Leaders should view workplace engagement as the degree to which employees are bringing their best selves to work, rather than trying to measure how hard they're working, says William Kahn. "The shift in the industry to 'employee' engagement is, in many ways, a reversal of that idea, and of my intention," he says.

William Kahn: Q&A With The Founding Father Of Engagement (Part 1)

by David Zinger | Posted January 23rd, 2017 | Engagement

Dr. William Kahn is a professor of Organizational Behavior at Boston University’s Questrom School of Business. In the comprehensive engagement textbook by Catherine Truss and others, Employee Engagement in Theory and Practice, William Kahn is acknowledged repeatedly for his legacy as the founding father of engagement. This is based on his seminal paper in the Academy of Management Journal, “Psychological Conditions of Personal Engagement and
Disengagement at Work” (1990). In the same textbook, William co-authored an insightful chapter with Emily D. Heaphy on the relational contexts of engagement.

To fully understand engagement and make the most of engaging approaches to work it is helpful for you to know the relatively short history of engagement.

Here are three short quotes from Bill’s 1990 paper on the psychological conditions of personal engagement:

“People are bringing in and leaving out various depths of their selves during the course of their work days.”

“I define personal disengagement as the uncoupling of selves from work roles; in disengagement, people withdraw and defend themselves physically, cognitively, or emotionally during role performance.”

“Organizational members seemed to unconsciously ask themselves three questions in each situation and to personally engage or disengagement depending on the answers. The questions were: (1) How meaningful is it for me to bring myself into this performance? (2) How safe is it to do so? and (3) How available am I to do so?”

D. Zinger: When you wrote the article on engagement 26 years ago, did you ever think engagement would get this much attention from academics, consultancies, HR practitioners and organizations?

W. Kahn: I indeed did not. I think that the engagement idea hit a nerve at a time when organizational leaders and HR practitioners were looking for ways to move beyond the idea of job motivation or involvement. The engagement idea offers a way to think more deeply about the choices that individuals make, consciously and not, about how much of their personal selves they wish to bring in and express in the conduct of their work roles.

D.Z.: What made you chose the word “engagement” for your work?

W.K.: I liked the various meanings of the word, starting with the notion that people could “betroth” themselves to their work, that liminal period after
commitment and before marriage. And engagement also refers to vehicles – to engage the clutch of a car, to power an engine – which also appealed to me as a guiding metaphor about how people brought their energies into their work.

D.Z.: What engages you most in your own work?

W.K.: Ideas always engage me in work—developing them, applying them, teaching them—and bringing them into the practice of how people and organizations perform.

Engagement is about being your best self, not productivity. @davidzinger interviews Bill Kahn

D.Z.: In 1990 you wrote about personal engagement while recently you co-authored a chapter on the relational context of personal engagement at work. How is personal engagement different than employee engagement and how can individuals or organizations benefit by more attention to personal engagement?

W.K.: I very deliberately focused on “personal” engagement—the harnessing of the person in the context of role performances. This refers to the thoughts, feelings, and energies of who people are when they are at their best selves. The focus, frankly, is on whether people can express their selves in the context of their work roles, which enables them to grow and evolve even as they are performing well.

The shift in the industry to “employee” engagement is, in many ways, a reversal of that idea, and of my intention. The industry focus is on how leaders can get people to work harder and with more energy on behalf of their organizations, with less focus on whether people are bringing their best, cherished selves into that work. I think that the power of the ideas about personal engagement gets lost in that reimagined focus.

D.Z.: I sometimes think that the fraternal twin of employee engagement is psychological safety. Google’s Project Aristotle identified safety as one of the 2 key variables for engaged teams. What can you tell us about the connection between engagement and safety?
My initial work identified psychological safety as one of the three necessary components for personal engagement. It is crucial: people need to feel safe if they are going to unearth and make visible their personal selves in their work. To express what we really think and feel at work – a setting marked by conditional rather than unconditional regard – makes us vulnerable. We either need to feel very desperate, or very safe, given that vulnerability – and I think that organization leaders and HR practitioners have a better shot at enabling safety, in the context of their interactions with members.

Watch for Part 2 of the interview with William Kahn next week as he focuses on meaning, availability, relationship, and what we can do to enhance engagement. In the interim, I encourage you to read William Kahn’s paper on personal engagement.

About the Author

David Zinger believes engagement is both a right and a responsibility. He is devoted to advancing the New Employee Engagement. The ABCs of the new engagement are Achieve results, Build relationships and Cultivate wellbeing through daily actions and interactions focused on results, performance, progress, relationships, recognition, moments, strengths, meaning, wellbeing, and energy.

David has worked on engagement from Singapore to Saskatoon, Wales to Winnipeg, and Oman to Ottawa. He has devoted over 18,000 hours to engagement which included 4 books on work and over 1500 blog posts on engagement. David is the founder and host of the 7000+ member Employee Engagement Network. Connect with David at www.davidzinger.com or email him at: david@davidzinger.com