Creating a Positive Workplace Culture

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Introduction and Problem Statement

Engaged employees are less negative than disengaged employees. "According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics report, US companies lose about $3 billion a year because of workplace negativity. Negativity among employees increases stress levels and staff turnover, corrodes morale, undermines teamwork, saps initiative and disrupts the smooth running of the workplace (Bagga, 2013, p. 28-29)."

My company has instituted many initiatives to help create a positive workplace culture that enhances employee engagement, including bonuses and team bonding experiences. However, we lack a cross-departmental approach to bridge gaps between departments. An initiative I began in 2013 is a cross-departmental morning inspirational group where employees meet each other and discuss one inspirational topic each day. I am the leader of this group, although everyone contributes content to share and discuss.

Purpose and Intended Audience

The purpose of this research was to determine if discussing an inspirational or encouraging topic each day increases employee engagement.

The initial audience for this research included my classmates and instructor in my class at the University of Colorado – Denver. It also included 22 current members of the inspirational group. These members are from various departments across the organizations, with various titles including managers and individual contributors.

Ultimately, this research is also intended for employees and corporations all across the world. The information gained from this research will be shared in a book that will be published in 2015. The book will be used by company leaders or lower level employees who feel empowered to begin initiatives in their own companies.

Research Questions

To determine what impact attending the morning inspirational group has on workplace engagement, I surveyed group members' using various methods. The three questions that were answered during this research are below:

1. **What motivates group members to attend the morning inspirational meetings?**

2. **What impact does attending the morning inspirational group have on the level of engagement in members' work environment?**

3. **What impact does attending the morning inspirational group have on group members' skills?**

Context of Study

In 2013, I visited Philadelphia, PA on a business trip. I met with various successful field leaders for my workplace. These field leaders are responsible for the success of multiple restaurants. One of the field leaders introduced me to a method he used to develop leaders, enhance people's speaking skills, motivate, encourage, and inspire employees. Every morning, one of his employees would lead an inspirational and encouraging meeting about ways to enhance their leadership skills and simply be better people. They discussed one thought each day.

This same year, a group at the corporate location of my workplace, I created a meeting that I led to discuss inspirational topics every morning. The goal of this group was to develop leaders and bridge gaps between departments by fostering cross-departmental communication in a relaxed, encouraging atmosphere.

Members include leaders and individual contributors from various departments including IT, Recruiting, Training, Finance, Marketing, and Sustainability. During a given meeting, approximately fifteen people attend. Topics include leadership, motivation, failure, perseverance, kindness, and a variety of other genres. At the beginning of the meeting, group members take turns reading a portion of an article about a topic. Then, group members take turns discussing their experiences and thoughts about the topic. When someone is struggling with a particular area, others provide suggestions to help them.

The purpose of this research was to determine if discussing an inspirational or encouraging topic each day increases employee engagement.

Literature Review

Literature Review Questions

According to Stringer, conducting a literature review is important to validate personal experiences that could come into conflict with the other people in a setting. He goes on to

say that "in these situations we have available a stable and powerful body of knowledge established through a long history of systematic investigations, that enables us to check the validity of statements often presented as 'facts' (Stringer, 2014, p.120)."

Since my research is specifically focused on the impact of inspirational morning groups in the area of employee engagement, I decided to widen my questions in the literature review process. In this literature review process, I determined answers to the following questions:

1. **What are the benefits of employee engagement?**

2. **What actions create an engaged workplace culture?**

Literature Search Procedures

I found all literature review articles in the Auraria Library database. In the beginning of my search, I used phrases that included 'workplace community' and 'positive employees'. These search phrases did not yield the type of articles that would be necessary for this research. Therefore, I emailed the Auraria Library for assistance with finding benefits of a positive workplace culture. Eric Baker, Research & Instruction Librarian, suggested that the term 'positive' may be too broad and may need to be in conjunction with other keywords. He also suggested using the term 'corporate' instead of 'workplace' to improve results. This was a turning point in the quality of articles found in the literature review.

Ultimately, I used search phrases that included 'positive workplace culture', 'positive corporate culture community', and 'employee engagement culture'. Out of the seven articles I used, five of them are peer-reviewed.

Since I focus on two main literature review questions, I color-coded articles and categorized them into two categories: 1) benefits of employee engagement and 2) actions to create employee engagement.

Literature Review Findings

Throughout the many articles, including peer-reviewed articles, the research shows a very small number of employees worldwide are engaged in their jobs. According to Achor (2015), "in a recent study conducted in 142 countries, Gallup found that only 13 percent of employees worldwide are truly engaged in their jobs (p. 110)." Research by Wildermuth and Pauken (2008) states "amongst all currently employed US workers, an estimated 25 percent are fully engaged, 50 percent not engaged, and 15 percent are actively disengaged (p. 122)." Both of these articles show a very low engagement rate for employees.

In addition, actively disengaged employees spread negativity to other employees, which could cause additional employees to become more disengaged. Many articles proved that negative and positive emotions could be spread among employees. Curtis (2008) described emotional contagion as an act where "people 'catch' emotions from others' movements as well as their verbal and nonverbal cues (p. 131)." He goes on to say "the theory of emotional contagion attempts to explain how emotions are conveyed in social exchanges and how the process of picking up another person's emotions can affect the social exchange (Curtis, 2008)." On the positive side, Vragel (2013) shows that "engagement starts with an individual taking action and making that action into a habit, which then spreads virally (p. 27)." Whether positive or negative, emotions can be spread among employees.

Employee Engagement Benefits

I found consistent themes regarding the benefits of employee engagement, for both the company and individual employee. These benefits include elevated retention rates, increased morale, heightened productivity, reduced turnover and absenteeism, reduced stress, healthier employees, higher customer ratings, higher profits, employees going above and beyond the requirement, higher innovation, and inter-departmental cooperation.

In a survey of 572 human resource professionals, it was concluded that increasing employee engagement "elevated employee retention rates, increased morale, heightened productivity and reduced turnover (Curtis, 2008)." In a survey of 7,939 business units in 36 companies, "significant relationships between employee engagement and improvements in customer satisfaction, productivity, profits, turnover, and safety records" were identified (Wildermuth, C., & Pauken, P., 2008). Creating an engaging environment for employees increases benefits for them and the company.

Actions to Foster Employee Engagement

I also found consistent themes regarding how to foster employee engagement. These include supporting organic, employee-driven growth and embedding work routines with positive practices to create positive emotional experiences (Achor, 2015). Trust, feeling heard, and building relationships outside of the workplace are also ways of increasing engagement (Vragel, 2013). Sarangi (2012) found that "striking emotional bonds with people and work in the organization" enhances employee engagement (p. 23). He goes on to say that interdepartmental co-operation "gives employees a sense of security and enhances belongingness with the organization (Sarangi, 2012)." Employees that are more connected to each other have an increased level of employee engagement.

Quality of Literature

Out of the seven articles I used, five of them are peer-reviewed. In addition to their own research, many of the articles built a solid framework on the grounds of existing research and referenced large-scale research outcomes by distinguished individuals such as known psychologist Dr. Daniel Goleman.

For example, Wong, Cummings and Grau (2014) incorporated concepts from Boyatzis and McKee's (2005) resonant leadership theory, Kanter's (1977, 1993) theory of organizational empowerment, Andersson and Pearson's (1999) workplace incivility theory, and Maslach and Leiter's (1997) burnout theory.

Even non peer-reviewed articles built their research on solid numbers from widely accepted organizations such as Gallup. Achor (2015) included Gallup's 2013 State of the Global Workplace report that lists benefits for happy organizations (p. 110). The only bias that I currently see in this article is the word happy, since that is a broad term and can mean many things.

The size of the studies were also very compelling. In one study, 7,939 business units from 36 companies were included (Wildermuth & Pauken, 2008).

Gap in Literature

Creating a positive workplace culture is a widely researched topic with much data and research available. Benefits of employee engagement and actions to foster employee engagement are well explained throughout the research. My research enhances what's already available by answering the question of whether attending inspirational morning meetings improve employee engagement, which leads to the benefits found in existing research.

Methods

Site Selection and Sampling

The current inspirational morning group is made up of approximately twenty-five people at my workplace. Members include leaders and individual contributors from various departments including IT, Recruiting, Training, Finance, Marketing, and Sustainability. The group is available to any employee in my workplace and new members join often. Some members come everyday while others come once a week. Regular attendance members were involved in this research. 'Regular attendance' group members are defined as those who come at least twice a week on average.

Data Collection Methods

Data from this research was retrieved via SurveyMonkey surveys. On March 16, 2015, I introduced the survey to all participants in the group by email. I also verbally introduced the survey in the group that day. I outlined the purpose of the survey, how the results will be used, and the approximate time commitment to fill out the survey. On March 21, 2015, I sent out the survey to all group members via SurveyMonkey. The timeframe for the survey was March 23 through March 30. I sent a reminder email to anyone who had not yet participated in the survey by March 28. At the conclusion of the survey timeframe, I verbally thanked the group for participating in the survey.

To answer the first research question, regarding the motivation of group members to attend, I provided a free form survey question since the answer could vary greatly depending on each group member.

To answer the second research question regarding the impact on workplace engagement, I used a likert scale survey question to make it easy to analyze the quantitative data. Also, I used a free form survey question to provide context for the quantitative data.

Finally, to answer the third research question regarding the impact of skills, I used a likert question to make it easy to analyze the quantitative data. Again, I also used a free form survey question to provide context for the quantitative data.

A breakdown of each research question with the data collection method that was used can be found in the Appendix, Figure 1.1.

Data Analysis Methods

The data collected was both qualitative and quantitative. The quantitative questions used a likert scale. The analysis of this ordinal data was computed using the most frequent response to each question. I transferred this data into an Excel Spreadsheet to quickly see how many responses were provided for each response selection. I divided the responses into positive (strongly agree/agree) and negative (disagree/strongly disagree) categories to demonstrate the rate at which each was selected.

The qualitative questions used freeform survey questions. For qualitative data, I used Excel to identify themes among the feedback. According to Stringer, "when the categories associated with each stakeholding group have been placed in a system of categories it may be possible to identify themes held in common across stakeholder groups (Stringer, 2014, p.142)."

After looking at the researcher's journal notes, I opted not to use it, as it didn't help me answer any of the questions below. Instead, it simply recorded discussions of particular topics each day.

A breakdown of each research question with the data analysis method that was used is below.

Research Questions	Data Analysis Methods
What motivates group members to attend the morning inspirational meetings?	I used an Excel spreadsheet to document and analyze the data. I categorized the data by topic. Since there was a small amount of participants, I manually sorted similar feedback and found common themes.
What impact does attending the morning inspirational group have on group members' engagement in the workplace?	From the analysis of the quantitative data, I assessed the impact attending the group has on group members' engagement in the workplace. For the free form survey question, I used an Excel spreadsheet to document and analyze the data. I categorized the data by topic. Since there is a small amount of participants, I manually sorted similar feedback and found a common theme.
What impact does attending the morning inspirational group have on group members' skills?	From the analysis of the quantitative data, I assessed the impact attending the group has on group members' skills. For the free form survey question, I used an Excel spreadsheet to document and analyze the data. I categorized the data by topic. Since there is a small amount of participants, I manually sorted similar feedback to find common themes.

Timeline

A timeline of each research action is below.

Date	Action
2/17	Action Research Proposal Draft submitted
2/21	Action Research Proposal submitted
2/29	Finalize and share data collection instruments
3/8	Gather articles for literature review
3/10	Literature Review Draft submitted
3/14	Literature Review submitted

3/15	Create survey
3/16	Introduce survey to group members
3/21	Send survey (survey deadline: 3/30)
3/21 – 3/30	Use researcher's journal to record meeting topics and discussions
3/28	Email survey reminder to anyone who hasn't yet responded
3/23 – 3/30	Spring Break
4/5	Finalize data collection
4/14	Research Findings Draft submitted
4/18	Research Findings Final Draft submitted
4/28	Final Action Research Report Draft submitted
5/2	Final Action Research Report submitted
5/7	Taking Action Presentation submitted

Checks for Rigor

The reliability and validity of my findings was ensured in many ways. Credibility is ensured by audit trails that can be confirmed through SurveyMonkey data, Excel spreadsheets, and group observances recorded in a researchers journal over a period of time.

Many employees do not currently attend the morning inspirational group. In fact, there are many employees who are not aware that the group exists since it is a word of mouth group. Transferability was taken into consideration to ensure the experience of current group members can be applied to other employees. Anyone interested can review survey results to determine if the outcomes for current group members might apply to them.

Research Findings

Through this research, I sought to understand why members attend the group as well as the impact they have on workplace engagement and employees' skills. Twenty-five inspirational group members were surveyed to determine this information and twenty-two members responded.

For quantitative data, I used a Likert scale rating of Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. For the data below, I grouped positive indicators (Strongly Agree and Agree) together. I also grouped negative indicators (Disagree and Strongly Disagree) together.

Why Members Attend

Two common themes were found regarding why group members attend. The themes were networking with other departments and getting a boost of positivity.

Networking with Other Departments

When asked what motivates them to attend morning inspirational meetings, one member said, "getting to know people outside my department a lot better." Another member stated that one reason they attend is to "meet new people." Yet another member stated, "I like meeting people from other departments." Finally, another member mentioned getting to really know others by stating that "meeting colleagues from other departments and learning more about their work and who they are as people" was the reason they attend. Cross-departmental relationships are important to employees and attending morning inspirational meetings help build these relationships.

Getting a Boost of Positivity

One member said that attending inspirational morning meetings helps them "start my day off on a positive note." They go on to say "I cannot always attend inspirational mornings, but when I do I find that I feel a lot better and happier. It could be difficult to come to work in the morning and start working right away. If the first thing you do is read your emails, it could seem overwhelming from the start. Attending these morning meetings calms you down and give you the confidence to get your day jumpstarted the right way." Another member stated that they "love how it gets my day started on the right note." They go on to say "Taking a few minutes to focus on myself, my goals, my passions and my opportunities sets a really positive tone for my day." Yet another member stated, "It is a great way to start your day because of the positive energy and discussion." Finally, another member stated that attending the group helps them "have a positive and centering start to the day." Attending morning inspirational meetings help employees start their day in a calm, positive way.

Building a community to foster positive discussion between departments that provides many perspectives on specific topics is a motivating factor for group members to take a few minutes out of their morning to attend this group.

Workplace Engagement

It was confirmed that attending inspirational morning groups has a positive impact of the level of workplace engagement of group members by creating a sense of belonging, connecting departments, and helping group members feel more ready to take on the day. In each of these areas, approximately 95% of participants agreed there is a positive impact.

Creating a Sense of Belonging

When asked whether they felt a stronger sense of belonging in the workplace by attending this group, 21 out of 22 people surveyed agreed. One group member said, "It makes me think about how I interact with others and how I approach my work relationships. I am a

pretty open and honest person but this group has encouraged me to share on a deeper level." Attending inspirational meetings increases engagement by creating a sense of belonging.

Connecting Departments

21 out of 22 people surveyed agreed attending the group helps connect them to other departments, one member stated, "I have more familiarity with colleagues outside of my department and understand their goals and obstacles better." Another member said, "It encourages me to invite others to join in on the daily ritual of starting the day of with inspiration, aiding in bringing multiple departments together to learn more about each other." Cross-departmental connection helps establish relationships with group members and helps them to better understand goals of different areas of the business.

Feel More Ready to Take on the Day

21 out of 22 people surveyed agreed they feel more ready to take on the day when they attend the group. One member stated that the group "dulls the mental edge of barely hanging in there." This same member goes on to say that the group "adds a confident 'no challenge is too difficult' state of mind." Yet another member stated, "the insight, philosophies and overall mood of the group helps me to set the pace for the day, both in attitude and goals." Attending inspirational meetings increases engagement by helping members feel more ready to take on the day.

Creating a Sense of Community

When asked what other ways the group impacts their level of engagement in the workplace, the major theme was the fact that the group creates a sense of community. Comments like "this group has encouraged me to share on a deeper level", "bringing multiple departments together to learn more about each other", "introduces me to new people around the company that I normally wouldn't interact with", "meeting new people, feeling 'safe' to share your feelings and thoughts", "creates stronger relationships and connections in the office", and "great network of engaged people" show that a sense of community is very important to group members.

Skills Impact

It was confirmed that attending the morning group does have a positive impact on leadership skills, listening skills, increased productivity, and being challenged to help others. Out of 22 people surveyed, over half agreed that attending the group has a positive impact in each of these areas. However, the group does not seem to have a big impact on work/life balance.

Leadership Skills

When asked whether attending the group increased their leadership skills, 15 out of 22 people surveyed agreed. One member stated, "I had lost a lot of confidence in my last job". They continue on by stating that the group "helps me with public speaking and to find my own voice." Another member said, "The group discussions have helped me grow during a pivotal point in my career." Attending the group helps participants with their leadership skills by increasing their confidence and helping them with public speaking when they discuss topics or read the days content out loud.

Productivity

When asked whether attending the group increased their productivity, 16 out of 22 people surveyed agreed. The rest of the group members were neutral. One group member stated, "I feel better prepared to approach my workload knowing that I'm not alone in troubles and struggles I have in the workplace." Another member stated, "I know I'll be in a better, more positive mood to tackle my day if I go." Over half of people surveyed have seen an increase in productivity due to attending the group.

Challenged Members to Help Others

19 out of 22 people surveyed agreed attending the group challenged them to help others. One group member stated "It encourages me to invite others to join in on the daily ritual of starting the day off with inspiration, aiding in bringing multiple departments together." Another member said, "I have more familiarity with colleagues outside of my department and understand their goals and obstacles better." Attending the group bridges gaps between departments.

Work/Life Balance

Half of people surveyed agreed attending the group improved their work/life balance. The rest of the group members were neutral.

Listening

When asked in what other ways the group impacted their skills, one common theme was listening. One member stated that the group "helps with communication and listening." Yet another member simply stated, "Listening!" Listening was a skill that I didn't originally anticipate as being impacted through this group. Asking the open-ended survey question allowed for this qualitative data to be shared.

Comparison of Research to Literature Review

Throughout the many articles reviewed during the Literature Review process, including peer-reviewed articles, I found consistent themes regarding how to foster employee engagement.

These include supporting organic, employee-driven growth and embedding work routines with positive practices to create positive emotional experiences.

Trust, feeling heard, and building cross-departmental relationships and relationships outside of the workplace are also ways of increasing engagement. For example, Sarangi (2012) stated that cross-departmental communication provides employees with a sense of security and connectedness in the workplace. It also aids in the smooth conduct of business (p. 23). I found this to be true in my research, as well. Regarding this concept, one member stated, "I have more familiarity with colleagues outside of my department and understand their goals and obstacles better."

During the Literature Review process, I found consistent themes regarding the benefits of employee engagement, for both the company and individual employee. These benefits include elevated retention rates, increased morale, heightened productivity, reduced turnover and absenteeism, reduced stress, healthier employees, higher customer ratings, higher profits, employees going above and beyond the requirement, higher innovation, and inter-departmental cooperation (Curtis, 2008).

The results of my research show that attending an inspirational morning group increases the level of engagement employees feel toward their workplace, which provides all of the benefits mentioned above. My research provides a tangible way for employers and employees to increase their level of engagement in the workplace.

Limitations

One limitation was the short length of time in which the research was conducted. However, since this group has been in session since 2013, the responses received during this short analysis still provide a concrete understanding of the level of engagement in the workplace that is affected by attending inspirational morning groups.

Another limitation is the size of the study. 22 group members were included in this study. While this is a small number of people in a company whose headquarters is approximately 150 people total, this still provides a good indication of the affect of attending the group.

Implications

Based on these findings, other workplaces that implement inspirational morning groups could expect to see increased levels of engagement and enhanced skills for employees. The next step is to present these findings in a book that provides content to assist other organizations to facilitate morning meetings. A manager or individual contributor at any company will be

able to pick up the book, review the findings from this action research, and then use the content from the book to start positive conversations in their own workplace.

Conclusion

Overall, it was confirmed that attending inspirational morning groups has a positive impact of the level of workplace engagement of group members by creating a sense of belonging, connecting departments, and helping group members feel more ready to take on the day. In addition, it was confirmed that attending the morning group does have a positive impact on leadership skills, including listening skills, increased productivity, and challenges members to help others. However, the group does not seem to have a big impact on work/life balance.

Two common themes were found regarding why group members attend. The themes were networking with other departments and getting a boost of positivity.
Creating a positive workplace culture is important for organizations and their people. There are many benefits of employee engagement, for both the company and individual employee. These benefits include elevated retention rates, increased morale, heightened productivity, reduced turnover and absenteeism, reduced stress, healthier employees, higher customer ratings, higher profits, employees going above and beyond the requirement, higher innovation, and inter-departmental cooperation (Curtis, 2008).

This research concluded that attending inspirational morning groups has a positive impact on the level of workplace engagement of group members by creating a sense of belonging, connecting departments, and helping group members feel more ready to take on the day. Also, attending this group has a positive impact on leadership skills, including listening skills, increased productivity, and challenges members to help others.

References

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Appendices

The Survey Monkey survey used during this research can be found <u>here</u>. The Survey Monkey responses are located <u>here</u>. The Excel spreadsheet used to categorize data is located <u>here</u>.

The Literature Review Log that I used is located <u>here</u>.

Research Questions	Data Collection Method
What motivates group members to attend the morning inspirational meetings?	Because the answer to this could vary greatly, a free form survey was provided. What motivates you to attend the morning inspirational meetings? Additionally, I used a researcher's journal to record topics and discussions from March 21 through March 30.
What impact does attending the morning inspirational group have on group members' engagement in the workplace?	Surveymonkey survey of a scale rating. The scale is: 1 – Strongly Agree 2 – Agree 3 - Neutral 4 – Disagree 5 – Strongly Disagree Group members answered the following questions using the scale above: • I feel a stronger sense of belonging in my workplace by attending this group. • I feel that this group helps connect me to other departments, making it easier to do my job. • I feel more ready to take on the day on the days that I attend this group. A free form survey question was also provided. In what other ways does this group impact your level of engagement in your workplace?
What impact does attending the morning inspirational	Surveymonkey survey of a scale rating for specific skills. The form had the following rating selections:

group have on group members' skills?	1 – Strongly Agree
	2 – Agree
	3 - Neutral
	4 – Disagree
	5 – Strongly Disagree
	Group members answered the following questions using the scale above:
	• This group has increased my leadership skills.
	• This group has improved my work/life balance.
	• This group has increased my productivity.
	• This group has challenged me to help others.
	A free form survey question was also be provided.
	• In what other ways does this group impact your skills?

Figure 1.1