

# Employee Engagement and Its Role during Crisis Management: A Conceptual Model

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## Abstract

The field of crisis management, business continuity and resilience is part of discussion in many important forums around the world. Is there any paper discussing the importance of people continuity and employee retention in the recent years? Yes many organizations are concerned about losing their talents and will have to do quite a lot in the coming years to improve their employee commitment and employee engagement. This paper is looking into the importance of building employee capabilities and employee engagement in organizations that can transform employees – the powerful resource of organizations into heroes and heroines during crisis scenarios. The paper builds a model based on employee engagement that can facilitate effective crisis management for organizations. The existing literature on employee commitment, employee engagement and employee crisis management capability building is discussed to develop a model and the model is validated using a case study of Taj Hotel Mumbai employee initiatives during the terrorist attack on the hotel. The article elaborates on how building of efficient staff becomes the building block that can save companies during crisis and the importance of investing on employees through learning and development, having right leaders, and team building to harness their powers for organization sustainability and growth.

**Key words:** employee engagement, crisis situation, hospitality employees, bottom line, discretionary behavior

## Introduction:

*“Capitalism is being replaced by Talentism” (Klaus Schwab, founder and executive chair World economic forum, 2012)*

If talent is becoming the decisive competitive factor we can be confident in stating that capitalism is being replaced by talents. This process will lead to new approaches and changes in the field of management and economics. It is important to understand what a crisis to organizations is or what are the crises that can affect organizations. In the recent years of recession and global financial meltdown, crisis has hit many a companies. EU, OECD, WEF and other strategic organizations are constantly discussing on reforms and policies that can bring the economies back to a balanced state so that business, banks and organizations are saved from extreme crisis environments. In all these cases we are only looking at the major macroeconomic policies that can save countries and economies. But when it comes to business we need to focus not only on these economic factors as we are hit by natural calamities, global terrorism, corruption and political unrest spreading across the world. Employee engagement is a topic that is repeatedly being discussed in most of the HR forums, articles and journals in the recent past. The Hay consulting group, Mercer, Towers Perrin consulting, Aon Hewitt and many other human resource consulting groups have repeatedly done surveys on employee engagement and has found that employee engagement levels are becoming lower and lower and by 2018 there is trend which is alarming to the organizations.

**Crisis management** is the process by which an organization deals with a major event that threatens to harm the organization, its stakeholders, or the general public. The study of crisis management originated with the large scale industrial and environmental disasters in the 1980s. (Shrivastava, P. Mitroff, I.I., Miller, D. and A. Miglani, 1988). There are three elements which are common to any crisis. They are threat to the organization, the element of surprise, and the short decision time (ASIS International, 2009). Venette (2003) argues that "crisis is a process of transformation where one cannot maintain the old system." Therefore the fourth defining quality is the need for change. If change is not needed, the event could more accurately be described as a failure or incident. Crisis is not risk management. Risk management involves assessing potential threats and finding best ways to avoid those threats, whereas crisis management deals with threats before, during and after they have occurred. Hence it has to be understood in a broader context of management consisting of skills to identify, assess, understand and cope with a serious situation from the moment it occurs to the point where recovery procedure starts.

According to Seeger, Sellnow and Ulmer (1998) Crisis have four defining characteristics that are specific, non-routine and unexpected events or series of events that create high level of uncertainty and threat or perceived threat to an organization's high priority goals. There are natural calamities, climate change crisis which people

know exists but there is a denial of the same by prominent decision makers. This affects the way in which we perceive crisis. We also have crisis related to unemployment. Recent research by the LSE has estimated the cost to ten leading global banks of 'scandals', comprising fines, money set aside for compensation to customers and liabilities arising from other areas as a whopping £148bn.

### **Employee engagement:**

Recent studies have looked into the importance of developing positive organizational concepts like optimism, trust and engagement among employees so that organizations can function effectively in the dynamic markets and scenarios to achieve sustainability (Koyuncu et. al., 2006). Welch(2011) suggests that employee engagement is the most important factor that can drive organization success and organization effectiveness.

Towers Perrin in their study on 85000 employees in 16 countries (2006) found that many organizations are experiencing an increase in their operating costs, which is driven by legacy issues and work place programs like pensions, benefits and salaries. At the same time shareholders want to see the engine of growth. But organizations are using strategies such as improving customer intimacy and innovation to achieve these growth strategies and they are very people intensive than ever before. This brings attention to the point that this paper need to address: which is employee engagement of high levels to ensure that the driving engine- people of the organization are continuously motivated and engaged. This puts a pressure on retaining talent, building succession plans for current leaders and new ways of incentivizing employees to achieve business growth objectives. In their study, Towers Perrin found that only 14% of the employees are highly engaged and there is more chances of the moderately engaged employee to leave the organization in short span.

The above research figures bring out the importance of ensuring higher engagement among staff members of the organizations to ensure their active participation during crisis management. Employees today are given clear job descriptions and training to do their jobs, but that alone will not ensure employee engagement. Definitions of employee engagement varies in literature. The common components of employee engagement includes enthusiasm for work, commitment to work, organizational pride, employee alignment with organizational goals and a willingness to exert discretionary efforts ( Vance 2006;Robinson, 2007; Schneider, Macey, Barbera, &C Martin, 2009). The most important aspect of these definition of employee engagement is the willingness of employees to put discretionary efforts to accomplish tasks which are of importance in achieving the organization goals.

According to Johnson (2000) the top ten drivers of employee engagement are:

1. Confidence in organization's future
2. Promising future for one's self
3. Organization supports work/life balance
4. Contribution is valued
5. Excited about one's work
6. Opportunity for growth and development
7. Safety is a priority
8. Leadership has communicated a motivating vision
9. Organization's corporate responsibility efforts increase overall satisfaction;
10. Quality

In broader terms this list can be made into 4 categories. They are

- Leaders who inspire confidence in the future (drivers 1, 2 and 8);
- Managers who recognize employees and emphasize quality and improvement as top priorities (drivers 4 and 10);
- Exciting work and the opportunity to grow and develop (drivers 5 and 6); and
- Organizations that demonstrate a genuine responsibility to their employees and the communities in which they operate (drivers 3, 7 and 9).

Above research of Johnson clearly points to four major factors as important to employee engagement or drivers or antecedents of employee engagement. Several studies have been conducted on these factors and employee engagement too. Table below is adapted partly from the work of Wiley J.W( 2013) .

Summary concept	References
Leaders who build trust and confidence	<p>Tim, M., Bakker, A. B., &amp; Xanthopoulou, D. (2011). Do transformational leaders enhance their followers' daily work engagement? <i>The Leaderstip Quarterly</i>, 22:121-131,</p> <p>• Xu, J., &amp; Thomas, H. C. (2011). How can leaders achieve high employee engagement? <i>Leadership &amp; Organization Deveipment Journal</i>, 32:399-416.</p>
Managers who recognize and employees	<p>Bakker, A. B., &amp; Bal, M. P. (2010). Weekly work engagement and performance: A study among starting teachers. <i>Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology</i>, 83:189-206.</p> <p>Bakker, A. B., Hakanen, J.J., Demerouti, E., &amp; Xanthopouiou, D. (2007). Job resources boost work engagement, particularly when job demands are high. <i>Journal of Educational Psychology</i>, 99: 274-284.</p> <p>Mauno, S., &amp; Kinnunen, U. (2007). Job demands and resources as antecedents of work engagement: A longitudinal study. <i>Journal of Vocational Behavior</i>, 70:149-171.</p> <p>Schaufeli, W. B., &amp; Bakker, A. B. (2004). Job demands, job resources, and their relationship with burnout and engagement: A multi-sample study. <i>Journai of Vocational Behavior</i>, 25:293-315.</p> <p>Schneider, B., Macey,W. H., Lee,W. C, &amp; Young, S.A. (2009). Organizational service climate drivers of the American Customer Satisfaction index (ACSI) and financial and market performance. <i>Journai of Service Research</i>, 12:3-14.</p> <p>Xanthopoulou, D., Bakker, A. B., Demerouti, E, &amp; Schaufeli, Vli. B. 2009a. Work engagement and financial returns: A diaty study on the role of job and personal resources. <i>Journai of Occupationai and Organizational Psychologi</i>, 82:183-200.</p>
Growth and development opportunities	<p>Bakker, A. B., &amp; Bal, M. P. (2010). Weekly work engagement and performance: A study among starting teachers. <i>Journal of Occupationai and Organizational Psychologi</i>, 83:189-206.</p> <p>Coetzer, C. F., &amp; Rothmann, S. (2007). Job demands, job resources and work engagement of employees in a manufacturing organization. <i>Soui/iern African Business Review</i>, 11:17-32.</p> <p>Schaufeli,W. B., Bakker,A. B., &amp; Rhenen, W.V. (2009). How changes in job demands and resources predict bumout, work engagement, and sickness absenteeism. <i>Journal of Organizational Behaviour</i>, 30:893-917.</p>
CSR activities and employee engagement	<p>Mirvis, P. (2012) Employee Engagement, and csr :transactional, relational, and developmental approaches, <i>california management review</i></p> <p>Albdour, Ali Abbaas; Altarawneh, Ikhlas Ibrahim.(2012) Corporate Social Responsibility and Employee Engagement in Jordan. <i>International Journal of Business &amp; Management</i>. Aug2012, Vol. 7 Issue 16, p89-105. 17p. 7 Charts</p> <p>Jenkins, Christine; Baker, Pam.(2007) Engaging employees in community investment in Pfizer . <i>Corporate Reputation Review</i>. Winter2007, Vol. 10 Issue 4, p305-311. 7p. 1 Black and White Photograph, 1 Diagram. DOI: 10.1057/palgrave.crr.1550059.</p> <p>Smith, Victoria; Langford, Peter.(2011). Responsible or redundant? Engaging the workforce through corporate social responsibility. <i>Australian Journal of Management (Sage Publications Ltd.)</i>. Dec2011, Vol. 36 Issue 3, p425-447. 23p. DOI: 10.1177/0312896211415459.</p>

The author would like to draw the attention to the most important aspect of this paper, which is understanding the value of employee engagement in crisis situation. Although there are many researches which connect engagement to different aspects of organization performance and other drivers and antecedents of engagement, not much has been done in developing a conceptual model of the impact of employee engagement during crisis. This research attempts to fill that gap, where many organizations have seen their employees rising up during the times of crisis. During crisis we need the service of engaged employees more to save our business and keep our customers safe and happy. One of the available case studies of employee engagement during crisis is that of the Taj Mumbai case study (Deshpande R. And Raina A. ;2011). It speaks volumes of employee engagement in

crisis situations. The paper is going to look into employee engagement models followed in Taj and propose a model of employee engagement that builds crisis management capabilities in employees.

### **Analysis and Discussion: Taj Case study in relation to employee engagement:**

#### **The Taj Episode:**

It was on a November 2008 evening dinner At Taj Mahal Palace Hotel , Mumbai, India, that chairman and CEO of Hindustan Unilever was bidding a farewell party to his retiring CEO Patric Cescaue and giving a welcome party to Paul Polman the new CEO. There were about 25 Taj hotel employees led by team leader Mallika Jagad, a 24 year old banquet manager who was assigned to manage the dinner on a second floor banquet room. It was at this time they heard sounds like fireworks which they thought were from a distant wedding fireworks sound. But in actuality they were gun shots from terrorist inside Taj hotel. But Mallika Jagad and team soon realized that it was gunshots from their own building and took charge of the situation very calmly. They instructed the guests to go down the tables and lie low. During this time the terrorists were bombing and running around with grenades and guns that were shooting down innocent hotel guests. The staff kept their calm and went around distributing water to the guests all the time. The night passed in quite silence of hushed up whispers. By morning a fire broke out in the passage of the room and the staff asked the guest to start moving to the windows and slowly seek help from outside. The fire officers saw them and rescued them immediately.

In another part of the hotel, the Japanese restaurant at 9.30 pm : The 48 year old Thomas Varghese senior waiter at the restaurant got a call that there is a terrorist attack on the hotel and he need to take control and keep the guest safe and take them out once the security contacts him. He immediately asked his team to inform the guest and asked the guest to crouch under the table and the team of his staff remained like a safe protection around the tables. Then the security reached the corridor and instructed that guests can be moved one by one down the spiral security staircase to safely. The 30 year old Thomas enabled safe exit of all the guest with staff support and insisted that he will move out last. But unfortunately he could not survive as the terrorist spotted the last person moving out of the room and shot him down.

Another remarkable crisis management was done by the general manager Kang Singh. He was out at another property of Taj while he heard about the terrorist attack on Taj Mahal palace . he immediately set off to the hotel and gave lead to the evacuation of guests from the premises. His own family was in the sixth floor and he could not reach them and they were killed in the fire in the sixth floor by midnight and kang continued the rescue operations till noon next day. After that he informed his parents of the death of his child and wife. Such was his commitment to the customer service and guest safety values of Taj.

During this Taj attack 31 people died and 21 were hurt. But the guests were full of thankfulness at the service and support given by Taj employees during the episode. They were overwhelmed by the employees' dedication to duty and commitment without regard to personal safety and their emergency handling skills. Restaurant and banquet staff moved to safe locations like kitchen and basement. Telephone operators signaled guests to stay in their rooms locked. Kitchen staff made human shields to protect guests during their evacuation. Almost 11 staff lives were gone in protecting around 1200 to 1500 guests.

It is now important to analyze what does Taj Mumbai staff has exceptional that they sacrificed or put their lives in danger while rescuing others. Taj Mumbai is known for their staff and guest services in the hospitality industry. What do they do? They teach staff to improvise rather than do things by book. They insist that employees take guest interest over company interest. They empower employees to take decisions without consulting supervisors. They have incumbent managers and not consultants who train their employees. There is timely recognition and reward and ensure that it comes from immediate manager and not top management. The employees of the organization are driven from customer centricity and exceptional hospitality. It is important to look into their human resource practices that drive this achievement. Most of used HR practitioners are aware that employees drive operational excellence which drives forward to customer satisfaction and loyalty and which leads to revenues and profitability.

Taj group values respect of elders, humility, consideration of others, discipline and honesty while recruiting their staff. Unlike many other metro companies Taj usually take its staff from Pune, Mysore, Haldia, Coimbatore, Chandigarh and such places where they think these values are still rooted in the upbringing of a youngster. Taj group usually take high school students and drop outs who have respect for teachers and elders, who are needy for a job and who are cheerful in their disposition. These selected group are sent to skill certification centres in the metros for farther training. There is around 18 months training with free food and accommodation and Taj takes care of their health and safety too. These youngsters work hard and send their stipends to their families who need it In the first year they get around 5000 Indian rupees which is around 100 dollars, and in the second

year they earn around 7000 Indian rupees. It takes its supervisors and managers from hospitality institutes and other management institutes where they have a tie up with. They go for B tier management schools as they believe that these managers are more driven by values of Taj and will stay for longer period and build career with Taj group. Taj group give around 18 months training with 24 hours stay with them to all supervisors too. By this training they expect the trainees to acquire technical skills as well as have 40 to 45 guest interactions which is called as moments of truth. From food, to wines to other operations the employee learns in and out about Taj and its guests. They are sometimes walking encyclopedias of guests who come to Taj. They know many things about their guests and their likes and dislikes through moments of truth. They empower their employees to take valid decisions in the interest of the guests without support from supervisors. This enabled them to win the Gallop's great place to work in the year 2009 and 2010.

Reward system: their reward system is more of an expression of gratitude to their employees and the interest they show to Taj guests. They started special thanks and recognition system ( STARS) to provide awards to exceptional staff services. At the end of every day the employee can put their guest compliments, coworker compliments and their own suggestions together and this will be evaluated by the HR director, head of respective department and training manager and they have to take decisions to give the employee a point for that day. If these people fail to take any decisions on that day, then also the employee get a point. These accumulated points will enable an employee to collect enough points to get the most cherished award which can be managing director's club, COO's club, Platinum, gold and silver levels . The department will give the platinum, gold and silver pins when employees achieve that points. But the most cherished crystal award of entering into director's club or COO's club is awarded during the Annual Taj business excellence award ceremony. This stars program really motivates employees to work more customer centric and efficiency levels of TAJ went up after this program and they won the human resource innovation award Hermes award 2002 in hospitality industry.

On December 26 2004 also staff of Taj showed their exemplary crisis management behaviors in Tsunami that attacked Maldives Taj exotica and Taj coral reef. They evacuated the panic stricken employees to the top floor and at the same time moved as much food and drinks for their guests which otherwise would have been submerged in the water that came with the waves of Tsunami. By 1 the waves subsided and they served their lunch to the guest and chartered a flight from there to Chennai for all their guests on Taj's expenses. This was also an amazing example of employee's engagement during the crisis situation.

This enables us to understand that human resource practices from recruitment, training and reward and recognition schemes aligned on values which are customer centric for the service industry of hospitality brought in higher employee engagement. This led to discretionary behavior among the employees and that lead to amazing brand image about the hospitality of TAJ across world. Employee engagement using adequate values of supervisor engagement in reward, training and recruitment of the staff is notable in the case of TAJ. This is also a lesson to be learned about employee engagement. It is clear that engaging managers and supervisors in HR initiatives, innovations and practices, yield higher employer discretionary actions in times of crisis for organizations.

### **Model of employee engagement**

Kahn (1990) in his research paper, psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work has brought together many important current studies during that time and made a grounded theory stating that meaningfulness, psychological safety and psychological availability are the psychological conditions that enable an employee to involve , commit and personally engage in the work that they do. Every employee takes up his role and researchers in organization study have focused on how they take these roles and act on it physically, emotionally and cognitively. People experienced psychological meaningfulness when their task performance had rewarding interpersonal interactions with their co-workers and clients. They were psychologically available when they felt that their job was rewarding and they had the capability to do the same. Value congruence was also important here. Psychological safety was also a function of good leader interactions and empowerment of oneself and engages in ones job without fear of being reprimanded. Trust and supportive managerial behavior were an important component here.

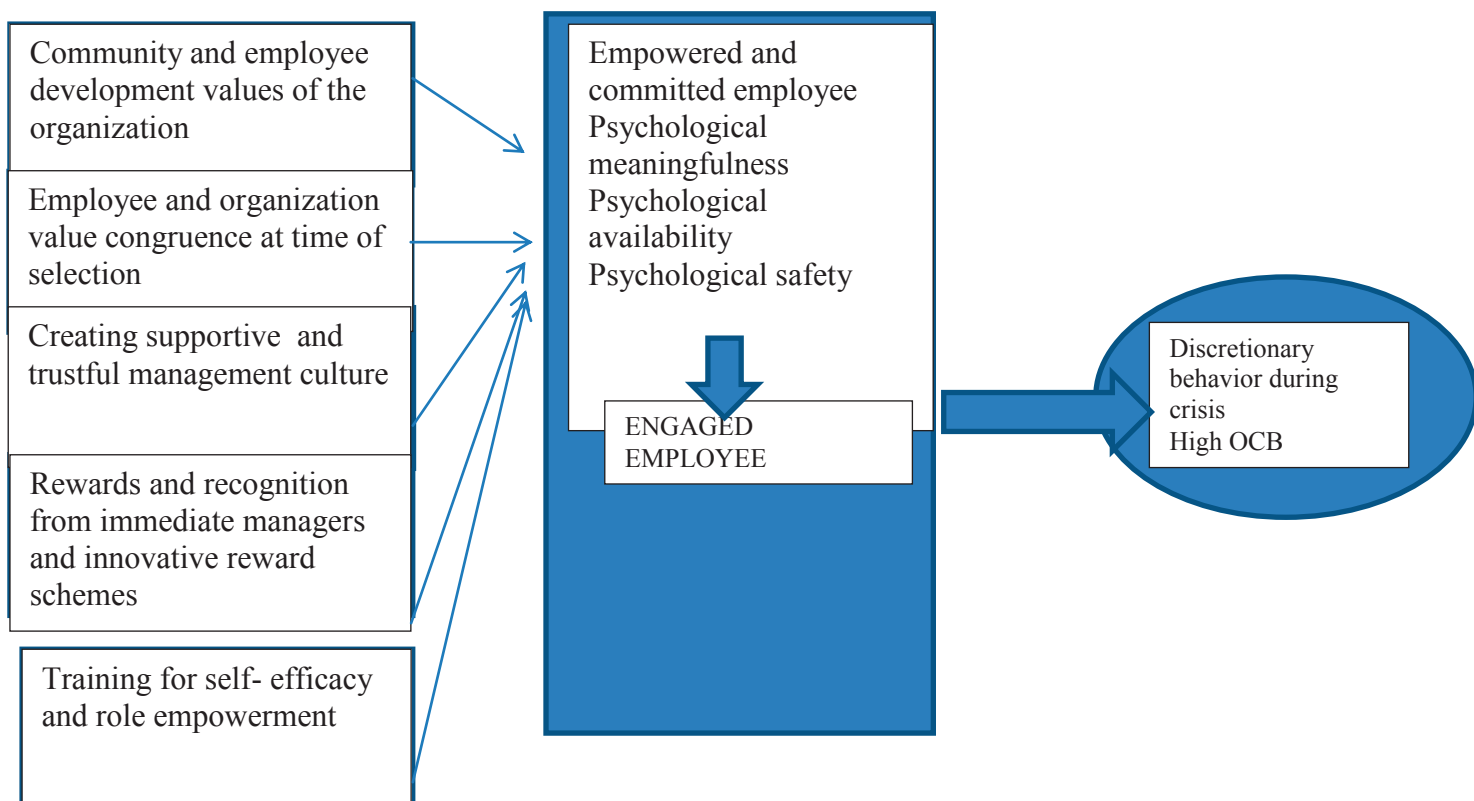
Having looked into Taj HR practices in hiring, training and developing a culture that appreciates, we can come to a conclusion that antecedents of engagement are those HR practices that makes a difference to the employee from the point of hiring to treating them with trust and respect throughout their journey with the organization. As engagement is all about how the employee feels proud about his employer brand and would do discretionary behaviors beyond the call of his duty to ensure the success of the organization, we need to look into those conditions that make an employ or motivate an employee to behave in ways that enhance his organization citizenship behavior. Meaningful engagement in ones work is like a flow of getting deeply engrossed physically ,

psychologically and cognitively in ones work (Csikszantmihalyi, 1975) and this occurs when individual is in absolute sync with his surroundings.

Hence Taj’s recruitment and selection of employees from the inner towns and not the metros is the first step where they are identifying a person with certain values of respect and service for their organization. They understand that people with those values are important as they operate in a hospitality sector . Hence the first step is identify your own organization values and select people who can understand and exhibit those values. People feel safe and comfortable with the supportive climate that they get from the manager. Most importantly under this situation people can identify their self with their roles and hence there is more of psychological availability at the work. This psychological connectivity creates an alignment with individual values with organizational values and expectations (Cooper Thomas, Vianen and Anderson, 2004; Ostroff and Kozlowski, 1992).This person organization fit brings in greater organizational identification and commitment among the employees and employee develops a sense of communality of purpose with the employing organization ( Van Vuuren, Veldkamp, Jong and Seydel (2007). Biswas and Bhatnagar ( 2013) also found in their study that person organization fit brings in greater employee engagement that they will show more discretionary and OCB behavior on their job.

Next is providing empowerment to those employees through training required to do the job and empowering them to take decisions, They are also given rewards by their immediate managers which create a good relationship between the manager and the subordinate. This organization support through making improvements in their ability to perform well increase their self-efficacy which in turn supported by a supportive manager can enhance their cognitive and emotional faculty to undertake their work with full commitment. In times of crisis they become more confident due to their high self-efficacy and psychological feeling of support given by their managers, and they tend to exhibit discretionary behaviors that can support and benefit the organization . Hence creating engaged employees is in the hands of the human resource management and the supervisors and worker reward management systems.

Figure1: Employee engagement model for crisis situations



From many decades we know that leaders find it very hard to trust and delegate important decisions to their employees until and unless they are experienced. Taj training programs are much focused on role related training as well as self- efficacy improvement through providing employees opportunity to use their value system which

is trained to be in congruence with the service value system of the hospitality sector. Hence selection, training, employee development by experienced hands helped to bring employees who experience the oneness of their values with that of the organization

### **Implications for future managers:**

The model is derived from the practices followed by Taj and how the employees have exhibited discretionary behavior during crisis. Using the case of Taj we have validated the model in this paper. The model is valuable for human resource managers as well as senior managers of the organization to understand the power of employee engagement during crisis. It is important to ensure that human resource managers understand the espoused and hidden values of an organization and is able to create a culture where these values are communicated through words and actions. This study is important to those managers who are in constant touch with their subordinates to educate and empower their subordinates to take decision and trust them to make those decisions for the best of the organization. This will give them meaningfulness and psychological safety while performing their job.

### **Limitations and future research:**

The limitation of this study is that the model is not validated with an empirical study yet although there are many similar studies of engagement. Engagement under crisis situation need to be studies in organizations which have undergone crisis. It is important to use questionnaires and interviews to capture the dimensions perceived by the employers, managers and employees of such organizations. The present researcher looks forward to funding agencies that can provide support to conduct a study with larger sample size on crisis affected organizations to understand more about the model and its dimensions. Sometimes self-efficacy and resilience is part of a person's personality, but making a psychologically safe environment for the employees is in the hands of the management and human resource professionals. This can enhance the retention of those employees within the organization who will be pillars of strength to ones organization during crisis. Hence a study of same can be done on normal organizations to understand the perceived discretionary behavior and attitudes on organization employees to check whether existing employees are engaged enough to give a positive crisis oriented behavior in their responses.

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