First things first: Examining personal motivation before learning how to motivate others

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ABSTRACT

Work motivation is one of the most popular topics in organizational behavior and principles of management courses. Virtually all the attention, however, is directed towards how to motivate others, rather than examining issues with students' own personal motivation. The purpose of the course assignment described here is to help students gain self-insight into their own challenges with motivation through self-assessment and the development of a personalized improvement plan. Students apply concepts of engagement and energy management to complete the exercise.

Keywords: Motivation, engagement, energy management, self-analysis

INTRODUCTION

Learning motivation theories and techniques for maximizing employee effort is a core concept in most organizational behavior and principles of management courses. Through a variety of methods — lecture, case analysis, experiential assignments — instructors focus students' attention on how managers can maximize employee productivity through the application of theoretically sound motivational strategies. Given the considerable amount of space allocated to this topic in management textbooks and the corresponding time spent in class, students understandably get the message that managers routinely encounter employees whose performance displays deficits in intensity, direction, and persistence of effort. However, many students would likely discover their own motivation deficiencies if asked to engage in some directed self-analysis; such a reflective exercise could have substantial benefits for them now and in the future. The premise of this article, then, is that management instructors may be "putting the cart before the horse" by devoting so much time to discussing how to motivate others before asking students to first analyze their own productivity drains. Thus, the exercise described here was developed to help students gain insight about their motivation challenges and how to overcome them. Those who fully engage with it should see improvements in their personal productivity, while perhaps also enhancing their ability to successfully motivate others later in their professional careers.

MOTIVATION AND ENGAGEMENT

The typical treatment of the motivation topic in most management textbooks involves presenting various theories that have been developed over the years to explain what motivates workers, along with their empirical validity. To take one example, the widely-adopted Robbins and Judge (2013) text sequentially covers 'early' theories of motivation, such as Maslow's (1954) needs hierarchy and Herzberg's (1959) two-factor theory, followed by the more empirically sound 'contemporary' group of theories, including goal-setting (Locke, 1968), equity (Adams, 1965), and expectancy (Vroom, 1964). This approach has merit in its clear, logical progression. Studying a series of individual theories, however, does not lend itself especially well to the objective of comprehensively examining students' own motivational challenges.

Instead, in this exercise students will be introduced to the concept of engagement to help them analyze their current motivation level. This "multidimensional motivational concept" (Rich, Lepine, & Crawford, 2010, p. 619) has been thoroughly researched in the workplace context in the form of job engagement. Kahn (1990, 1992) described engagement as the harnessing of one's full self in the work role; that is, investing one's physical, cognitive, and emotional energies at work. In this view, engagement is a comprehensive manifestation of one's connectedness with work through simultaneously exerting physical effort, maintaining focus and vigilance, and emotionally investing with others (Rich, Lepine, & Crawford, 2010). Engagement has most frequently appeared in the burnout literature, where it was originally conceptualized as the antithesis of the exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy displayed by workers suffering from burnout (Maslach, 2003; Maslach & Leiter, 1997; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). More recent research suggests, however, that rather than being burnout's opposite on a single continuum, engagement is a separate, negatively correlated construct (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Schaufeli and colleagues empirically validated a multidimensional measure of engagement consisting of the following four components (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Schaufeli,

Martínez, Marques Pinto, Salanova, & Bakker, 2002; Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002):

1. Vigor: high energy, resilience, willingness to invest effort
2. Dedication: feelings of significance, enthusiasm, challenge
3. Absorption: fully concentrated, engrossed, persistent state of 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990)
4. Efficacy: feelings of accomplishment, contribution, confidence

The proposition that students will be more motivated and successful if they are high on these four components of engagement has face validity and is indirectly supported by research conducted in employment settings. These studies have reported positive outcomes associated with job engagement, including higher levels of employee task performance, organizational citizenship behavior, and working safely (Nahrgang, Morgeson, & Hofmann, 2011; Rich, Lepine, & Crawford, 2010) and lower turnover intentions (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). With regard to college students' engagement, most of the existing research has focused on its negative correlate, burnout, and its influence on academic performance. Two studies found negative, though weak, correlations between burnout and college students' performance (McCarthy, Pretty, & Catano, 1990; Nowack & Hanson, 1983), while another found no correlation between burnout and GPA (Balogun, Helgemoe, Pellegrini, & Hoeberlein, 1996). Issues with the translation of burnout measures from the workplace to the academic environment likely contributed to these inconsistent findings (Schaufeli, Martínez, et al., 2002). A significant advancement, therefore, has been the development and validation of a measure of engagement specifically adapted for use with college students, the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale – Student (Schaufeli, Martínez, et al., 2002; Schaufeli, Salanova, et al., 2002). Research using this scale has supported engagement's positive relationship with college students' academic performance across three samples, particularly with regard to the efficacy and vigor dimensions (Schaufeli, Martínez, et al., 2002). Having briefly introduced the engagement concept and the accompanying research evidence on its link to important outcomes, the classroom exercise will be described next.

TARGET AUDIENCE AND OVERVIEW OF THE EXERCISE

This exercise was created and tested by an instructor who primarily teaches principles of management, organizational behavior, and leadership courses in a traditional undergraduate context. Thus, the concepts discussed herein specifically reference students' engagement with their academic studies rather than engagement in a professional work setting. With minor modifications to change the referenced role to the workplace, however, the exercise can be used effectively with working graduate or nontraditional undergraduate student populations.

The exercise incorporates segments of in-class time, approximately thirty to forty minutes each, distributed across the term. These are devoted to presenting, discussing, reflecting upon, and writing about energy management concepts and how they relate to students' engagement, motivation, and productivity. This is followed by a capstone homework assignment due at the term's conclusion. If necessary, some of the in-class time allocated to reflection and writing can be converted to homework to accommodate time limitations.

Briefly, in part one of the exercise students assess themselves using a short survey instrument on the four dimensions of engagement noted above, vis-à-vis their academic work. After students gain self-insight into what their engagement profiles currently look like, in part

two the instructor presents information on the personal energy sources that drive engagement (Fritz, Lam, & Spreitzer, 2011; Loehr & Schwartz, 2003). Students are encouraged to relate this material to their own lives through reflective writing prompts. In part three, students develop a set of "positive rituals" (Loehr & Schwartz, 2003), which takes the form of a personal improvement plan to strengthen and more effectively manage the energy sources driving their engagement. The ultimate objective is for students to experience enhancements in their vigor, dedication, absorption, and/or efficacy, thus optimizing their personal motivation and productivity. The specific steps of the exercise are described in detail below.

CONDUCTING THE EXERCISE

Part one: Assessing current level of engagement

In part one, students rate themselves on the assessment instrument shown in Table 1 (Appendix), which has been adapted from previously published scales for measuring engagement and burnout (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Schaufeli, Leiter, Maslach, & Jackson, 1996; Schaufeli, Martínez, et al., 2002; Schaufeli, Salanova, et al., 2002). These items assess the four dimensions of engagement as they apply in the college setting: vigor (e.g., "I feel like I am bursting with energy when I am studying"); dedication (e.g., "I find my studies to be full of meaning and purpose"); absorption ("Time flies when I am studying"); and efficacy (e.g., "I can effectively solve the problems that arise in my studies"). Students sum item scores to obtain a profile of their level of engagement across the four dimensions.

While the primary objective here is to individually raise a student's awareness of his or her current level of engagement, a brief period of small group discussion can be useful to strengthen understanding of the four dimensions and connections between them. Sample discussion starters include:

1. What do the patterns across the four dimensions look like for students in your group?
2. Are there common profiles, i.e., one or more dimensions that are typically lower than the others?
3. How do the four engagement dimensions inter-relate? For example, how do deficits in vigor, which is primarily a feeling of low physical energy, affect feelings of dedication, absorption, and efficacy?

Part two: Understanding how engagement is affected by energy management

After the self-assessment, attention in part two turns toward providing the conceptual information students will need to develop an individually tailored plan for enhancing engagement, motivation, and productivity, i.e., the capstone homework assignment. To do this, a summary of Loehr and Schwartz's (2003) work with energy management training, which they conducted with athletes and corporate executives, is introduced through a series of four mini-lectures corresponding to the authors' four "energy sources." In conjunction with the mini-lectures, it is recommended that instructors assign the relevant chapters of Loehr and Schwartz's book ("The Power of Full Engagement: Managing Energy, not Time, is the Key to High Performance and Personal Renewal") as outside-of-class reading to accelerate comprehension and reduce the amount of lecture time. [An alternative, shorter reading assignment is Schwartz (2007).] In addition to explaining concepts, the Loehr and Schwartz book contains case studies

of clients who the authors have helped through energy management training. Reading these cases helps students transition from learning key principles to their real world usefulness.

Distributing the mini-lectures across the term, rather than presenting and discussing all the conceptual information in a single session, allows students to really focus on each energy source and how its management or mismanagement can affect them personally. Each mini-lecture is followed by a prompt for student reflection and writing. This feature encourages students to begin thinking about the specific areas where they have depleted energy reserves that may be negatively impacting their engagement, motivation, and productivity. The products of these brief reflective writing periods are the initial work that will culminate in the creation of students' personal improvement plans. A description of the four mini-lectures follows. Instructors will want to reference the Loehr and Schwartz text for additional background material.

Mini-lecture #1. Maximizing engagement requires effectively managing four sources of energy, the first being physical energy.

Optimal personal productivity is possible only when individuals effectively manage their physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual energy reserves. Causes of performance problems related to energy management include insufficient capacity to start with, continually "spending" energy without allowance for recovery, and/or an imbalance across energy sources, for example, being physically in top shape but underdeveloped in emotional or mental energy capacity. Thus, to optimize engagement, motivation, and productivity, all four energy sources need to be maximally developed and periodically recharged on an ongoing basis (Loehr & Schwartz, 2003).

Physical energy capacity is strengthened through consistently following recommendations for a healthy lifestyle in the areas of eating, sleeping, and exercising (Loehr & Schwartz, 2003). Relating back to the self-assessment completed in part one, physical energy is most closely related to the vigor with which a student approaches his or her studies. Connections may also be evident between physical energy capacity and the dedication (e.g., enthusiasm), absorption (e.g., sustained concentration), and perhaps even efficacy (e.g., confidence) dimensions of engagement. Of the four energy sources, people tend to be most familiar with this one and how it is affected by day-to-day lifestyle choices. Most people know what should be done to optimize physical condition, yet sometimes fall short in one or more of the behaviors conducive to a healthy lifestyle.

Reflective writing prompt: Where do you, personally, see problems in the areas of eating, sleeping, and/or exercising that may be draining your energy and negatively affecting your engagement with your academic work?

Mini-lecture #2. Maximizing engagement requires effectively managing emotional energy.

Emotional energy capacity is built through regularly experiencing positive feelings, such as joy, pleasure, challenge, and fulfillment (Loehr & Schwartz, 2003). In contrast, negative feelings – for instance, anxiety, impatience, frustration, and despair – indicate depleted emotional energy reserves. A deficit in positive emotional energy is most relevant to the efficacy dimension of engagement; that is, when negative, anxious, and frustrated feelings dominate a person's outlook, his or her confidence in the ability to meet and overcome challenges tends to decline. Secondarily, a person may also perceive a link between emotional state and the

dedication dimension; for example, a student is unlikely to feel enthusiastic and inspired by his or her studies if his or her overall emotional state is negative.

Developing strong relationships with others, socially, at work, or at school, and regularly devoting time to maintaining and deepening those connections are primary means of "filling one's tank" with positive emotions that can boost emotional resilience. Additionally, scheduling extracurricular activities that are personally enjoyable, are active rather than passive (e.g., teaching someone a favorite hobby as opposed to watching TV), and perhaps involve a moderate degree of challenge is another way to build emotional energy reserves. Support for the concept of an energy exchange between one's extracurricular and academic lives comes from workplace research. Studies indicate pleasurable evening and weekend activities can effectively "recharge" employees' energy reserves, which are then available for "spending" later on the job (Fritz & Sonnentag, 2005; Sonnentag, 2003; Sonnentag, Binnewies, & Mojza, 2008).

In sum, unlike physical energy for which the prescription for strengthening reserves is fairly consistent across people, building emotional energy capacity will be a highly individualized endeavor. In developing a personalized plan for strengthening engagement and improving motivation and productivity, an individual will want to think about the particular relationships and activities to invest in that have the greatest potential for increasing the joy, challenge, and fulfillment experienced in one's day-to-day life.

Reflective writing prompt: In what areas of your life do you regularly experience negative feelings, e.g., frustration, impatience, incompetence, etc., that drain your emotional energy reserves? In contrast, what experiences or activities do you (or would you) find emotionally recharging? These may be activities you currently engage in, used to but don't anymore, or would like to but haven't tried yet.

Mini-lecture #3. Maximizing engagement requires effectively managing mental energy.

Mental energy capacity refers to one's ability to sustain focus and concentration on the task being worked on (Loehr & Schwartz, 2003). It is most closely linked with the absorption dimension of the engagement scale from the self-assessment. Many people are plagued by distracted thinking and short attention spans. One cause may be an imbalance between mental energy spending and recovery. Adults have been socialized to believe that "putting one's nose to the grindstone," that is, long periods of uninterrupted, intense work, is the behavioral hallmark of highly productive individuals. Over time, however, this behavior pattern draws down mental energy reserves without sufficient recovery. Another contributing factor to deficits in mental energy is the increasing prevalence of multi-tasking. An example familiar to students is the practice of studying while also keeping an eye on the TV and periodically checking social media. While this routine may seem stimulating and enjoyable, a substantial body of evidence indicates that multi-tasking undermines productivity, creativity, and decision making (Dean & Webb, 2011; Hemp, 2009; Schwartz, 2007; Shellenbarger, 2003), one reason being that switching between tasks uses up mental energy resources. A preferred approach for balancing mental energy use and renewal is to establish a regular pattern of focusing on a single task or project for no more than 90 to 120 minutes, followed by a recovery break (Loehr & Schwartz, 2003; Schwartz, 2007). While giving "mental muscles" some time to recover, these breaks can simultaneously strengthen physical and emotional energy reserves depending on the kinds of activities one engages in. In addition to intentionally scheduling intermittent breaks, busy individuals might consider ways to reduce interruptions (e.g., limiting e-mail and text message

checks to specific times), manage their time more purposefully (e.g., preparing a daily to-do list with priority tasks noted), and inform others that they will not be reachable immediately at all times of the day (Schwartz, 2007).

Reflective writing prompt: Do you have problems with concentration and focus? What behaviors do you currently engage in that may be sabotaging your ability to effectively manage your mental energy reserves?

Mini-lecture #4. Maximizing engagement requires effectively managing spiritual energy.

In their training work with corporate executives, Loehr and Schwartz (2003) devote considerable attention to helping them define their core values, which are linked to a fourth source of energy – spiritual. Rather than being used in a religious sense, 'spiritual' describes the kind of energy derived from involvement in activities that individuals care deeply about because they serve a significant, meaningful and enduring purpose. Spiritual energy aligns most closely with the dedication dimension of engagement. After executives in energy management training identify their most deeply held values, they are asked to examine how their current lifestyles are incongruent with those values. A common example of disconnection occurs between a professed commitment to family and the actual hours they spend with them. This becomes the basis for creating a new behavioral routine that involves actually "scheduling" family time to renew spiritual energy.

There are a variety of ways one can identify core values. For instance, one might give some thought to questions such as,

- "What do I care deeply about?"
- "What purpose(s) beyond my own needs and desires do I want to devote time to?"
- "At the end of my life, how would I want people to describe me?"
- "What do I want to be remembered for?"

A creative exercise for clarifying core values, suggested by Kouzes and Posner (2007), is to write a tribute to oneself. This involves placing oneself in the position of honoree at a 'Person of the Year' banquet and imagining the descriptions and phrases one would most like to hear. Put another way, if an individual could write his or her own 'Person of the Year' nomination speech, what would he or she like to be able to truthfully say?

The next step is to expose incongruities between one's core values and his or her day-to-day behavior. To what extent are a person's waking hours currently spent on activities and purposes he or she personally deems significant, meaningful, and of lasting value? Not at all? Some? Is there room for improvement? Spreitzer and Grant (2012) have proposed for student use a formal way of examining current allocation of time. They suggest an "energy audit" in which students track for two days their energy level hour-by-hour, including what they were doing at the time, with the aid of e-mail or cellphone alarm reminders. The audit produces a tangible record to review for insight into how waking hours are currently being invested, and in turn, the relative proportion of time allocated to energy-renewing versus energy-sapping activities. Making modest changes aimed at specifically directing a few more hours a week to activities that align with one's values is a powerful way to boost spiritual energy.

Reflective writing prompt: Have you taken the time to identify your core values? If not, spend a few minutes thinking and writing about what you would like to be remembered for, or what words you would like to hear others use to describe you. If you have already gone through the process of defining your core values, assess the fit between how you spend your days and

your values. Are you allocating enough time to activities that are consistent with your values? Can you identify some areas of incongruence that you can potentially change?

Part three: Developing a plan for improving engagement, motivation, and productivity

'Positive rituals' are behavioral routines created for the explicit purpose of strengthening energy capacity and effectively managing it on an ongoing basis (Loehr & Schwartz, 2003). At first, these need to be precisely defined, scheduled activities that require conscious discipline to implement. Over time, however, rituals become mostly automatic habits that help people balance energy spending with energy renewal consistently over time. Below are some guidelines for creating effective rituals that should be shared with students before they begin the final step of writing their individualized improvement plans (Loehr & Schwartz, 2003):

- Rituals should be positive behaviors an individual will start doing, rather than negative behaviors he or she will stop doing.
- Rituals should be as specific as possible, including the scheduling of their timing. Depending on the ritual, this could be a particular hour in one's planner or the event / experience that will prompt one to engage in the positive behavior.
- Rituals should be designed in incremental stages. They should begin with realistic steps that require a slight stretch from present behavior, rather than wholesale changes to current lifestyle that are unlikely to be sustained. Making only one or two significant behavioral changes at a time increases the chances for success.
- Individuals should commit to a minimum 30-day trial period to allow for the transition from deliberate action to automatic habit. At the end of the trial period, progress should be reviewed and adjustments made to the ritual as necessary. If a ritual has been successfully adopted so that it is now a habit, the next ritual in the sequential plan for improvement can be initiated.

Students are now prepared to work from the ideas they have sketched out in the reflective writing prompts to develop a comprehensive, personalized plan to improve engagement and productivity. See Table 2 (Appendix) for a template that can be provided to students for this purpose. This format encourages them to make explicit connections between the engagement dimensions from the self-assessment in part one and the lecture material on energy sources and building energy capacity in part two.

Instructors may be surprised by the number of positive rituals students are able to come up with, as well as the creativity and diversity of their ideas. Sometimes, though, students get "stuck" and need some examples to stimulate their thinking. Below are some brief positive rituals that have been suggested for working professionals seeking to strengthen or better manage their energy.

- Physical energy: Eat five or six small, nutritious meals daily rather than two or three big ones; consistently get seven or eight hours of sleep at night; specifically include physical workout times in workday schedule (Loehr & Schwartz, 2003; Pozen, 2011).
- Emotional energy: Show gratitude to someone else; do something that will make another person happy; offer to help another person; learn something new (Fritz, Lam, & Spreitzer, 2011).
- Mental energy: Identify next day's most challenging task and schedule it first; set cellphone to voicemail during meetings; check e-mail two times per day (Schwartz,

2007); leave at least one hour unscheduled each day (Pozen, 2011); take a recovery break every 90 to 120 minutes during the workday (Loehr & Schwartz, 2003).

WRAPPING UP THE EXERCISE

There are a couple of options for wrapping up this exercise. The instructor may specify a minimum number of positive rituals (i.e., completed Table 2 templates) and evaluate students' submitted work for completeness, effort level, and depth of thinking, ending the assignment here. Alternatively, if students are members of pre-existing small groups in which they have developed some level of familiarity and trust, they could be asked to share their completed plans within their groups. They can be encouraged to set up accountability check-ins with one or more members of their small groups for the implementation phase of their plans. Regarding this last point, although the timetable of the academic calendar may not permit it, ideally the exercise will not terminate at the plan development stage, but instead include monitoring progress, adjusting rituals as needed, and implementing additional ones following successful results. How this is accomplished – informally through periodic in-class discussions, through small groups as mentioned above, or more formally through subsequent graded written assignments – can be tailored to instructor preference, course design, and the maturity and motivation level of students.

CONCLUSION

Studying theories and strategies for motivating others for maximum productivity certainly has value for students interested in pursuing management careers. A significant omission in current management education, however, is the subject of personal motivation and productivity. In the spirit of "know thyself first," the exercise described in this article directs students' attention toward analyzing their current motivation and productivity drains vis-à-vis their academic work. The concept of engagement, a multidimensional manifestation of motivation, along with research on effectively managing sources of energy, is presented as the foundation for students' self-analysis. The primary benefit of the exercise is the development of an individually tailored plan for enhancing students' personal engagement, motivation, and productivity in their academic roles. A hoped-for secondary result is that students will carry this learning over into their post-college lives to effectively manage their own working behavior, as well as enhance their understanding of their employees' or co-workers' issues with engagement, motivation, and productivity.

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APPENDIX

TABLE 1 – STUDENT ENGAGEMENT SCALE*

Instructions: Using a 1 to 5 scale (1 = completely disagree; 5 = completely agree), answer the following items and then calculate a summed score for each of the four engagement dimensions.

Vigor
_____ I feel like I am bursting with energy when I am studying.
_____ I can continue studying for a very long time.
_____ I feel strong when I am studying.
_____ TOTAL

Dedication
_____ I find my studies to be full of meaning and purpose.
_____ I am enthusiastic about my studies.
_____ My studies inspire me.
_____ TOTAL

Absorption
_____ Time flies when I am studying.
_____ I forget everything else around me when I am studying.
_____ I can get carried away by my studies.
_____ TOTAL

Efficacy
_____ I can effectively solve the problems that arise in my studies.
_____ I feel confident in my abilities as a student.
_____ In my opinion, I am a good student.
_____ TOTAL

*Adapted from Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Schaufeli, Leiter, Maslach, & Jackson, 1996; Schaufeli, Martínez, et al., 2002; Schaufeli, Salanova, et al., 2002.

TABLE 2 – TEMPLATE FOR PERSONAL IMPROVEMENT PLAN

Instructions: Create your own personalized program for improving engagement, motivation, and productivity using the following format as your guide. Repeat the format for each "positive ritual" you create. Remember that your likelihood of success is greater if you implement only one or two significant behavioral changes at a time. Therefore, indicate the implementation sequence for your rituals by identifying a start date for each.

Positive Ritual # _____

Start Date: _____

Targeted engagement dimension(s) – vigor, dedication, absorption, and/or efficacy:
_____

Targeted energy source(s) – physical, emotional, mental, and/or spiritual:
_____

Positive ritual (specifically describe the new, positive behavior you will implement):
_____
_____
_____
_____

Timing (e.g., daily at ___; twice a week on ___ & ___ at ___; immediately after _____ occurs):
_____