The Influence of Attachment Styles on Employee Engagement

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ABSTRACT:*The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the influence of adult attachment styles on the engagement of employees in an attempt to address increasing losses in U.S. work productivity. Researchers have documented that organizations able to maintain better manager-employee relationships demonstrated positive employee engagement and improved productivity. Adult attachment theory was used as the foundation to explore how employees' relationships with their immediate manager affect their work engagement. Two themes emerged: employees have a need for purpose and value, and employees require varying levels of dependency. These findings indicate that managers must cater to the attachment needs of the employee to positively address productivity losses.*
KEYWORDS -*Attachment theory, Employee engagement, Manager-employee relationships*

I.   INTRODUCTION

There has been a recent resurgence of interest concerning employee engagement and its effect on organizational productivity and success (Kaliannan&Adjovu, 2015; Thakur, 2014; Tulasi Das & Vijayalakshmi, 2011). The performance of any organization depends on the productivity of its employees (Handa& Gulati, 2014; Shaukat, Ashraf, & Ghafoor, 2015). Gallup (2013) highlighted that a lack of employee engagement contributed to an annual loss of over $450 billion (p.12) in work productivity in the United States alone.

Researchers have documented that organizations able to maintain better manager-employee relationships demonstrated positive employee engagement and improved productivity (Alfes, Shantz, Truss, & Soane, 2013; Dávila& Piña-Ramírez, 2014; Hudson, 2013). Therefore, it is incumbent upon an organization's managers to motivate employees to foster positive employee engagement experiences that improve company productivity (Anitha, 2014). In turn, one of the greatest contributing factors to effective employee engagement is the development of a strong manager-employee relationship (Frazier, Gooty, Little, & Nelson, 2015).

It has long recognized that psycho-emotional factors significantly affect employee engagement (Davidovitz, Mikulincer, Izsak, Shaver, & Popper, 2007; Hicks, O'Reilly, & Bahr, 2014; Kapoor &Meachem, 2012; Lanciano&Zammuner, 2014). Contemporary attachment theory provides a meaningful advancement in understanding relationships and the behavioral and emotional variations found amongst employees in the workplace (Boatwright et al., 2010; Harms, 2011; Richards &Schat, 2011). However, limited knowledge exists regarding the relationship between an employee's attachment style and its effect on their level of engagement in a work setting. Of additional interest is how this relationship affects employee workplace behaviors and behavioral expectations of an employee's manager in the work environment.

A lack of knowledge of employee attachment styles by managers provides limited means for positively affecting work behavior and subsequent work engagement. Without an understanding of what individual employees require from their managers, based on their attachment needs, substantial improvements to employee engagement will not occur given that relationships play a significant role in determining how individuals, work groups, and organizations function (Richards &Schat, 2011). The intention of this paper is to help address this gap in knowledge by exploring how the lived attachment experiences of full-time employees affects their work engagement needs.

II.   PRIOR RESEARCH

Attachment describes a "lasting psychological connectedness between human beings" (Bowlby, 1969, p.194) and is established from a child's bond created with the primary caregiver (Bowlby, 1982). Attachment behaviors were initially formed with caregivers to protect an infant from the perils of physical survival. However, in contemporary society, attachment interactions serve to protect an infant against psychological or physical distress (Landa&Duschinsky, 2013). Recurring relationship experiences, maternal sensitivity, social competence, and quality of peer relationships act as antecedents to attachment development (Fraley et al., 2013) and influence attachment styles over the course of an individual's life (Buist, Reitz, &Dekovic, 2008; Hazan& Shaver,1990). Close, quality personal relationships are essential for human life and encompass the requirements for successful human development and well-being (Thomas, Martin, Epitropaki, Guillaume, & Lee, 2013).

Adult attachment styles include a matrix combination of a positive and negative view of self with a positive and negative view of others. (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Adults with a secure attachment style tend to have a positive view of themselves and others and engage and maintain well-connected, trusting close relationships (Bowlby, 1988; Hudson, 2013). Secure adults are characterized by high levels of self-esteem, are comfortable with autonomy, and demonstrate low levels of dependency and avoidance. Anxious-preoccupied attachment style adults tend to have a negative view of themselves and a positive view of others (Mikulincer& Shaver, 2007). These individuals seek close overdependent support to allay their fear of abandonment, and are characterized by lower levels of self-esteem, low levels of satisfaction and trust in relationships, and demonstrate ineffective problem-solving and coping skills (Hudson, 2013; Mikulincer& Shaver, 2005).

Adults who were formerly avoidant in childhood may develop to demonstrate one of two styles of avoidance. Adults with an avoidant-dismissing attachment style have a positive view of themselves but perceive others as unavailable and untrustworthy, thus avoiding close relationships (Boatwright et al., 2010; Ross, McKim, &Ditommaso, 2006). These individuals are characterized by being overly self-reliant, overrating the importance of their independence in relationships with other adults, not acknowledging feelings of vulnerability, and distance themselves from others when stressed (Hazan& Shaver, 1990). Adults with a fearful-avoidant attachment style have both a negative view of themselves and others, thus avoiding close relationships but maintaining a desire for them (Boatwright et al., 2010; Ross et al., 2006). While maintaining many of the same characteristics as individuals with an avoidant-dismissing attachment style, fearful-avoidant adults are characterized by a fear of rejection and respond negatively to criticism (Mikulincer& Shaver, 2005).

Adult Attachment at Work

Work is fundamentally a relational act where actions, decisions, and experiences are influenced by relationships (Blustein, 2011; Richards &Schat, 2011). Therefore, attachment theory provides a sound psychologically-based methodology for understanding how people interrelate based on their individual internal working models (Bresnahan &Mitroff, 2007; Gillath, Karantzas, & Fraley, 2016). Successful workplace functioning requires a balance of qualitatively different emotional and psychological attributes and behaviors, while unsuccessful functioning is characterized by behavioral imbalance (Hackman &Wageman, 2007; Morrison, 2015). Characteristics of adult attachment in work situations align to similar positive or negative coping behaviors associated with the caregiver-infant relationship. Thus, knowledge of attachment styles is an important antecedent for understanding interpersonal relationship quality, psychological well-being, effective leadership, trust, satisfaction, performance, and other organizational outcomes (Harms, 2011; Lanciano&Zammuner, 2014).

Relational Nature of Employee Engagement

Employee engagement is conceptualized as the level to which employees are dedicated to their work and encompasses aspects such as job satisfaction, job involvement, organizational commitment, motivation, and citizenship behaviors (Dalal, Baysinger, Brummel &LeBreton, 2012; Sahoo & Mishra, 2012; Sharma & Kaur, 2014). When employees engage with their preferred selves their psychological presence increases, resulting in greater involvement and work participation (Ali Memon et al., 2014; Kahn, 1992; Sharma & Kaur, 2014). A fully engaged employee demonstrates complete cognitive, emotional, and physical immersion in the individual's work, leading to higher quality work performance, increased organizational commitment and reduced turnover intention (Biswas & Bhatnagar, 2013; Handa& Gulati, 2014; Sharma & Kaur, 2014; Thompson, Lemmon, & Walter (2015). Engagement of employees is required for continued company performance; however, employee engagement must be continuous and stable over time, ensuring that it is not a one-off event (Mauno, Kinnunen&Ruokolainen, 2007; Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma, & Bakker, 2002).

Trusted, committed, and loyal relationships occur over time as reciprocal needs are met by both parties (Cropanzano& Mitchell, 2005). Immediate managers create the foundational relationship supporting employee engagement (Bates, 2004; Frank, Finnegan & Taylor, 2004). Organizational goals such as productivity and profitability can be attained through providing both tangible and psycho-emotional benefits (Kim, Eisenberger, &Baik, 2016). Managers must develop relationships with employees by creating conditions that facilitate the development of employee engagement as a means for improving organizational performance and productivity for organizational success (Alfes, Shantz, Truss, & Soane, 2013; Anitha, 2014; Shuck, Reio, & Rocco, 2011; Yasin-Ghadi, Fernando, &Caputi, 2013).

Managers' Effect on Employee Engagement Through Attachment

Managers within the work environment are responsible for directing leader-follower relationships in ways that help achieve the organization's goals. The strong bond created between manager and employee supports the employee to have the confidence to demonstrate behaviors that will contribute the company's performance (Hudson, 2013; Kafetsios, Athanasiadou, &Dimou, 2014).

Prior researchers have highlighted that leader behavior and employee self-concept affects psychological perceptions of behavior in workers (Berson et al., 2006; Boatwright et al., 2010; Harms, 2011). The contribution of psychological capital to the organization depends upon employees feeling that individuals have control over their work and are excited about their job's contribution to the firm's success (Sahin, Çubuk, &Uslu, 2014).

Interventions to enhance employee engagement and disengagement do not need to focus exclusively on the operational, physical, and cognitive aspects of the work environment. Relationships are key to developing and retaining engaged employees (Yuan et al., 2012). Manager behaviors can be incorporated into training courses to improve employee outcomes and yield better results in comparison to those achieved via eclectic leadership training.

In summary, managers have the opportunity to positively influence the behavior of employees toward the achievement of organizational goals and the well-being of employees. Given that attachment styles are malleable, knowledge of an individual's attachment style assists managers with developing behaviors in employees that can create a more secure attachment base. Fostering secure attachment behaviors leads to more engaged employees.

III. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore how the lived attachment experiences of a purposeful sample of 16 full-time employees affects their work engagement needs. The full-time employees selected from various industries throughout the United States comprised mid level employees who have had at least 5 years' experience in a full-time salaried job role. These salaried, full-time employees were required to have had direct line reporting relationships to an immediate manager so that they could share their experiences of how managers may affect engagement levels. More specifically, discover what individual employees require from their managers, based on their attachment needs, to produce improvements to employee engagement.

Sixteen participants took part in the study. Participants completed the ECR-RS questionnaire to determine their attachment style. Five participants were employed from each of the secure and anxious-preoccupied attachment styles. Each of the two avoidant attachment styles were represented by three participants. Interview data were then gathered this purposeful sample of 16 interview participants until saturation was obtained. Data were gathered in one-on-one interviews with employees of organizations who comprised a variety of attachment styles and who could provide first-hand feedback regarding the types of management behaviors that make them more engaged in their job roles.

Two instruments were administered for the data collection process. The first consisted of a questionnaire that was used to determine an individual's attachment style, known as the ECR-RS scale. The ECR-RS scale was developed by Fraley et al. (2011) to measure adult attachment styles across a variety of relationship contexts. The second instrument used for data collection was one-on-one interviews with employees who fit within the parameters required for the purposeful sample participants. Interviews were conducted to allow participants to share their experiences using a semi structured, open-ended protocol.

Those individuals that consented to complete the interview portion of the study were asked to respond to questions concerning employee engagement and how the perceived behaviors of their manager affected their levels of engagement. The modified seven-step Van Kaam method of phenomenological analysis as outlined by Moustakis (1994) was used to provide the basis for understanding the influence of attachment styles on employee engagement. Checking of data occurred through triangulation, which examines research data against prior research, or with checking with human sources of information such as participants, peers, or external consultants to determine evidence that corroborates the themes and findings uncovered. A second method was member checking, which allowed for feedback on interpretations gleaned from the data retrieved. Member checking involves returning the data analysis, interpretations, and findings to the participants so that they could confirm the accuracy and credibility of their account.

IV. RESULTS

The findings from this study resulted from triangulation of interviews conducted with the participants, and a review of past literature regarding adult attachment and employee engagement. The significant findings that emerged were categorized by two inter-related core themes: the need for value and purpose, and level of dependence.

Need for Value and Purpose

The first theme to emerge was the level to which an employee required their manager to support and recognize them for their value and purpose. When questioned about what engaged the employee in their job role, 62% of respondents emphasized the importance of having a higher purpose than themselves and shared success amongst members with whom they worked. Most respondents highlighted that their manager influenced their engagement positively to allow them to fulfill their engagement needs.

Having a higher purpose, such as improving the lives or others, subordinate success in the form of employees or clients, and shared success in attaining organizational goals, was highly sought after by secure and anxious-preoccupied participants. Secure participants reported establishing their relationship with higher purpose attainment and success achievement with support of others. They, in turn, supported others to achieve their own success but did not require explicit recognition of their role in others' achievement.

Secure participants indicated that their manager was instrumental in allowing the participant to fulfill their engagement needs through providing autonomy and authority. Low levels of dependence encouraged by high levels of autonomy and authority provided secure employees with the opportunity to contribute to the success of themselves and others and fulfill their engagement needs.

Insecure participants were less driven by a higher purpose and the success of others, and more by individual worth, success, and personal development. Establishment of value for insecure participants was heavily influenced by aspects related to manager communications including appreciation and praise, clarity of expectations, honesty, integrity, respect, openness, and professionalism. The importance of communication for insecure individuals was associated with the lack of consistent messaging related to their insecure attachment experiences.

Anxious-preoccupied participants sought a higher purpose but looked for their manager to recognize their value when providing support for the organization or others. Such outcomes are supported by researchers who have established that anxious-preoccupied individuals seek to gain approval from others due to their high level of dependence (Little, Nelson, Wallace, & Johnson, 2010). While respondents highlighted the importance of shared success and purpose, it was equally significant that these participants received recognition from their manager for their sacrifice. This occurred in the form of praise and recognition, financial rewards, autonomy, and authority. The main factor affecting the employee was that the manager showed that they cared about the employee and valued their worth both personally and to the organization.

Individuals categorized as avoidant considered communication to be at the foundation of assessment of their value in the workplace. The role and responsibility of their manager was less focused on a supportive, complementary relationship, and more reliant upon honest, clear, and respectful communication. Both of the avoidant attachment styles based an effective manager-employee relationship on clear and respectful communication due to their low level of mutual trust, and high level of sensitivity to criticism. Their engagement was achieved from factors relating to personal satisfaction rather than through the commitment to a higher purpose or shared success. These factors involved recognition of their workplace value and work ethic, and trust in their skills and abilities.

Respondents who were currently disengaged expressed that a lack of clear and honest communication led them to withdraw and do the very minimum of job-related tasks. Distancing from others is a characteristic of avoidant individuals when they are stressed (Harms, 2011). These individuals wanted recognition of their skills and abilities in the work environment as this was a factor that provided them with value at work. More importantly, feedback rather than praise was paramount to these individuals feeling worthy in the workplace.

The avoidant-dismissing respondents emphasized that an increase in clear and honest communication would help to show that they were trusted, allow them to grow in their job role, and demonstrated that their abilities were recognized in order for them to successfully undertake their job roles. The experience of open and clear communication allowed them to produce better quality work and waste significantly less time.

With avoidant-fearful participants, the importance of clarity, rather than feedback, appeared to be paramount. Clarity provided respondents with an understanding of value in their job role. In the instances where their manager was unable to meet their engagement needs, participants sought relationships with people who could fulfill these needs. Participants used self-identified strengths such as work ethic and value to others to portray their worth. This is supported by researchers (Harms, 2011) who have established that while avoidant-fearful individuals avoid close relationships they still maintain a need for them. From a communication perspective, while clarity for job tasks was important, so was the need for these respondents to feel as though their manager addressed them in a respectful and professional manner.

Level of Dependence

Underpinning the core theme for level of dependence were the concepts of trust and support between manager and employee. Trust, and making oneself vulnerable, is central to relationship development (Harms, 2011). The propensity to trust develops from a general attachment orientation to more person-specific attachment based on experiences and expectations of new relationships (Burke, Sims, Lazzara, & Salas, 2007).

When questioned about the role and responsibility of their immediate manager, 81% of respondents highlighted the need for a supportive, complementary relationship. However, the way in which individuals required the relationship to develop involved differing manager behaviors for the employee. Responses associated with the core theme of level of dependence demonstrated variation between participants of differing adult attachment styles.

Participants categorized as secure responded with comments highlighting the need for a complementary and balanced relationship with their manager. The participants' manager fulfilled the roles and responsibilities in a positive way to satisfy the engagement needs of secure employees. The complementary relationship included high levels of autonomy and authority and a lack of micromanagement and mundane tasks. Such a relationship emphasized a high degree of mutual trust and demonstration of a low level of manager-employee dependency.

Lower levels of trust and increased levels of dependency have been associated with anxious-preoccupied attachment in a work context (Harms, 2011). High levels of dependency for anxious-preoccupied employees are associated with an increased need for reassurance and support due to concerns regarding reciprocity of emotional fulfillment (Hudson, 2013). All employees categorized as anxious-preoccupied responded with a need for a supportive, complementary relationship with their manager. The difference between secure and anxious-preoccupied employees, however, was with the relationship balance. While the supportive relationship between anxious-preoccupied employee and manager included high levels of autonomy and authority, it was also characterized by greater dependency on the manager. Anxious-preoccupied employees expressed a greater need for support through recognition and appreciation of their individual value from their manager.

Individuals with avoidant attachment styles are characterized by low levels of trust and a fear of others and are very sensitive to criticism and rejection (Hudson, 2013). The main variation that existed amongst types of avoidant attachment is related to dependency. Avoidant-dismissing people are overly self-reliant and independent, while avoidant-fearful maintain the need for relationships but tend to avoid them. (Hudson, 2013). As with the anxious-preoccupied participants, avoidant individuals wanted recognition of their value in this supportive relationship.

Individuals characterized as avoidant-dismissing demonstrate lower levels of trust and higher levels of independence and self-reliance. This facet of their attachment style was apparent in the responses gained from the two avoidant-dismissing respondents.

Individuals characterized as avoidant-fearful demonstrate lower levels of trust and tend to shun relationships even though they have a desire for them. As such, they relied on their own abilities and work ethic to get the job done and support the organization as best they could.

V. CONCLUSION

The results of the study suggested that positive changes to employee work engagement can occur through greater understanding of an employee's attachment style. Managers of employees are in an ideal position to constructively influence the engagement of employees to the benefit of both the organization and the individual. The variations of individuals' attachment styles require managers to behave differently when addressing the needs of employees.

Employees require purpose and value in their job role. The employees' attachment style strongly influences how their manager attends to issues of engagement so that the employee feels a sense of security. Security allows employees to be more engaged in their job role. Employees with different attachment styles demand varying levels of dependence with their manager to meet their attachment needs.

Organizational leaders should ensure attachment styles are considered when employing and developing employees. Managers should be trained to understand and cater to their employee's attachment needs so that the work environment is more conducive to the emotional and psychological health and well-being of its workers.

The work environment exists as a place of many relational acts where relationships influence decisions and the actions people perform (Blustein, 2011). The most effective way to understand relationship interactions is through the knowledge of people's attachment styles, as they are innate to a person's psychological patterns. Attachment theory provides a sound psychologically-based methodology for understanding how people interrelate based on an individual's internal working models (Gillath et al., 2016).

Understanding these psychological patterns allows for a greater understanding as to what types of behaviors positively and negatively influence individuals with varying attachment styles. Knowing employees' attachment styles in the work place is crucial for understanding interpersonal relationship quality, psychological well-being, effective leadership, trust, satisfaction, performance, and other organizational outcomes (Lanciano&Zammuner, 2014).

Attachment in the work domain operates similarly to other relationship domains. In the work environment, the manager-employee relationship operates in a similar way to the caregiver of an infant. There is an unequal relationship between manager and employee, where the manager is viewed in a supervisory capacity.

The role of the manager is to maintain responsibility for directing employee relationships in such a way that they achieve organizational goals.

Managers provide the secure base from which employees can explore, while also providing a safe haven in times of distress (Kafetsios et al., 2014). A secure manager-employee relationship delivers meaningfulness to the employee through the value of work and protection from risk or threat. Furthermore, a strong bond created between manager and employee allows the employee to have the confidence to demonstrate behaviors that will contribute the company's performance (Hudson, 2013). The results of the research supported the findings highlighted in prior literature and reinforced that variations occur in employee behaviors based on their attachment experiences. In addition, the data uncovered two core themes that extended knowledge and understanding of attachment in the workplace.

The concept of attachment is one that must be handled delicately in a work setting. It is quite possible that the personal nature of an individual's relationship during their upbringing could be used with mistaken or unethical intention. However, if used with moral and ethical purpose, understanding an employee's attachment style can positively contribute to their work engagement. As organizations strive to maintain competitive advantage through improvements to productivity in a dynamic global environment, understanding practices that encourage employee engagement may mitigate losses in business productivity. Positive employee attitudes are critical to achieving organizational goals (Katsaros, Tsirikas, & Bani, 2014). Organizational leaders can incorporate measurement of attachment styles into their employee assessment procedures to better understand how to affect their engagement

VI. IMPLICATIONS

Employees who are engaged in their work tasks contribute to company productivity and profitability through improvement to revenue growth and enhancements of shareholders value (Medlin & Green, 2014). Conversely, disengaged employees contribute to productivity losses through increases to healthcare costs, product quality defects, workplace accidents, job stress, and turnover intentions (Peretz, Levi, & Fried, 2015). Disengaged employees contribute to annual losses in excess of $450 billion for the U.S. economy (Gallup, 2013; Hoolahan, Greenhouse, Hoffmann, & Lehman, 2012).

Improvements to understanding the manager-employee relationship has the potential to assist with mitigation of productivity losses which are detrimental to organizational success (Ram & Prabhakar, 2011). Thus, it is critical company management to develop effective managers and workplace policies and practices that focus on the positive engagement of employees. This research fills a gap in understanding the variations in relational needs of employees based on their lived attachment experiences.

The contributions from this study provide much needed insight into the manger-employee relationship, and the associated link to attachment styles and employee engagement. Results from this study indicate that by improvement in manager behaviors that supports the attachment needs of employees contributes to an increase in employee engagement. The support of an employees' attachment needs provides organizational leaders with the opportunity to address losses in productivity as well as support employee health, well-being, motivation, turnover intention, and job performance and satisfaction.

Organizational leaders, through their human resource departments, have the ability to better understand social interactions between managers and employees and personal attachment variations of employees. Knowledge generated from the data collected in this study could assist with improvements in manager-employee relations and improve worker engagement. Understanding the behaviors that managers may use with mid level employees to increase employee engagement may help to influence employee performance and commitment through trusting relationships. Further, managers may be better armed to identify and respond to situations that lead to employee disengagement.

Implications for positive social change for the current study incorporate the financial benefits derived from an increase in industry productivity and profitability. Furthermore, there is an associated reduction in the cost of healthcare due to lower incidence of stress-related issues and workplace accidents. Improvements to worker productivity and motivation result from the recovery of employees' commitment to the workplace, and enthusiasm and passion for their job role. A healthy work environment occurs through the provision of a trusting work environment where managers understand the needs of their workers based on their attachment styles.

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