recruited using solicitation materials, such as brochures, posters, web-based advertisements, etc., these materials must receive prior approval of the IRB. Any revisions in the approved application must also be submitted to and approved by the IRB prior to implementation. In addition, you are responsible for reporting any unanticipated serious adverse events or other problems involving risks to subjects or others in the manner required by the local IRB policy.

Finally, re-approval of your project is required by the IRB in accord with the conditions specified above. You may not continue the research study beyond the time or other limits specified unless you obtain prior written approval of the IRB.

Sincerely,

Colleen P. Gilrane, Ph.D.
Chair

Institutional Review Board | Office of Research & Engagement
1534 White Avenue Knoxville, TN 37996-1529
865-974-7697 865-974-7400 fax irb.utk.edu

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Appendix III. IRB-Approved Informed Consent

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

Exploring employee engagement

INTRODUCTION

You are invited to participate in a research study being conducted by Laura Lemon, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. This project explores how employees experience employee engagement and will build on previous research to potentially provide insight into how employees, including both management and nonmanagement employees, experience employee engagement. The results from this study will extend public relations understanding of the employee engagement phenomenon.

INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE STUDY

The researcher is conducting interviews with participants like you who can share experiences related to employee engagement. Participants must be over the age of 18. Procedures involve conducting individual interviews at a location, date and time convenient to you - including over the phone or online. The interview will last approximately one hour and questions will focus on your experiences with employee engagement. Example questions may ask you about an employee engagement experience at your current workplace and your thoughts and feelings surrounding that experience. At the end of the interview, participants will be given the option of whether or not they are comfortable being contacted at a later date for a possible follow-up interview and to review the study's preliminary results to ensure their experiences and perspectives are represented. These two activities will take place a few weeks after the initial interview.

In order to ensure accuracy, the researcher would like to digitally audiorecord the interview. You have the right to decline being recorded. All participation is voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time with no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Please indicate your preference by initialing one of the following statements:

_____ I agree to be audiotaped during my participation in this study.

_____ I do not agree to be audiotaped during my participation in this study.

RISKS AND CONFIDENTIALITY

There are no known or foreseeable risks greater than those found in everyday life that may result from participating in this project. Identities of participants will be protected to the maximum extent possible. The researcher will preserve confidentiality by reporting data in the aggregate and removing identifiers from any reports containing the data. To protect confidentiality, digital audio files and research notes will be scanned or typed and stored on a password-protected computer in a locked office. Digital recording files will be transcribed as soon as possible. They will only be accessed by the researcher and transcribers who have signed the confidentiality pledge. The researcher will secure files in a password-protected computer and within a password-protected data analysis software program on the researcher's laptop computer. Recordings will be destroyed once they have been transcribed. All other data will be destroyed (i.e., shredded or erased) when their use is no longer needed but not before a minimum of 10

IRB NUMBER: UTK IRB-16-02808-XP
IRB APPROVAL DATE: 04/13/2016
IRB EXPIRATION DATE: 04/12/2017

years after data collection. If digital files such as transcriptions are used in the future, they will be used within the context of this project.

BENEFITS

Expected benefits include contributing knowledge to the field of public relations regarding employee engagement.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Laura Lemon at 476 Communications Building, Knoxville, TN 37996 and (719) 237-3196. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, contact the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Office of Research Compliance Officer at (865) 974-7697.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at anytime without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

CONSENT

I have read the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

Investigator's signature _____ Date _____

Appendix IV. Example of Transcript

EEdiss_Participant_[Company]

- Participant:* [Company], this is Participant, can I help you?
- Interviewer:* Hi Participant, this is Laura Lemon calling. Is this still a good time for us to talk?
- Participant:* Yeah, how are you, Laura?
- Interviewer:* Good. How are you?
- Participant:* I'm good. Did you have a good weekend?
- Interviewer:* I did. We went up to Virginia and played some golf up there, so it was really nice. How about you?
- Participant:* You know what, it's pretty hot out here this time of year, so you do pretty much stay indoors and we went and test drove an all electric car on Saturday. That was interesting.
- Interviewer:* Cool.
- Participant:* Then we hung out yesterday around the house and just tried to stay cool. Nothing exciting, just a relaxing weekend pretty much.
- Interviewer:* Sometimes those are the nicest though, I have to be honest. Get rejuvenated for the week.
- Participant:* I watched the Olympics, the golf final round yesterday and that was pretty neat to see Matt Kuchar win bronze medal. That was pretty exciting.
- Interviewer:* Yeah, we've been watching a lot of Olympics as well, so it's been fun to see all the competitions and just the skill of the athletes is just unbelievable, to be honest.
- Participant:* Yeah, what is that girl, Katie Ledecky?
- Interviewer:* Yep, the swimmer.
- Participant:* Yeah she won her, I don't even know what event it was, but she won by 11 seconds or something ridiculous like that. That's pretty amazing.
- Interviewer:* Somebody said something funny, they were like, "They should put an average person in all the competitions so we have something to gauge it against, like how good they really are." [Laughter]
- Participant:* Yeah, yeah.
- Interviewer:* All right, well I look forward to chatting with you and thanks for arranging the opportunity to speak with [Participant] when we're done. That sounds wonderful.
- Participant:* Yeah, I don't know if you had any hourly associates or how many, if you needed another one and hopefully he can help you out a little bit.
- Interviewer:* Yep, that's perfect. I don't have any hourly associates right now, so arranging that was exactly what I needed, so thanks for doing that.

EEdiss_Participant_[Company]

Participant: Okay, no problem.

Interviewer: All right, thanks also too for signing the informed consent and if you don't have any questions, I'm just going to go ahead and get started.

Participant: Okay, I put you on speaker to just make it a little more convenient for me.

Interviewer: Yeah, for sure. I know obviously you're a General Manager for [Company] but could you share with me a little bit about your professional background and sort of how you came to be at [Company] and how long you've been with them as well?

Participant: Okay, so when I graduated high school, I was starting my education at University of Texas El Paso and so that summer, I was kind of looking for a job I could work part time and go to school and I grew up in El Paso, Texas. So it's kind of a commuter university. I didn't need to stay in the dorms. I just could drive to school and kind of grew up in a household where pretty much if I was going to do it, I had to do it on my own. We didn't have the financial resources to me not work. So I had to kind of pay my own way. So I was introduced to a company called Sysco Food Services and it was through my brother-in-law. He was a schoolteacher and he worked there during the summer and so he was having to leave his part time job to go back to teach school just as I was going to start my school and so it worked out that I started there part time and one thing led to another and I was promoted over the years and went through a lot of different transfers to different cities with Sysco and then later finished my education through the University of Phoenix out in Diamond Bar, California, in their Bachelor of Science and Administration program. So that's kind of, it was much later in life but it was because I was working and working full time and just kind of taking classes here, classes there. Later got involved in that program and, in any event, I had a 20 year career with Sysco.

Interviewer: Okay, wow.

Participant: So at Sysco, I basically started with, that's the grocery industry. They distributed to institutional grocers. They distributed to restaurants and other facilities that meals were prepared away from home. So [Company] and [Company]'s grocery, what we do in our environment, I'm in a grocery distribution center, is we distribute to [Company] stores. Obviously we sell to families who cook meals at home. So it's kind of a different side of the business, but groceries is groceries, produce is produce, frozen food is frozen food, so on and so forth. So I'd worked my way up to a position, I was a Vice President General Manager for a subsidiary of Sysco and then living out in California, it was a good, I was really, I love my job. Everything was going really really well. The only thing that was, I would say, a negative was the work environment was an organized labor union environment and we went through negotiations and things didn't go well and so we had to take a break in our negotiations because we couldn't reach a contract.

EE diss_Participant_[Company]

We had to get an extension and just at that time, I was needing to go to my 20 year high school reunion. So I went to my 20 year high school reunion and said, okay, this gives me a break and as I went to my 20 year high school reunion, I ran into an individual I went to high school with and went to UTEP with for a few years and he was a General Manager at [Company] and we started talking about his career and my career and he asked if I was interested in [Company]. Long story short, I ended up interviewing with his management team and then I was offered a position to join [Company] and I accepted and that was in 1998. So I've been with [Company] almost 18 years. It'll be 18 years in October. I started with [Company] as a Warehouse Manager trainee and then I was real quickly promoted to a General Manager opening up a new facility outside the Dallas, Texas area and then within a couple of years, they opened this facility here in Casa Grande, Arizona and I was asked if I would be interested in opening this facility as a General Manager and it was seen as a promotion because it was a larger facility and so I've been here for about 13 years as the General Manager. So almost 18 years with the company, 13 years here in this position as a General Manager.

Interviewer: Great. Sounds like you've had a really wonderful career.

Participant: You know, it's been exciting and I like to tell people that I've never been without a job since the age of 15. I've never filed for unemployment. I've always been fortunate to have an income and my dad used to tell us when we were growing up, "If you give your employer nine hours' worth of work in an eight hour day, you'll always have a job."

Interviewer: I like that. So what's a typical workday look like for you if there is such a thing?

Participant: There's some routines. Incidentally, I'm connected every day, so I'll go, I report to work Monday through Friday. I do stay connected to the facility on the weekends. I have a good management team. I have 54 managers in total and all of them don't directly report to me but we try to empower them to run their areas and have confidence that their decisions are going to be supported. So they pretty much do the work. They pretty much oversee the operations. So we process inbound freight, outbound freight. We receive and ship products and it's a 24/7 operation, so my day kind of begins with what's the workload look like? What does our staffing look like? How do our finish times look like? Is there any issues, potential issues in meeting the workload demands? By the time I really get to work, I really have a feel of what the day kind of workload looks like. Then we meet in the morning and have the managers do a second briefing, brief us on what their day looks like and any challenges, any opportunities that they may have or how they kind of move people around to make sure we meet the demands and then we finish up our meeting and come in and I start, spend a lot of time going through emails and communications and fielding any questions or concerns or requests from our customers. Our customers are the [Company] stores and the managers within the [Company] stores, I try to be very available to

EEdiss_Participant_[Company]

them. Many of them have my contact information and if they need something, they don't hesitate to send me an email or call me. So I kind of stay close to that to make sure we're meeting those expectations. We get, I call it, I spend a lot of time kind of trying to avoid opportunities from developing into bigger ones. I try to do a lot of customer service, a lot of relationship building. So I stay close to things that are happening and then there's going to be special requests sent down from our corporate office. We call our corporate office our home office and I want to stay close to what's going on and what's needed of us, what we have coming up and how we've planned, how we've prepared to handle whatever we're asked to do. I like to, my philosophy, I like to say, is I like to stay a couple steps ahead of my boss and help him stay a couple steps ahead of his boss. As long as we're kind of anticipating what's coming down and what we need to do and we're proactive, we avoid any exceptions lists. We avoid any negative publicity and try to keep everybody happy.

Interviewer: Nice. Sounds like you're busy. [Laugh]

Participant: Yep, I would say not too busy but there's things that, you know, probably between 100 to 150 emails a day if not a little bit more. Some of them are just kind of a quick glance and delete. Some of them require responses. On top of that, I represent the company and the community. So there's certain things that I do. A good example of that would be I just received an email, the local college has a new President and they want to introduce the new President to me. They feel, for whatever reason, that my role as General Manager, they want to make sure that she knows who I am, I know who she is, and there's some type of a connection there. If I need her for something, she needs me for something, I'll avail myself. If they want to come in and meet in my office, I'll take them for a quick walk around the building just so that I stay connected and I'm part of a civic organization, a couple of boards I sit on. I stay connected in the community. So a little bit of my day is spent in upholding those responsibilities in civic and community involvement. I think that's, in my role, a given that we're going to promote our brand out there and do good things in our community. So that's part of what I do as well.

Interviewer: What comes to mind when you hear the term employee engagement?

Participant: Something that comes to mind is probably more, has become more popular probably for us and for me, probably over the last five years. We used to have what's called an associate opinion survey and it gauged the engagement but we didn't necessarily tie it to the word engagement. About five years ago or so, the definition, maybe a little longer than that, maybe seven or eight years ago, the definition of engagement. So really what it means to me and always has meant to me is this sense of connection, this "Hey, as an employee, as an associate", our employees, we're all associates, "what's the level of connection what we're trying

EEdiss_Participant_[Company]

to accomplish and is there a sense of belonging and belief that what we're doing is good?" I think it's kind of an emotional tie to how we feel about our employer.

Interviewer: So does that term come up a lot in your day to day or often while working with [Company]?

Participant: It comes up often. It's a word I think is used a lot today in not just business but how engaged are you and are you engaged in this process? Are you engaged? It's funny because I have a lot of Spanish speaking associates and so the word engagement in Spanish is a little bit different. Compramentido means engaged. Even though you think about a man and a woman committing to marriage, that's an engagement, right? So we use that term engagement, it takes on different meanings. So when we do our survey and I visit with our associates prior to the survey, especially when I talk to the ones in Spanish and I talk about that connection, very much like two people that are engaged to get married, it's a different level but it's similar. To your question, the word is used quite often and it doesn't necessarily, it's not necessarily used to that emotional tie. It's more of an understanding, a clarity. Are our associates engaged in what we're trying to accomplish? Whether it be we've got a customer that needs a special order and we've got to re-sequence that route and get it, okay, is everybody engaged? Is everybody onboard? That word is used pretty frequently, to answer your question.

Interviewer: So what is the Spanish translation of engagement? How did the definitions or understandings differ between the languages?

Participant: Well, I don't know that it, well, the term, the word, when I talk about compramentido in Spanish, I think in the Spanish language, there is more literal interpretations of a word. Maybe it's my level of understanding English more than Spanish but I think when you look at the word engagement, as we're talking, we're not necessarily thinking of, "Hey, I'm engaged to get married" although engagement is, there's varying definitions. Do you follow what I'm saying? I don't know that in the Spanish language, it's that varying. So I find myself explaining that word because we use it as engagement, associate engagement. I further explain it in Spanish that it's more of how we feel about our company and our sense of belonging to the company, is how I explain it to our associates. But if I tell a person in English 'associate engagement', I don't have to go to much explanation.

Interviewer: Sure, yeah. When you think about your own experiences with employee engagement, I'd like for you to share maybe a story. You can kind of walk me through when you had a specific employee engagement experience.

Participant: Okay, so I'm going to tell you about something that happened to me a long time ago, okay?

EEdiss_Participant_[Company]

Interviewer: That's great, yep.

Participant: A long time ago before it was a buzzword, so I've always felt, I shared a little bit about my father, nine hours of work in an eight hour day. So I've always felt, I've always applied myself to stand out. I've always wanted to stand out, not in a bad way, in a good way through my work. So early in my career, I was a Director of Operations for Sysco in Atlanta, Georgia. As the Director of Operations, I had the warehouse, I had transportation. I used to have a CDL so I could drive the trucks. Rather than having a driver deliver something, a special order, oftentimes, hey, I'd just do it myself. So we had a sales force and they would have these quarterly sales meetings and they're big big to-dos. They would have vendors show their products. They would have sales forces from all over the area come in. They'd stay the night. They'd have this Saturday sales meeting as a big pep rally type deal and we had to get the product from the warehouse to the meeting. As Director of Operations, I had to be part of the meeting because I was part of the senior staff and, okay, so I'd have the truck loaded the night before. I came in early. I'd go grab the keys to the tractor and trailer and I'd drive that thing to the hotel, get there early, help unload it, help set up, and then the sales team would have their meetings and it was kind of an upscale event. So after this was all said and done, so I purposely brought this brand new rig out, brand new trailer, and then we had the sales force come out and look at our new equipment and then as I was standing out there by the trailer proud of this new piece of equipment, my boss who was the President of the company came up to me and said, "Participant, you don't have to do all of this. You don't have to go to all this trouble." I said, "I know I don't, but I want to. I enjoy this." He goes, "I just want to tell you how much I appreciate what you do and there's going to be a little extra in your check next pay period." I said, "Hey, well thank you. I really appreciate it. That means a lot to me." He didn't tell me how much. Obviously there was anticipation. It was back in the day when you couldn't look online and see what your paystub was. You had to get that hard check. I got it and it was a healthy increase.

Interviewer: Nice.

Participant: So I've always used that as a, I never have to ask for a raise. Example, as long as my engagement, as long as I'm committed to what we're trying to accomplish as an organization and I go and do my part and I put my best foot forward and put all of my effort into it for all the right reasons, then I'll always be taken care of. I've never in the 37 years that I've worked in this industry, I've never had to come into my boss's office and say, "Hey, I think I'm due an increase" or "Hey, I'd like to talk to you about a raise" and I've been well taken care of over the years, been able to provide for my family. I've been able to do that and more and I'm just blessed and I just believe that is kind of an engagement moment, okay? So in [Company], I don't have the flexibility. Things are so controlled. I don't have the flexibility to put a little extra in somebody's paycheck but I have the ability to

EE diss_Participant_[Company]

say those words that were said to me that made me feel the way I felt. I have the ability to say, “Hey, you don’t have to do this but I want to let you know, it is very much appreciated” and to me, that is the spark or the gratification or the recognition that drives engagement, say “Hey, what you do, what you’re doing is important. It’s appreciated and it supports what we’re trying to accomplish.”

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Did anything change specifically for you based on that experience that you shared of being director of the warehouse? Do you recall thinking back and any changes in maybe your feelings or approach or anything after that experience?

Participant: You know, if anything changed for me, there’s many of those stories. That’s one but there’s a lot of those type of examples. What really has changed to me is kind of that subtle pat on the back encourages me to try to pass that down to others, even if it is just a kind word and just understanding how impactful that is. So we get busy and we get stressed and we have high standards, expectations. That’s how business is. I call it the grind. My son just graduated college and he talks to me about, “Dad, I’ve got this. I’ve got that.” “Son, it’s the grind. They call it the grind for a reason” and in the midst of the grind, we still have a responsibility and ability to make someone feel good and appreciated and I think for me it’s just motivation to try to do that for others.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Do you have an opposite experience? I love what you shared and the pride that you had and the response you got from your boss but is there an opposite experience or a dissimilar experience that you could share?

Participant: The one experience that really got me to walk away from that, gave me the license to walk away from that company that I speak of was during these negotiations that I talked about, at the end of the day, what we do is about people. I think the whole idea of engagement is there’s people associated with doing work and people have emotions. People are living, breathing, human beings and at the core of every human are emotions, are feelings. I think that’s very very important in anything, in politics, in business, in anything. We’re human beings and so when we were entering into negotiations, as the General Manager Vice President over this facility, I knew what the workers wanted. They want more money. They want things that are going to favor them. They work hard and we made a lot of improvements. I believe there’s opportunities for reward and the company at the time had this belief that if we’re not making money in this particular facility, we really can’t afford to give increases, okay? The reason we weren’t making money wasn’t because of the workers. It was because of decisions outside the workers’ hands and it had to do with some bad debt and some customers that reneged on their receivables. So we’d take huge losses and then as a result, at the end of the year, we wouldn’t have profit. So I went into this and I talked to my boss about, “They’re going to want this and they’re going to want an increase and we need to come in and show that we want to reward them in some way” and he said, “Nope.

EEdiss_Participant_[Company]

This is what it's going to be" and the contracts are negotiated for a three year period. He said, "Year one is a 0% increase. Year two is a 0% increase and year three is a 0% increase."

Interviewer: Geez.

Participant: So we go through the negotiations and we talk about everything with an exception of finances. We get into the financial day. We walk in, sit down, they propose their initial offer, we propose ours. The union negotiator stood up and almost physically threw me and the Vice President of HR out of his office, almost physically. I mean, just told us to get out. So then it takes me 20 minutes to get back to the warehouse. In those 20 minutes, the word spread and now everybody was looking at me as "I cannot believe that you went in there and did that." So I didn't support them. I don't care about them. It wasn't the case. I was put in that position. So my opinion didn't matter. My ask didn't matter. My relationship with these people didn't matter. It was, "This is what we're going to do" and so that's when, okay, they filed a charge against us for unfair labor practices. We had to reset negotiations. We had to get a federal mediator involved. That's when we had to take this break. I went to my 20 year reunion and had that not happened, I would've said to my friend, "You know what, everything's good. I'm fine. I've been with this company 20 years" and it was at that point that I said, you know what, this is nonsense. I went from a hero to zero in a matter of that 20 minute drive back to that DC. That was a very negative negative experience. That's why I ended up at [Company]. Does that answer your question?

Interviewer: Yeah, that's a great narrative. Just so I understand, the negotiations with the labor union, because you were not willing to give your employees a raise or Sysco was not going to give your employees a raise over three years, they sort of pinned it on you versus your boss taking responsibility? Am I understanding that correctly?

Participant: Okay, so you go in there with your initial offer and then you negotiate. Everything is negotiable. So the initial offer was year one is a 0% increase, year two is a 0% increase, year three is a 0% increase. In other words, we're not going to offer anything, not even ten cents, ten cents, ten cents, 2%, 2%, 1%, nothing. So it put me in a position where because I was at the negotiation table, I was the Vice President General Manager of that facility. My boss had multiple facility responsibilities. It was his directive, okay, to put me as though it was my offer and it wasn't really my offer but in a management role, you have to carry out the orders you're given, right?

Interviewer: Right.

Participant: So it put me in that position. So by the time I got back to the warehouse, I was the one, even though I wasn't the one, but the damage was done.

EE diss_Participant_[Company]

Interviewer: Right, right. It sounds like, to the same question of changes made, you made a huge career change based on that one experience.

Participant: Right and I think that is kind of what we learn about engagement is, why do people leave companies? There was a time I had Sysco as a bumper sticker on my car. There was a time I had a Sysco belt buckle I used to wear. There was a time I had a Sysco ring I used to wear. This went from highly engaged to, man, this made me really really think about if this is the company I want to be with over that one decision.

Interviewer: Wow and then how long did it take for you to transition over to [Company], a couple months?

Participant: This was, I would say, within, so this happened in, I would say, within 60 days. I wasn't even part of the final negotiation. We'd extended it for 30 days and by the time the negotiation started, I had already given them my notice and so it was within 60 days, I was gone.

Interviewer: Wow, unbelievable. That's a great story and a great testament to the power of employee engagement. So do you recall talking about employee engagement outside of your work, maybe with friends or family or colleagues from different companies? Anywhere outside of the workplace, do you talk about employee engagement?

Participant: You know, obviously I've been married for 34 years.

Interviewer: Congratulations. That's wonderful.

Participant: Thank you. So your spouse is typically your confidante. I talk to my wife a lot about the trials and tribulations that she goes through in her work and we talk about my work a little bit. So we talk about engagement. When you talk about employee engagement, I have a friend that is, he used to own a couple restaurants here in town and in trying to help him build a better business, talking to him about employee engagement, yeah. So I'm kind of a, because I've been doing this for so long, a lot of people that I know kind of look at me as kind of the person of experience. I have another friend that his family owns an RV, they repair RVs, sell RVs. I've talked to him about employee engagement. It's all about what I can do to try to help others in their quest to succeed in business. So it's not an official consulting but it's kind of an unofficial consulting.

Interviewer: Sure and it sounds like you're pretty passionate about the topic anyway, so that also helps probably as well.

Participant: Well, I've also, because of my position, I'm asking to talk to different groups. Economic Development is a prime example. They want to bring business to Casa Grande. Their goal is to attract and build, make this an economic hub and attract business. All that's good for the economy. It's good for the tax base. It's good

EEdiss_Participant_[Company]

these buzzwords and efforts because they're meaningless if we're not ethical. They're meaningless. So years ago at [Company], we discovered that one of our mechanics was supposed to have been paid a dollar more an hour than what we were paying him, because we have these classifications. Mechanics have these classifications. So this mechanic transferred to our facility and he was of a higher classification and when he transferred in, we transferred him in at a lower classification. He accepted thinking that our base rate of pay was lower, not really realizing. I believe he was from Korea, Korean descent. So he just took it for, hey, this is what we offered. He accepted. So this went on for about two years that he was underpaid. It wasn't until this concept of classification came up that we realized this individual was supposed to have been paid at a higher rate. So I had a conversation with my boss, I said, "Hey, so-and-so, we've mistakenly underpaid him." We had done the math and it was several thousand hours at a dollar an hour. I said, "So what should I do next?" and without hesitation, he said, "Well, we're going to take care of him." I didn't expect anything less but it was that without hesitation, "We owe the man money. We're going to pay him his money." To me, that is at the core of the integrity of our company. So when you see that, if it were another company, maybe a small business, you could've said, "Well, he accepted the position. He knew what he was getting into. We don't owe him a dime" and the company would benefit, right? In this particular case, it was to me a clearly demonstrated, "We're going to do what's right." We have this term at [Company], "Do the right thing" and I think you have to have that. You have to demonstrate that. You have to have that integrity, that honesty, and associates have to believe in that in order for us to have any level or expectation that they're going to be engaged in what we're trying to accomplish. So that's just something I'd add to that.

Interviewer: Yeah, that's wonderful. Participant, this has been so informative and I really appreciate you taking the time to share with me your experience and it was definitely a fruitful conversation. So if I have any additional questions, are you open to me following up in the future via email or another conversation if need be?

Participant: Absolutely, yeah absolutely, sure.

Interviewer: Then I will be sharing my findings and insights from my study which won't be 'til later this year but I will make sure that you get an executive summary of that and thanks for your time and being part of this. Of course, I will pass it on to [Contact] as well but for the individual people, I'll be sure to pass that along.

Participant: Okay.

Interviewer: So how is the best way to reach [Participant] at this point in time?

Participant: I'm going to put you on hold. He should be waiting for us, okay?

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Interviewer: Okay great.

Participant: I will probably just transfer, just let him use this room. Let me grab him, okay?

Interviewer: Thank you.

VITA

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