
32 Feeling good and performing well? Psychological engagement and positive behaviors at work

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Introduction

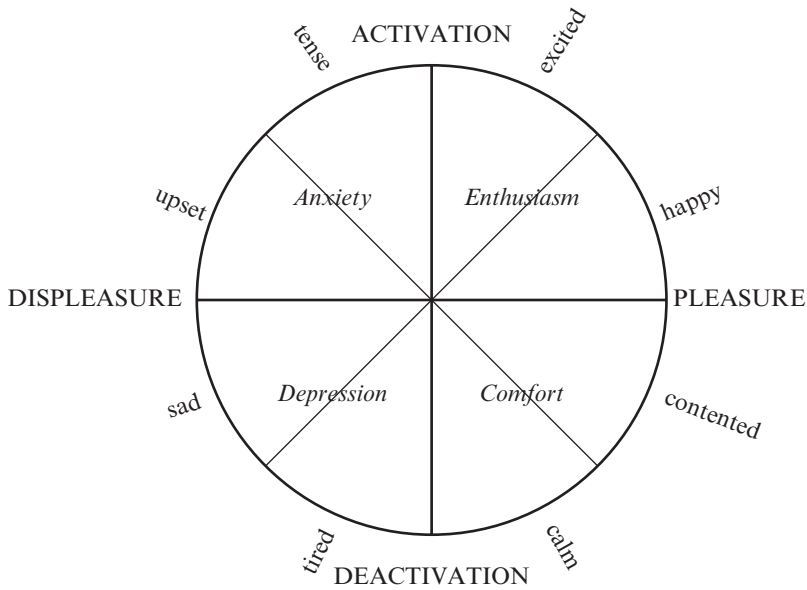
In spite of its popularity in the practitioner and scientific literature, we know little about how feelings of engagement affect the way individuals perform at work. The aim of our chapter is to draw on theory, as well as empirical studies, to better understand the relationship between psychological engagement and positive behaviors at work.

While there have been many definitions of employee engagement, we focus here on psychological engagement and, more specifically, the feelings of activated positive affect. Schaufeli et al. (2002) identified vigor as one of the key elements of engagement, along with dedication and absorption, and Macey and Schneider (2008) identified feelings of energy, enthusiasm, alertness and pride as central to psychological engagement. Each of these feelings is characterized not only by their positive focus, but also by their high level of activation. As noted by Macey and Schneider, activated positive emotional states better capture the construct of engagement than low-activation emotional states, such as contentment and satisfaction.

In this chapter, we elaborate on how and why such activated positive emotional states might influence three different types of work role performance: proficiency, adaptivity, and proactivity (see Griffin et al., 2007). We conclude our chapter with suggestions for further research and practical implications to organizations. To set the foundation for our discussion, we first define affect and work performance.

Affect at work

Affect at work is usually distinguished into two related concepts: *moods* reflect the way employees temporarily feel when at work. For example, employees can feel energized and enthused at work. Employees are likely to interpret any events at work in the light of their current moods, and behave accordingly (Parkinson et al., 1996). In contrast, *emotions* are the feelings of an employee towards a specific event or issue (Brief & Weiss, 2002). For example, employees can feel frustrated about not



Source: Adapted from Russell (2003).

Figure 32.1 *Circumplex model of affect*

succeeding with a project, or proud about the feedback they receive from their supervisor.

When we speak of psychological engagement, we refer to moods, which tend to exist for longer time periods, rather than more short-lived emotions at work. Employees are said to be engaged at work when they experience activated positive feelings at work, such as energy and vigor. These and other types of feelings are represented in the *circumplex model of affect* (Russell, 2003). Russell distinguished between activation and deactivation, as well as between pleasure and displeasure, yielding in four different affect quadrants (see Figure 32.1). Employee engagement is best represented by the activated pleasure quadrant of affect, or feelings such as enthusiasm.

Positive work behaviors

For our review, we draw on the taxonomy of work performance introduced by Griffin et al. (2007), whereby work performance comprises three distinct types of positive work behaviors – proficiency, adaptivity, and proactivity.

Proficiency is characterized by the fulfillment of role requirements that can be clearly anticipated, such as a call-center agent who effectively

answers incoming calls following formally prescribed guidelines. Such proficient behavior, which has received the most attention in the literature, was especially important in the past when the working environment was rather predictable, and job tasks were clearly defined. However, with increasing globalization, mergers, and dynamic changes in businesses it has become increasingly important for the viability of organizations to have employees who engage not only in proficient, but also in adaptive and proactive behaviors (Frohman, 1997; Campbell, 2000; Parker, 2000; Frese & Fay, 2001). *Adaptivity* refers to employees responding to changes at work, and *proactivity* relates to employees actively changing their work. For example, as well as answering calls (proficiency), a call-center agent can respond to changing customer requirements in an efficient manner (adaptivity), and suggest improved ways of dealing with customer queries (proactivity).

Importantly, Griffin et al. (2007) identified that each of these three types of individual work behaviors can be directed towards different levels. For example, employees can ensure that their tasks are completed properly (individual task proficiency), they can coordinate work with their co-workers (team member proficiency), or they can demonstrate loyalty to their organization by defending its reputation (organization member proficiency). Each of these three behaviors – completing one's tasks, coordination, and loyalty – are considered examples of proficiency because the need for them can be anticipated and prescribed. However, they vary in whether they contribute primarily to the individual's job, the team, or the organization. While there have been general arguments that employee engagement should promote positive work role behaviors, these lack theoretical precision, in part because distinctions have not been made between different types of performance.

Relationship between affect and positive work behaviors

There are theoretical reasons, as well as empirical evidence, to suggest that positive affect in general will promote each of the categories of positive work behavior. For example, positive affect leads people to focus on positive outcomes, which enhances their judgment that they will be able to perform the corresponding task, and thereby promotes greater effort towards achieving the task (proficiency). However, as described above, engagement is more specific, and involves activated positive affect, such as feelings of enthusiasm. In most of the research and theorizing on positive affect, it is not clear to what extent this affect must be “activated” to have the predicted effects on behavior. For example, laboratory-based research conducted in social psychology regularly speaks of “positive affect inductions” (for example, Isen & Reeve, 2005), and thus does not

distinguish between activated or non-activated positive affect. Likewise, most organizational research relies on the PANAS (Positive and Negative Affect Scale) measure, which does not distinguish between activated and non-activated affect, although mainly captures activated affect (Tellegen et al., 1999).

In the following, we develop some initial propositions regarding how activated positive affect might influence positive work behaviors. We focus particularly on proactivity, for which there is the clearest evidence. We propose that activated positive affect will promote proactive behavior, albeit not for all individuals or in all situations. The positive element of engagement results in broadening and building of thought–action repertoires, and facilitates expected outcomes of actions; and the energized, activated aspect of it prompts the engagement in action and approach.

Although it is not the core focus of our chapter, we suggest that activated positive affect can also promote proficiency and adaptivity, however we suggest that boundary conditions exist for these associations.

Activated positive affect and its effect on proactivity

Proactivity at work has been defined as a special type of goal-directed behavior that it is self-starting, anticipatory and change oriented (Crant, 2000; Parker et al., 2006; Grant & Ashford, 2008; Bindl & Parker, in press). Employees can be proactive in initiating better ways of conducting their tasks (individual task proactivity), they can be proactive in developing methods to help their team perform better (team member proactivity), or they can actively suggest how to improve performance of the organization (organization member proactivity). Positive affect can broaden individuals' momentary action–thought repertoire (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001; Isen, 1999; Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002), thus encouraging engagement in generative, proactive behaviors. In support of this, positive affect has been shown to predict higher, and more challenging goals (Ilies & Judge, 2005), and to help individuals engage with a more problematic future (Oettingen et al., 2005). In this vein, a recent study by Foo et al. (2009) investigated entrepreneurs' daily behaviors and found that positive affect at work may prompt a more future-oriented focus, which then helps increase levels of effort into tasks that go beyond those immediately required. Finally, proactivity likely “rocks the boat”, and is thus, although beneficial for the organization, not always welcomed by supervisors and colleagues (Frese & Fay, 2001). As Parker et al. (2010) suggest in their model of proactive motivation, the “energized-to” mechanism, that is, affective states, may promote proactivity at work via enhancing employees' expectations of success as well as the utility judgments of their proactive actions.

Several studies to date have focused on the relationship between employees' engagement, or activated positive affect, and proactivity at work. Salanova and Schaufeli (2008) found for managers of a telecom company in the Netherlands that there was a positive relationship between work engagement and self-reported personal initiative ($\beta = 0.64, p < 0.001$). Similarly, in an online study across professions in the Netherlands, work engagement was found to be positively related with self-reported innovative work behaviors ($\beta = 0.37, p < 0.001$; Schaufeli et al., 2006); and employees working in the healthcare sector reported increased levels of personal initiative at work if they were in an activated positive mood (Den Hartog & Belschak, 2007). These findings were supported in a longitudinal study of dentists which showed that individuals with high work engagement in the initial year of the study were more likely to indicate higher personal initiative three years later ($\beta = 0.13, p < 0.001$; Hakanen et al., 2008).

Longitudinal insights of more short-lived, daily processes also indicate a positive influence of engagement on proactivity at work. Sonnentag (2003) found over five consecutive days that day-level work engagement predicted higher levels of day-level self-initiative ($\gamma = 0.77, p < 0.001$) and pursuits of learning ($\gamma = 0.78, p < 0.001$). In an even more fine-grained level of investigation, Binnewies, Sonnentag and Mojza (2009) showed that the feeling of being recovered and energized in the morning predicted higher levels of self-initiative during the same work day ($\gamma = 0.21, p < 0.001$).

The relationship between activated positive affect and proactivity holds not only for individual task proactivity but also for organization member proactivity. In a study of executive MBA students, individuals who indicated higher levels of activated positive affect also reported engaging in more strategic scanning (for example, anticipating needed changes in the organization) and issue selling; both behaviors directed at enhancing the organization's fit with its environment (Parker et al., 2008).

In sum, there is there is good evidence of the beneficial role of activated positive affect for proactive behaviors at work. We thus suggest:

Proposition 1: Activated positive affect promotes proactive behaviors at work.

Moderators

Individual and contextual contingencies may affect the relationship between activated affect and positive work role behaviors. First, prior evidence shows that the broadening effect of positive mood on cognitive processes only occurs if the task is judged to be important (Isen, 1999). This perception of importance is likely especially relevant for proactive

behaviors at work, as they are self-initiated, without being imposed by others (Bindl & Parker, in press; Parker et al., 2010). We thus suggest:

Proposition 2: The relationship between activated positive affect and proactivity at work is stronger if the situation or task is perceived as important.

Further, the actual control employees have over their tasks has been shown to affect the relationship between feelings of energy and recovery on the one hand and individual proactivity on the other. When employees perceive higher levels of job control, the positive relationship between state engagement and proactivity is stronger (Binnewies et al., 2009). These findings indicate that employees, in order to show proactivity at work, not only need to be engaged at work, but also need to be given a considerable amount of discretion over their tasks. We thus suggest:

Proposition 3: Activated positive affect promotes proactivity in a specific situation if the employee has control or influence over that situation.

Finally, Parker et al. (2008) showed that activated positive affect predicted the proactive behaviors of individual innovation and issue selling. This relationship, however, was sustained only if individuals did not possess a high performance orientation, that is, did not have a very strong desire to prove their competency in every situation. High levels of performance orientation appeared to overwhelm any value of activated positive affect for promoting proactivity. We thus suggest:

Proposition 4: Activated positive affect promotes proactivity if the employee does not have overarching dispositional orientations that discourage self-initiated and change-oriented behaviors at work.

Activated positive affect and its effect on adaptivity and proficiency

We argue that while general positive affect (that is, both the “enthusiasm” and “comfort” quadrants of affect in Figure 32.1) is beneficial for adapting to and complying with requirements within the work environment, there are several reasons why activated positive affect should be particularly helpful for some types of proficiency and adaptivity, albeit under some circumstances more than others.

Positive affect can increase performance at work by improving the efficiency by which employees process information, especially mood-congruent information (Matthews, 1992). When employees decide whether to behave in a positive work behavior, or not, the recall of positive past emotional experiences will signal to individuals that it is appropriate to

engage in the planned action, thus promoting continued engagement in the action (Baumeister et al., 2007). Ultimately, individuals who are engaged in their work are thus more likely to be persistent at their tasks (Erez & Isen, 2002; Seo et al., 2004).

Empirical studies suggest the particular importance of activated positive affect in this respect. In a study of insurance sales agents, Tsai et al. (2007) showed that activated positive affect at work promoted self-efficacy and task persistence, and Totterdell (1999, 2000) showed that professional cricketers' feelings of energy, enthusiasm, and focus predicted higher performances in competitive games. In a similarly daily study design, Xanthopoulou et al. (2009) found that higher levels of daily engagement predicted higher levels of daily financial return by the respective service employee. These findings also appear to hold over a longer timeframe. Staw et al. (1994) showed that employees' experiences of positive affect at work predicted higher levels of supervisor-rated performance ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$), as well as slight increases in wage ($\beta = 0.05$, $p < 0.01$), 18–20 months later. In sum, we argue:

Proposition 5: Activated positive affect is particularly important for facilitating proficient and adaptive behaviors where the situation requires persistence.

In addition, we propose:

Proposition 6: Positive affect will be especially important for promoting positive work behaviors that are oriented towards the team and the organization, such as team member proficiency and organization member proficiency.

Ample research suggests that positive affect promotes individuals to help other individuals. For example, Tsai et al. (2007) found that positive moods promote employees' helping colleagues ($\beta = 0.40$, $p < 0.01$), and Belschak and Den Hartog (2009) found partial support for a positive relationship between positive affect and intentions to engage in team member proficiency behaviors such as helping colleagues ($\beta = 0.12$, n.s.; $\beta = 0.52$, $p < 0.01$; $\beta = 0.16$, n.s., for study 1 (samples 1 and 2) and study 2, respectively). Likewise, studies support the facilitating role of activated positive affect for organization member proficiency. For example, salespeople who experience positive work-related mood were rated by their supervisors as engaging more in customer service-oriented work behaviors ($\beta = 0.17$, $p < 0.05$; George, 1991). Similarly, Belschak and Den Hartog (2009) showed that positive affect facilitates intentions to engage in citizenship behaviors that are directed towards the organization, such as active participation in

organizational life and matters, and – with more inconsistent results – in citizenship behaviors that are directed towards the team. Similar effects have been found in studies focused on day-specific level of mood, although some studies have found stronger effects for behaviors directed at the organization rather than the work group (Dalal et al., 2009), whereas other studies (Lee & Allen, 2002) have shown that activated positive affect is most important for predicting citizenship behaviors that were directed at individuals, rather than the organization *per se*.

With regard to the facilitating effect of positive affect on adaptivity, Baron (2008) argued that positive affect may enhance an individual's capacity to respond effectively to dynamic situations, and to reach effective decisions under situational ambiguity. This is because individuals who experience activated positive affect are more likely to choose to engage in approach behaviors: they are likely to spend increased effort in the situation as opposed to deliberating and not engaging in action. For example, Salanova and Schaufeli (2008) investigated the relationship between engagement and employee behavior during technological changes in their company. More engaged employees were also more likely to indicate "When things are wrong, I search for a solution immediately" (p. 22; $\beta = 0.56, p < 0.001$). We thus propose:

Proposition 7: Activated positive affect is particularly important for adaptivity in dynamic and ambiguous situations.

For employees to perform well on their job, help co-workers, or adjust efficiently to a changing situation in the organization, they need to be in the position to be able to do so (Blumberg & Pringle, 1982). In this vein, similar to the relationship between engagement and proactivity at work, job control appears to have a facilitating function for engaged employees to perform well in their job (individual proficiency) and to help co-workers (team member proficiency; Binnewies et al., 2009). These findings suggest that job control is an important facilitator for translating employee engagement into positive behaviors at work, leading us to suggest our final proposition:

Proposition 8: Activated positive affect promotes proficiency and adaptivity to the extent that employees perceive control over their tasks.

Theoretical implications and recommendations for research

We have discussed the relationship between psychological engagement, or activated positive affect, and its relationship with positive behaviors at work. Based on this discussion, we arrive at three main avenues for future research, which we shall outline in the following paragraphs.

1. *Measurement of state engagement:* As Macey and Schneider (2008) summarized, measures of employee engagement cover the activated emotional component to either a greater or a lesser extent. As we have argued, activated affect should be most relevant when predicting proactive behaviors at work, whereas for proficient and adaptive behaviors positive affect, regardless of activation, should be sufficient. Thus, using different types of measures will potentially yield conflicting or incoherent results. We call for a more explicit focus on activated positive affect when assessing state engagement, as well as the need to separate affect from distinct states such as absorption or dedication.
2. *Systematic studies:* We argued in our chapter that it is activated positive affect, rather than low activation positive affect, that is most important for promoting proactive behaviors at work. So far research in industrial and organizational psychology has mostly investigated activated positive affect because it mainly drew on the PANAS measure which has this as its sole focus. Systematic comparisons between activated versus non-activated, and positive versus negative, types of state affect and their relationships with different types of behaviors at work are lacking, as suggested in preliminary research by Warr and colleagues (Bindl et al., 2010).
3. *Context:* When studying the relationship between affect and behaviors, researchers need to incorporate contextual factors, such as job control, or task significance, as well as individual factors, such as learning versus performance orientation. As we summarized, these factors can act as contingencies in the relationship between affect and the way individuals perform at work. Therefore, not taking these factors into account can obscure existing relationships.

Practical implications

Our review shows that employee engagement can fluctuate not only between individuals but also within individuals over time, and that these fluctuations impact on performance. This means that, through enhancing engagement, organizations can influence the extent to which employees display positive work behaviors, such as proficiency, adaptivity, and proactivity. First, they can put in place practices to generate greater activated positive affect among their employees. Second they can ensure that engagement, and activated positive affect, among employees is “translated” into more positive behaviors at work.

What practices will generate greater positive affect or ensure its translation into performance? An initial and obvious strategy is to select individuals who typically experience high levels of positive affect at work (for example, George, 1989). However, since research shows that state positive

affect likely affects performance at work to a greater extent than dispositional affect (George, 1991), it is just as important to consider the situation. Thus organizations, instead of only selecting engaged individuals, can promote feelings of engagement among their workforce by creating conducive work situations.

An important aspect of the work situation is the *work group* to which the employee belongs. For example, the larger the group size, the lower the group's affect tends to be. With increasing group size, the intensity of the relationship between group members decreases, and disagreement and tension become more common (George & Brief, 1992). Similarly, the affective tone of the work group, or the consistent affective reactions of group members, can influence individual positive affect. Thus if the team an employee works in experiences activated positive affect at work, this employee is also more likely to be able to experience activated positive affect themselves (Totterdell, 2000). For example, in a study with service employees, positive daily team climate predicted higher levels of individual employee engagement on the same day (Xanthopoulou et al., 2009). Organizations should therefore aim to pay attention to the moods of work groups. Interventions that improve teams' overall level of engagement will likely produce more sustained effects than targeting individuals only.

In addition to considering the work group, *features of the job* can influence individuals' positive affect at work. George and Brief (1992) focused on physical factors of the environment, such as pleasant office designs and good technological equipment (see also Salanova et al., 2005). Researchers have further identified task-related features as influences on positive affect at work. One of the most important is job control or autonomy, which has been shown to promote feelings of enthusiasm (see Warr, 2007). In addition, employees need control to execute positive behaviors at work. If the work is overly constrained, even if individuals feel positive, they will not have the latitude to engage in behaviors like proactivity (for example, Bindl & Parker, in press). A further important job feature is task variety. The greater the extent to which employees are involved in different types of tasks the more likely they will feel engaged. Being responsible for different tasks prevents feelings of monotony, and enables employees to feel stimulated in their job (Salanova & Schaufeli, 2008). With both job control and task variety, however, it is important to note that supports need to be in place. For example, if employees are expected to make decisions that they do not feel qualified to make, or have so much of variety in their job that they feel overwhelmed, then well-being will be impaired (Warr, 1994).

A further important feature of the task environment for promoting engagement is feedback on job performance, either directly from the outcomes of the tasks or feedback from colleagues and supervisors. Feedback

can also lead to employees realizing that their tasks are significant, such as by informing them on the consequences of their contribution to the end-beneficiary of the product or service. As noted in proposition 2 above, the more an individual sees his or her task as important, the more that positive affect is likely to result in positive work behaviors.

A further set of influencing factors is what George and Brief (1992) refer to as “motivational bases”. An example is the internalization of organizational values: the more employees internalize and identify the values and goals of the organization they work in, the more likely they will feel engaged at work. Thus, organizational practices that effectively convey the values of the organization to all employees, and involve them with the goals of the organization, result in more engaged employees, and – ultimately – in more positive behaviors at work.

In sum, there is good evidence that engagement, and hence proficiency, adaptivity, and proactivity can be promoted through the design of more effective work situations.

Conclusion

When employees are engaged, they experience activated positive affect, such as feeling inspired and enthusiastic. We have proposed that such active and positive feelings promote employees’ initiation of proactive behaviors at work (proposition 1), especially if the employee perceives the situation as important (proposition 2), experiences or can craft some control over the situation (proposition 3), and if the employee does not have a disposition against initiating change that overwhelms the value of the positive affect (proposition 4). We also proposed that activated positive affect is important for both proficient and adaptive forms of behavior, especially if these behaviors require considerable persistence (proposition 5), if these behaviors are directed toward the team and the organization (proposition 6), and if the adaptivity is required in a highly dynamic and ambiguous situation (proposition 7). Finally, for all types of performance, we have noted the importance of perceived control over one’s tasks (propositions 3 and 8). Only if individuals feel able to exercise control, will the positive affect they experience translate into greater proficiency, adaptivity, or proactivity. In sum, there are good theoretical reasons, and accumulating evidence, to suggest that employees who feel positive in an activated way at work will *indeed* perform more effectively.

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