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## Does provision of feedback increase work engagement and reduce cynicism among employees?

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### Keywords

Constructive, Cynicism, Destructive, Employees, Engagement, Feedback, Negative, Organizations, Positive Feedback, Work Engagement.

### Abstract

*The purpose of this paper is to highlight the impact of providing feedback on employee's engagement and cynicism. This study posits that the relationship between positive feedback and engagement is mutually reinforcing and leads to an upward spiral effect. That is positive / constructive feedback boost engagement at workplace while negative/ destructive feedback can lead to disengagement of employees which in turn may give rise to cynicism.*

*The paper defines various types of feedbacks which are provided to employees in organizations in relation to their work and performance. Further a conceptual model is offered which identifies the relation of positive and negative feedback with engagement and cynicism. Lastly it highlights the aspects which if taken into consideration while providing feedback may drive employee engagement and reduce cynicism at workplace. It would be valuable to both practitioners and academic communities who are seeking to explore various antecedents of employee engagement and how it can be used to control cynicism at workplace.*

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### Introduction

People come to work in organizations which are usually complex places, synonymous to complicated mazes (Wollard & Shuck, 2011) in which they find themselves navigating throughout the duration of their tenure. These organizations irrespective of their sizes (Matley, 1999), expect their employees to show initiative and invest themselves not only in their professional development (Bakker & Leiter, 2010) but also be committed to high quality performance standards (Sonnentag, Volmer, & Spsychala, 2008). In recent years, the relationship of an 'engaged' work force with organizational outcomes has been receiving increased interest and arguably, employee's engagement at workplace has emerged as a potential source of competitive advantage (Macey & Schneider, 2008; Wefald & Downey, 2009).

It is evident from extant research that engagement at work matters as the employees which are engaged have consistently shown to be more productive, safer, precise and less likely to leave an organization (Saks, 2006; Fleming & Asplund, 2007; Stuck, 2011). On the other hand disengaged employees cost organizations billions in years in losses due to high absenteeism, high turnover and lower productivity (Cordes & Douherty, 1993; Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002; Saks, 2006). Therefore, it is vital that organizations must understand the potential of every employee, take care of their needs and provide them with opportunities to develop themselves

both personally and professionally so as to keep them engaged (Roberts & Davenport, 2002; Fleming & Asplund, 2007). Thus it is not surprising that researchers both in academia and practitioner circuits are “consistently ranking the development of an engaged work force as an organizational priority” (Shuck & Wollard, 2010).

However although some academic research has focused on the state of engagement (Kahn, 1990; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001; Saks, 2006; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Wefald & Downey, 2009), it has been proposed that there might be some antecedents to engagement which could enhance and perhaps aid in the development of an engaged work force (Saks, 2006). However when it comes to employee engagement, antecedents that develop engagement at an organizational level revolve around basic personnel / human needs. Thus there is need to not only identify the basic needs of an employee but also develop organizational conditions conducive for engagement (Stuck, 2011). Conceptually, emerging cross cultural literature has suggested that feedback provision may drive potential conditions for engagement at the organizational level (Brown & Leigh, 1996; Lockwood, 2007). However no empirical study till date could be identified that focused specifically on the role of feedback and how its acceptance or rejection can impact engagement and cynicism within an organizational context.

The objective of this paper is to focus on the impact which providing feedback would have in terms of engagement. Additionally, it examines the consequence of negative feedback which could cause disengagement of employees aggregating to cynicism. A conceptual model is presented here by identifying the impact of both positive and negative feedback on engagement and cynicism at workplace.

### **Employee’s engagement at work**

Engagement at work was first of all conceptualized by (Kahn, 1990) who defined it as “the harnessing of organizational members’ selves to their work roles (p.646). Thus work engagement could be understood as the degree to which an employee commit physically, emotionally and cognitively to his / her workplace (Kahn, 1990). This will in turn have implications on the way that employee conducts him/herself at work and thinks about the organization and how long he/she may want to stay as result of this commitment (May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004). However other streams of research have emerged during the last decades which have developed the concept of engagement at work from different perspectives. The first stream follows Kahn model which has advocated the investing of personal resources at work place (Kahn W. , 1990; Kahn W. A., 1992; May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004). The second school of thought views engagement as an anti - thesis to burnout (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001) and argue that people, who are engaged at work, feel energetic, involved and committed to their jobs. These academics (Leiter & Maslach, 1999) identified six areas within the workplace setting that contained critical factors thought to result in engagement or burnout. These areas included: workload, control, fairness, reward, community, and values. It was hypothesized (Leiter & Maslach, 1999) via structural model that presence of specific job demands (i.e. work overload, lack of recognition, personal conflicts) and absence of specific resources (i.e. Lack of control, autonomy, support system) predicts burnout, which in turns is expected to lead to various negative outcomes such as physical illness, absenteeism, tendency to leave and diminished organizational commitment. However it was argued that this model is purely descriptive and mainly served to provide experiential framework for integrating study results that were

obtained with the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). Furthermore researchers argued that both engagement and burnout are two distinct negatively correlated states of mind rather than being two opposing poles of a single continuum (Schaufeli W. , Salanova, Gonzales, & Bakker, 2002). This initiated further research which led to the development of a third approach to view engagement as an outcome of having adequate job resources. This model was called Job Demand - Resources ( JD - R ) model that states that job demands are linked with exhaustion while lack of job resources would cause disengagement (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001). Demands are defined as 'the degree to which an environment contains stimuli that imperatively requires attention and response . In simple terms, job demands are the things that have to be done in order to carry out a job. They are not necessarily negative but they can turn into job stressors when they require high effort causing negative responses such as anxiety, depression, exhaustion, cynicism or burnout (Mulder, Mulder, Meijman, Veldman, & van Roon, 2000). The Job resources include physical, social, psychological or organizational aspects of job (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001) that not only assist in work performance but they may also enhance an employee's personal growth and development (Hofboll, 2002). This model was further revised over the years with other assumptions such as job resources (which include social support from co - workers, performance feedback and autonomy) trigger a motivational process that leads to work engagement and eventually higher performance levels (Bakker & Leiter, 2010). Also it was argued that when the job demands (e.g. workload, emotional & mental demands) are increased, the job resources become more salient and gain their motivational potential (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001). Further research have expanded the Job Resource and Demand model linking job resources to personal resources, thus suggesting the personal resources (resilience, self-efficacy, self-esteem and optimism) can be independent predictors of work engagement (Xanthopoulou D. , Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2007).

Owing to these different views, a forth school of thought has recently emerged which defines engagement using a multidimensional approach (Saks, 2006). The present paper adopts the definition of employee's engagement at work as advocated by Saks, 2006, (p.602) where he has considered engagement as a multidimensional construct having cognitive, behavioral and emotional facets, associated with individual role performance (Saks, 2006). This was done for three reasons. Firstly, this definition includes most of previous major literature suggesting that engagement is composed on cognitive (Kahn W. A., 1992; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001), emotional (Kahn W. , 1990; Leiter & Maslach, 1999) and behavioral (Kahn W. , 1990; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001; Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002) components. Secondly, this definition extends the current thinking on engagement by considering it as mediator within a three component model with antecedents and consequences (Saks, 2006). Finally, this definition indicates that not all dimensions of work engagement can be measured empirically by psychometrical valid instruments (Saks, 2006; Christian, et al., 2011). So probably work engagement given its multidimensionality requires other methods of measures in addition to the traditional scales namely MBI (Maslach & Leiter, 1997) and UWES (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003) which brings us to the main focus of present study.

Given all these differing view on concept, its vital that the factors which drive engagement are examined (Saks, 2006; Shuck & Wollard, 2010) within the context of both individual and organizational context. The present study seeks to fill this gap by examining the impact of feedback on work engagement (Cawley, Keeping, & Levy, 1998; Gruman & Saks,

2011). However given that the feedback may be positive or negative, the responses of the individuals may also vary which may impact the engagement at workplace. Additionally most of the previous literature has focused only on the direct effects of work engagement but they have failed to explain why and how work engagement impacted by feedback may influence job performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Bakker & Leiter, 2010).

### **Employee's cynicism at work**

Cynicism was defined by Maslach as a "negative, callous or an excessively detached response to various aspects of the job" (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). By depersonalizing various aspects of the job, an employee might choose to ignore the qualities that make those they work with unique and effective. Cynicism in workplace results when an employee believes that an organization lacks integrity (Dean, Brandes.P., & Dharwadkar, 1998), which when coupled with an intense negative emotional reaction, leads to a critical and at times destructive behavior (Abraham, 2000). Further research (Andersson, 1996; Cartwright & Holmes, 2006) has highlighted that cynicism among employees may be related to burnout which is parallel to Maslach's view that a disengaged employee increasingly feels exhausted, ineffective and cynical at work (Maslach & Leiter, 1999).

Cynicism among employees has been increasingly attributed to negative consequences both at individual i.e. excessive stress, role overload frustration, absenteeism (Andersson, 1996; Abraham, 2000) and organizational i.e. poor performance at workplace, increase in conflicts with co-workers, high job turnover (Cordes & Douherty, 1993) levels respectively. Given this, it could be suggested that cynicism in workplace can result from the breach of Kahn's (1990) psychological contract model which involves a person's psychological connection with the performance of work tasks (Kahn, 1990). When an organization fails to meet one or more of its obligations towards an employee then this psychological contract is violated, thus leading to employee cynicism. This violation can have serious consequences in terms of employee's attitude toward work and behaviors (Morrison & Robinson, 1997).

Research has suggested that cynicism is 'anticipatory' in nature (Andersson, 1996) and is a behavioral construct (Abraham, 2000) so it's not specific to one object rather it can be related to multiple numbers of objects at the same time (Andersson, 1996; Cartwright & Holmes, 2006). It implies that similar to work engagement, employee cynicism could be regarded much broader in scope (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004) and it could be representing a new paradigm of relations at workplace due to longer working hours, increase in work intensity, perceived ineffectiveness of management (Turnley & Feldman, 2000). Similarly, (Porath, 2006) reported that cynicism is significantly related to reduction in organizational citizenship behaviour and increased compliance to unethical requests from management. Since cynicism is a negative attitude that is composed of behavioral, affective and cognitive components (Andersson, 1996), it might be possible that it might co-exist with engagement.

Although literature (Baron, 1988; Andersson, 1996; Abraham, 2000) has hinted that employee cynicism can be controlled and reduced by work engagement (Abraham, 2000) but there have been very few studies which have established this link empirically. One such study which looked at the relationship between work engagement and its behavioral outcomes is by Cartwright & Holmes (2006) who suggested that by increasing engagement at work, employers could reduce cynicism which is one of the main causes of intentional turnover (Anderson, et al.,

2001). Thus it could be proposed that increase in engagement will have a negative effect on cynicism as employees which are engaged at work feel less cynical about their work (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). The present study will be examining the effects of positive and negative feedback on cynicism on its work engagement. Additionally, since engagement and cynicism both appear to be mutually exclusive constructs so it may be possible that they might co-exist together as a state but might be negatively related. Thus it is proposed that, engagement will impact cynicism negatively.

***Proposition 1: Engagement at work will be negatively related to cynicism.***

Moreover due to the dynamics involved in workplace, more and more superiors are forced to appraise and then provide feedback to their employees (Drake, Wong, & Salter, 2007). While positive or constructive feedback has been conceptually linked to work engagement (Garg & Kumar, 2012), negative or destructive feedback has been increasingly associated with employees being aggressive and getting cynical at workplace (Abraham, 2000). This is very disturbing for both academic and practitioners who are trying to look for ways to gain maximum benefits from an engaged work force (Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011; Wollard & Shuck, 2011).

### **Feedback at Workplace**

The construct of performance feedback maintains a prominent interest in both the academic and practitioners communities (Geddes & Baron, 1997). Research on seeking and using feedback at workplace has demonstrated its worth for both the organizations and the individuals working in them (Roberson, Deitch, Brief, & Block, 2003; Gruman & Saks, 2011). In recent years, performance feedback has garnered even greater attention due to potential implications to fair employment practices and because of increasing concerns over employee productivity in the organizations. Feedback is one of the key organizational resources which have the motivational potential (Llorens, Bakker, Schaufeli, & Salanova, 2006). In Job characteristics model, Hackman and Oldham (1976, 1980) have emphasized on feedback as it's one of the key elements of job design along with skill variety, task identity, task significance, and autonomy (Hackman & Oldham, 1980).

Also according to the theory of conservation resources (Hobfoll, 2002), the basic human motivation is directed toward the creation, accumulation and maintenance of resources. This also includes self - skills or resources which employees bring to work in terms of physical, emotional and cognitive efforts (Kahn, 1990). Once the employees are provided feedback it initiates a motivational process (Kluger & Denisi, 1996) which increases dedication toward work (Bakker & Leiter, 2010). When individuals are treated with dignity, respect and value for their contributions, and not simply as the occupant of a role, they are likely to obtain a sense of meaningfulness from their interactions. Especially in terms of managing job performance feedback is like a cornerstone without which an employee's assessment is not complete (Gruman & Saks, 2011). Thus the management must ensure that employees are provided honest and appropriate feedback which enables them to stay engaged and make better decisions in relation to their work (Peterson, 1996). However along with the importance of having and providing feedback, increasingly attention has been drawn to the variability with which employees respond to the feedback about their performance at workplace (Kluger & Denisi, 1996).

The feedback could be provided either formally as a part of formal assessed procedure such as performance appraisals (Cawley, Keeping, & Levy, 1998) or informally through one to one meetings (Skule, 2004). Although academics report feedback's beneficial impact on the critical organizational outcomes such as improved organizational performance, satisfaction and motivation, (Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Pavett & Lau, 1983; Cusella, 1987) empirical findings also indicates feedback's unfavourable, even detrimental effects on attitudes of the employees and their respective organizations such as withdrawal and disengagement from work (Baron, 1988; Kluger & Denisi, 1996). Explanations for these varied responses often center on whether the feedback is positive / constructive or negative / destructive (Geddes & Baron, 1997).

Positive feedback is likely to promote engagement and performance. It can be understood as information communicated to the employee that is intended to modify his or her behaviour or attitude toward work along with appreciation. According to research, (Shute, 2008) positive or constructive feedback is supportive, timely, specific and may be non - evaluative. It is usually presented as information to employee in response to some effort or action on his / her part and has been conceptually linked to progression at workplace (Gruman & Saks, 2011). Further research has suggested that positive feedback promotes engagement by affecting the socio-emotional climate in organizations (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2007). In a longitudinal study, Xanthopoulou and colleagues found that job resources including feedback were positively associated with engagement approximately 18 months later (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2009). However, feedback has an inconsistent relationship with performance, sometimes producing a debilitating effect (Baron, 1988; Cusella, 1987; Geddes & Baron, 1997). This can occur when feedback occurs in the form of destructive criticism (Baron, 1988) or focuses on meta-task processes and damages the recipient's self-esteem (Kluger & Denisi, 1996).

Scholars has named this kind of feedback as negative / destructive feedback which makes up one of the most difficult and stressful interactions at workplace (Baron, 1988; Geddes & Baron, 1997; Drake, Wong, & Salter, 2007). Although such encounters may be necessary to produce changes and improve employee performance, they may also prompt retaliation, hostility and cynicism (Abraham, 2000) at workplace which could prove fatal to the culture of engagement at an organization. Negative feedback could be constructive in the sense that it may be offering suggestions for improvement but the way information is conveyed (by supervisors or managers) and the way it is perceived or understood (by employee) can either initiate acceptance or rejection of such feedback (Cusella, 1987).

Thus negative feedback, in particular may be thought to be informative with regards to a better understanding and directing performance feedback impact (Geddes & Baron, 1997), however it is more likely to evoke a response (favorable or unfavorable) from the recipient employee (Cusella, 1987). Additionally, research has indicated that although negative feedback may or may not improve employee behavior (Kluger & Denisi, 1996), however it can serve as source of ego threat, defensiveness, negative effect, withdrawal behavior and conflict among organizational members (Baron, 1988; Geddes & Baron, 1997). Further research (Bandura & Cervone, 1986; Podsakoff & Farh, 1989) has indicated that employees generally respond to negative performance feedback by either accepting it (by increasing their efforts, decreasing their goals) or by rejecting it (i.e. continue to perform as before or start performing even worse)

but this may not be always the case however (Mesch, Farh, & Podsakoff, 1994; Nease, Mudgett, & Quinones, 1999).

Moreover, in order to minimize the consequences of negative feedback, research (Geddes & Baron, 1997; Abraham, 2000) has indicated that training superiors to deliver the feedback in an appropriate manner and considering alternate models of appraisal practices may help. However, provision of negative feedback is important but research has emphasized that the honesty in providing feedback should not be confused with hurtfulness (Drake, Wong, & Salter, 2007). In terms of (Kahn, 1990) three psychological conditions, hurtful feedback can compromise the recipient's sense of psychological safety and undermine engagement. Many contemporary performance management systems incorporate 360°, or multisource, feedback. Academics have suggested that aspects of successful multisource feedback systems include ensuring trust, providing support, being sensitive to individual differences, and trying to boost self-efficacy (Brown & Leigh, 1996). Such conditions promote psychological safety and will enhance engagement (Kahn, 1990; May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004).

Thus based on the above discussion it could be proposed that feedback provision would impact engagement and cynicism at work.

**Proposition 2 : Feedback will impact employee's engagement at work.**

2.a) Having positive feedback will increase employee's work engagement

2.b) Having negative feedback will decrease employee's work engagement

**Proposition 3 : Feedback will impact employee's cynicism at work.**

3.a) Having positive feedback will decrease employee's cynicism at work.

3.b) Having negative feedback will increase employee's cynicism at work.

### **Proposed conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework of the present papers views employee's engagement at work from a multidimensional aspect as presented by Saks (2006). He hypothesized that employee engagement at work is based on a social exchange model which is of view that engagement at work happens as part of agreed social contract between employee and employer. The social exchange theory (SET) argues that engagement at work results from a series of interactions between two parties i.e. employee and employer who are in a state of reciprocal interdependence within a system or organization (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). This mirrors the findings of Morrison and Robinson who described engagement at workplace as two way relationships which is much more than a wage - work perception (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). Saks (2006) argues that the amount of engagement exhibited by employees at workplace demonstrate their relationship status with the organizational resources such as conditions and relations at workplace and feedback. Thus when employees are provided these resources, they repay in form of been more engaged to perform better which will increase job performance (Gruman & Saks, 2011). Similarly if the organizational fails to provide these resources to employees, it causes a breach of the psychological contract (Kahn, 1990) and increases cynicism (Andersson, 1996). Based on the review of the literature above, the relationship between engagement and cynicism at workplace and the two types of feedback is depicted as below in

Figure 1.

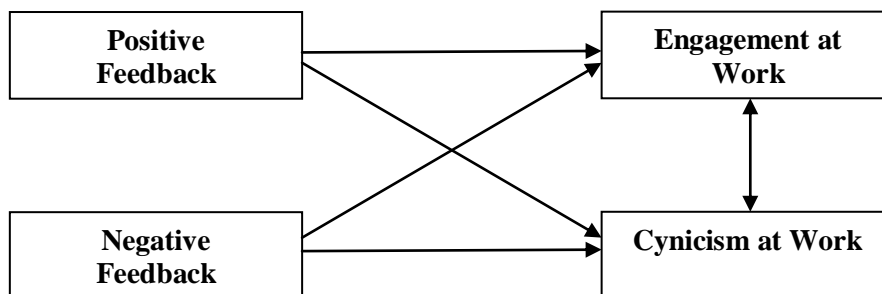


Figure 1 : The impact of feedback on the relationship between employee's engagement and cynicism at workplace.

### Expected Research contributions

The effects of positive and negative feedback on individuals has been well documented in literature (Bandura & Cervone, 1986; Cusella, 1987; Baron, 1988; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001) however it impacts at an organizational level is still to be explored (Drake, Wong, & Salter, 2007). The Burnout school of thought (Leiter & Maslach, 1999; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001) which views engagement as anti-thesis to burnout has repeatedly indicated that feedback at work has strong influence on the way an employee may decide to engage his or herself at workplace but the scale validity has been repeatedly criticized (Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011). Surprisingly, till date no study has empirically or conceptually examined the relationship between engagement and cynicism and what affect the feedback provision has on them. Thus a major finding of this study would be (1) is there a significant negative relation between work engagement and cynicism, (2) is there a significant relationship between feedback and engagement, and (3) is there a significant relationship between feedback and cynicism.

This research is expected to contribute towards the theory, practice and policy in terms of implications of providing appropriate feedback at workplace. The proposed research model is also likely to contribute towards uncovering of organizational antecedents of work engagement and cynicism by empirically confirming the appropriateness of various constructs which shall be devised to test the impact of positive and negative feedback on employees. In terms of practical implications, this study will provide support for utilizing the research construct of feedback in development of objective work interventions, specifically for HR professionals and senior management, who as a result of this study could focus on development of appropriate trainings methods which could be used for preparing senior staff before they are asked to assess performance and provide feedback both positive and negative. As an added benefit, knowledge from this study could be used to inform other fields of study (e.g., education, public affairs, non-profit administration) that are challenged with similar organizational variables and conditions.

### Limitations and Directions for Future Research

As with all the studies, there are limitations to this proposed study. The main limitation is that the propositions developed here must be tested empirically in order to establish their validity. There is also a possibility that the relationships developed here may not materialize. Thus future research in this area should attempt to test the model developed in this study to see whether a mutually exclusive relationship exists between engagement and cynicism at workplace.



Although the paper focuses on the impact of positive and negative feedback on both engagement and cynicism respectively, the future research must also empirically validate the impact of individual personality ( adaptability, willing to learn, locus of control) and organizational variables ( e.g. organizational credibility, perception of fairness, coping style of superior ) on work engagement to have a more holistic view of its relationship with cynicism.

## Conclusion

In spite of these limitations, the present study should be viewed as one of the first attempts to analyze the relationship between engagement, cynicism and feedback at workplace. Developing and maintaining a highly engaged workforce which is not cynical is a highly viable organizational goal as it will have a positive impact on several organizational outcomes like higher performance, lower turnovers, higher job satisfaction and higher productivity. It is suggested that by providing feedback either positive or negative but in an appropriate way, the managers and superiors can not only increase their employees engagement but may also reduce cynicism as a by - product of the process which in turn may further boost the organizational welfare. Thus it is hoped, the future studies will continue to uncover many other predictors in addition to feedback provision which may help in the creation of a sustainable and supportive organizational climate for employees.

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