

SEEKING DIALOGIC EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Employee understandings of engagement and dialogic communication

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Abstract:

This thesis examines employee perspectives about the concept of employee engagement and dialogical communication's role in enacting it. It approaches simplistic and instrumentalist views with scrutiny and explores more complex and profound understandings of the definitions, value, outcomes, and antecedents of employee engagement. Employee voice has been largely absent in engagement discourse, and both engagement and communication research have overwhelmingly ignored communication's role in enacting engagement.

To expand these narrow views, the research questions in this thesis investigate how employees understand the concept of employee engagement, the tensions or problems it may entail, and the role of dialogic communication in enacting it. A case study in a Finnish energy company consisted of semi-structured, individual interviews with 10 employees from different units. Qualitative content analysis combining data-driven and concept-driven strategies functioned as the method of analysis for the interview data.

The results of the analysis suggest that in addition to genuine opportunities to influence issues in a work community, employees appreciate transparency and open communication about how their voice had an effect. The interviewees considered features of dialogic communication as important antecedents of engagement, but other antecedents were meaningful as well, such as sufficient resources, clear structures and goals, and formal and informal meetings. In addition, the role of self-determination and autonomy were present in accounts of both the definitions and antecedents of employee engagement.

The interviewees recognized both beneficial and adverse outcomes of engagement. Therefore, employee perspectives of engagement are more complex and versatile than suggested by previous research or hyperbolic discourses. However, the multiple meanings attached to the employee engagement concept sustains its previous problems of vagueness and indistinctiveness.

The thesis highlights the need for expanding the previously narrow views of employee engagement. Demands for dialogic employee engagement challenges organizations to balance between different priorities, such as providing both agency and guidance, and encouraging diverse views while aiming for unity and shared culture.

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1. Introduction

In this thesis, my aim is to explore the concept of engagement from an employee perspective. I will discuss the definitions and value of employee engagement, including both traditional and more critical approaches to its conceptualization. In addition, I will investigate how organization communications may broaden the understanding of employee engagement by providing more dialogical means of enacting it.

Instead of analyzing engagement's value simply from the individual or organizational perspective, my focus is on employee perspectives and engagement's value for the work community. Thus, the research questions are the following:

1. How do employees understand the concept of employee engagement and what tensions or problems can be attached to it?
2. What is the role of two-way, dialogical internal communication in the employee understandings of enacting engagement?

To examine these questions, I will perform a case study in a Finnish energy company that aims to engage its employees and had interest in participating in this study. I will be interviewing 10 employees about their experiences and understandings of employee engagement. I will conduct semi-structured, individual, and anonymous interviews, and then use the method of qualitative content analysis to analyze the interview material.

One of the first scientific conceptualizations of employee engagement was offered in the beginning of 1990s by a professor of organizational behavior, William Kahn (1990, 694). According to Kahn, engaged employees “employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally” during work role performances. Since this first definition, both scholars and business practitioners have conceptualized engagement in various ways. It has been discussed in different disciplines from psychology, human resource management to corporate communications and organizational research. Due to its numerous definitions, there have been concerns about whether engagement is merely a buzz word that cannot be distinguished from other work-related concepts, such as work commitment.

Engagement and communication research have overwhelmingly ignored communication's role in enacting engagement. In addition, particularly in consultant literature and among practitioners, the discourse surrounding employee engagement has been characterized by an instrumentalist perspective that emphasizes the benefits and positive outcomes of engagement at the individual or organizational level of analysis, focusing on results such as productivity or the bottom-line. Organizations have measured the level of engagement with consultancy surveys that provide a seemingly objective argument for the benefits of engagement and monetize the concept. At the same time, employees' actions become meaningful only in relation to organizational outcomes.

However, academic research has recently introduced more critical voices. These studies present a more interpretivist approach to the employee engagement concept and highlight the importance of communication in enacting engagement. In addition, the studies recognize the more problematic aspects of engagement, such as organizations engaging employees to advocate for a decision without forgoing actual influencing power to employees.

Nevertheless, the perspective of employees is still relatively absent in the engagement discourse. Furthermore, the increase in the more critical approaches does not yet indicate a change in engagement practices or in consultancy literature about the topic. As employees are the object of employee engagement practices, I find it crucial to include their perspectives in engagement research. In addition, scholars and practitioners alike must consider more complex understandings of engagement that recognize the role of internal communication in enacting engagement as well as the power dynamics inherent in engagement practices.

Thus, I contend that engagement research and organizational practices lack a comprehensive understanding of the complexity of the employee engagement concept and the ways in which engagement should be enacted in a workplace. Employee perspectives about engagement have not been sufficiently addressed.

Accordingly, in my case study I want to explore the complexity of employee engagement concept and expand the understandings of it further. In particular, I will focus on employees' perspectives and experiences of engagement. In addition, I will examine how dialogic communication engagement functions as an alternative perspective to understanding engagement, in comparison to the more managerial and instrumentalist approaches presented above.

Next, I will introduce the structure of my thesis. In the second chapter, I will build a comprehensive review on the different definitions of employee engagement and elucidate how the concept has evolved throughout time. The focus is on my first research question about what employee engagement is and what tensions it may include. Thus, I will explore both engagement's benefits as well as the critical perspectives related to employee engagement discourse. I will conclude the chapter by describing how the former conceptualizations shape my research question about the employee understandings of engagement and its challenges.

The third chapter examines the theoretical framework related to my second research question about dialogic communication's role in enacting engagement. My focus is on the perspectives provided by communication research and how it understands the role of dialogue in enacting genuine employee engagement experiences and outcomes. The chapter summarizes the development of communication research paradigms, elucidates the different conceptualizations of dialogical communication, and introduces the main features of dialogic engagement.

Lastly, the third chapter connects my second research question about the role of two-way communication in enacting engagement with the concepts of dialogue. Thus, I will explore the role of dialogic communication as a possible answer to the challenges of engagement presented in the second chapter.

In the fourth section of the thesis, I will further elaborate my research design which includes sampling, data collection, and content analysis. I will also consider the validity and reliability of my thesis as well as ethical questions.

The fifth chapter consists of the description of the analytical process, the results of my case study, and discussion on the results. The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section examines the definitions, challenges, and value of employee engagement according to the employee perspectives provided by the interviewees. This section aims to answer my first research question. The second section of the chapter focuses on the antecedents of engagement and aims to answer my second research question. I will complete my thesis with conclusive remarks in the sixth chapter.

2. Employee engagement as a concept

In this chapter, I will form the theoretical framework for my first research question: how do employees understand the concept of employee engagement and what tensions or problems may this entail? First, I will introduce the different definitions of employee engagement and describe how the concept has developed after William Kahn's (1990) first conceptualization in the 1990s. I will include both academic and practitioner perspectives to demonstrate the discourse surrounding the topic. To form a comprehensive review of engagement discourse I will indicate the challenges and problems it entails as well as the arguments for the benefits of engaging employees in organizations.

In the end of the chapter, I will outline how engagement is understood in this thesis and how the former conceptualizations shape my research question about employee understandings of engagement.

2.1 Development of the employee engagement concept

Mary Welch (2011), a researcher in communication management, presents four stages of the development of the concept of engagement: pre-wave (before the 1990s), wave 1 (1990–1999), wave 2 (2000–2005), and wave 3 (2006–2010). Each wave includes varying degrees of interest among academics and practitioners, the latter mainly from business consultancies and management literature.

During the pre-wave period, the general need for employees to engage with their work and organizations was recognized (Welch 2011). At the start of the first wave, William Kahn (1990) offered one of the first scientific conceptualizations on engagement, introducing its multidimensional – physical, cognitive, and emotional – nature and connecting it with individual work roles. In general, this cognitivist approach to engagement as a state characterized the first academic definitions. They focused on the individual-level outcomes and the straightforward stimulus-response mechanisms of engagement (Johnston & Taylor 2018, 19).

At the turn of the new millennium (wave 2), scholarly work introduced new variations of engagement conceptualizations in which engagement was connected to different theories and models. For example, engagement was defined as the antithesis of burnout (e.g. Maslach et al.

2001), or it was explained with the social exchange theory (e.g. Saks 2006), or the job demands-resources model (e.g. Schaufeli & Bakker 2004), among others. (Welch 2011; Schaufeli 2014.) Between 2000–2010 there was a sharp yearly increase in the number of publications with employee engagement and work engagement in the title (Schaufeli 2014, 17).

Before engagement reached this stage in academic literature, practitioner interest had already surged at the end of the 1990s (Welch 2011). Gallup, a management consultancy firm, is generally credited for “coining the term” of work engagement (Schaufeli 2014, 15). It produced a well-known tool called Q12 to measure engagement at the workplace (Welch 2011). At the turn of the century, other consultancy firms followed in Gallup’s footsteps and practitioner interest increased further (Schaufeli 2014, 16).

Why did the academic and practitioner interest increase at a different pace? A professor of organizational psychology, Wilmar Schaufeli (2014, 16–17) argues that in the 1990s, work life experienced major changes that required different psychological conditions from employees – adaptation, teamwork assertiveness, and personal initiative for job crafting. Organizations needed employees who were willing to invest in their jobs psychologically. These developments functioned as the basis for the heightened interest in engagement among business and management practitioners.

In turn, both Schaufeli (2014) and Welch (2011) connect the slower academic interest with the positive psychology movement that did not occur until the turn of the millennium. The focus in scholarly work moved from negative attitudes related to work, such as job burnout, to positive drivers, such as engagement (Welch 2011, 333).

Wave 3 (2006–2010) was characterized by a concern among scholars about the concept becoming more of a buzz word than a serious scientific construct (Welch 2011). Critical voices started to emerge, but many scholars defended the concept and argued for its uniqueness. For example, Schaufeli (2014) emphasizes the importance of the psychological state and the experience of engagement in the term’s definition. That is, the behavioral consequences of this psychological state do not constitute as engagement. For him, this narrow definition is the way to ensure the distinctiveness of the concept.

This is similar to the approach of organizational psychology researchers Arnold Bakker, Simon Albrecht and Michael Leiter (2011, 9) who contend that more established organizational terms, such as organizational commitment, should be conceptualized as *outcomes* of engagement instead of confusing the concepts with each other. Alan Saks (2006), a professor of organizational behavior, also insists that scholars have defined engagement as a distinct and unique concept: engagement consists of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components that are associated with individual role performances.

As we can ascertain from Saks' definition, Kahn's original conceptualization of engagement has sustained its influence in determining engagement. In general, the different definitions and approaches introduced above have been influential in shaping understanding of engagement, but their focus has remained rather narrow – they have mainly incorporated a psychological, individual-level analysis of engagement. The aim of my study is to expand these views by including more critical perspectives to the conceptualization of engagement as well as introducing viewpoints offered by organizational communication research.

Communication's role in enacting engagement has previously been overwhelmingly ignored by both engagement and communication research. For example, Welch (2011, 329) argues that corporate communication literature has not sufficiently considered the concept of engagement even though internal communication has often been stated to be important factor in employee engagement. According to management and communications researchers Kim Johnston and Anne Lane (2021), communication's role in engagement is often implicit and assumed without further exploration or elaboration.

According to Kim Johnston (2018, 20), recent scholarly work has introduced more interpretivist and constructivist approaches in which communication's role is more focal. Instead of a psychological state, engagement is then understood as a socially situated process in which meaning is cocreated through communication. In addition, the organizational level is taken into consideration, and challenges related to engagement narratives are not ignored. These critical perspectives are explored next.

2.2 Critical perspectives: negative outcomes and instrumental narratives

One way to analyze the concept of engagement is to include the perspective of its outcomes. Vast amounts of studies report employee engagement's potential benefits and positive outcomes. Engagement has been connected to several positive attitudes and behaviors at work such as fewer absences, innovative behavior, and general wellbeing of employees and work communities. Engaged employees appear to create their own resources, perform better, and have happier clients. For the organization, engagement promotes productivity, positive reputation, and consumer loyalty. Commitment to the organization, knowledge capital, and social capital increase as problems are solved together and trust is enhanced. (Schaufeli 2014, 30; Laajalahti & Pennanen 2019, 29–30; Bakker et al. 2011, 17; Johnston 2018; Pekkala & Luoma-aho 2019, 21–22). Saks' (2006) study revealed that regardless of whether engagement is directed at the organization or the job itself, it explains many positive outcomes. For instance, engagement resulted in increased job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and organizational citizenship behavior directed at the organization, as well as decreased intention to quit.

These examples provide a strong argument in support of enhancing engagement in organizations. However, the positive outcomes may be overstated and should be examined with caution. They also represent a more instrumentalist understanding of engagement. The instrumentalist approach has vastly dominated the employee engagement discourse in which engagement has mostly been understood as a tool to achieve goals identified by the organization. These goals include the financial, social, and reputational benefits resulting from engaged employees. (Johnston 2018, 20.) If a deeper understanding of employee engagement is to be established, the more critical perspectives and negative outcomes of engagement should be addressed.

An instrumentalist approach can be problematic. Public relations researcher Magda Piezcka (2018) has studied discourses related to the different forms of engagement. According to her, the main actors in employee engagement discourse are large multinational consultancies, such as Gallup, mentioned in the previous section, or Hay Group, a global human resources consultancy firm (now part of the consultancy firm Korn Ferry). The consultancies directly benefit from being able to help companies enhance their employee engagement.

Management researcher, Professor Tom Keenoy (2014), has studied consultant texts and argues that even though consultants aim to sell their services to organizations, their voices cannot be ignored as mere commercial hyperbole. They have a significant role in driving the narratives and discourses of

engagement. Additionally, engagement expertise and practices are circulated further by the support of professional bodies and governments (Piezcka 2018).

Piezcka (2018) asserts that rhetorically, employee engagement discourse leans towards hyperbole. The discourse is connected to management terms, such as job satisfaction and leadership, and it is operationalized through different measurement instruments, such as large-scale survey research across countries and industry sections. Thus, people are presented with seemingly objective and universally applicable knowledge which also facilitates the concept's monetization.

Similarly, Keenoy (2014, 204) argues that while consultants may vary in their definitions of engagement, they share an emphasis on the direct measurable relationship between engagement and "performance, productivity and bottom-line values". Narratives are built with the help of "statistical artefacts" emerging from surveys and databases. The databases are large and global which increases their discursive power. However, the studies cannot be evaluated properly due to insufficient methodological detail and discussion of context, culture, and representativeness. (ibid. 206–207.)

Perhaps ironically, employees do not seem to have strong agency or voice in the employee engagement discourse. The measurement and monetization discourse transforms employees into a group of people whose actions are meaningful only in relation to their effects on organizational performance. Thus, they are not treated as individuals. (Pieczka 2018, 554–555). An argument based on humanist values of freedom, trust and fulfillment is in practice used to serve organizational effectiveness, and the relationship between employees and work is understood as a trade (ibid. 555).

This is not the only paradox in the employee engagement discourse. For example, if we are to believe Gallup's engagement surveys, which have been conducted since the 1990s, there is still a major engagement gap: many employees in the world are not engaged and this is an obstacle for productivity. The solution then is to put one's trust onto managerial practices that are legitimized by survey-based literature and professional credentials. (Piezcka 2018, 555–556.) Therefore, despite the hyperbole, the achievements of engagement practices seem rather thin when an "engagement gap" is still proclaimed to exist.

The way employee engagement is understood in an organization is not insignificant. For example, it can affect how well engagement efforts succeed. Organizational researchers Sarah Jenkins and Rick

Delbridge (2013) noticed this, when they investigated two companies with different approaches to employee engagement. The organization which emphasized individual employees' experiences at work and treated the employee experience as the primary objective of engagement, resulted in high levels of engagement reported by the employees. The other organization focused instead on individual employee productivity and organizational performance objectives. Their employees reported high levels of disengagement, despite the senior management committing themselves to and prioritizing employee engagement. The context also mattered: the latter organization's overall business and management strategy did not cohere with employee engagement as well as it did with the former organization. Interestingly, even the more engaged work community reported some negative outcomes of engagement, such as increased workloads, work intensification, and stress.

Indeed, studies have also found negative outcomes to engagement. In the context of participation and joint decision making, possible pitfalls had been recognized already before Kahn's (1990) first engagement definition. For example, Sherry Arnstein (1969/2019, 24–25) categorized participation into eight types in her well-known article *A Ladder of Citizen Participation*. According to Arnstein, many of the participation types incline to "tokenism". This means that powerholders can claim that all sides are considered but the true decisions are still made by only some of those sides. The participants are heard, but there is no follow-through. This maintains the status quo and no genuine citizen participation occurs. Accordingly, Arnstein suggests that the actual redistribution of power is essential to citizen participation, because without it, participation is an "empty and frustrating process for the powerless".

In the context of employee participation, organizational behavior researchers Nicholas Baloff and Elizabeth Doherty (1989) also observed that not all participation necessarily produces positive outcomes. Especially during the early phase of employee participation programs, the participants may be subjected to peer-group pressure against what is perceived as collaboration with management. Managers may retaliate against the participators if the program's results are not up to their expectations, and the participators can have difficulty returning to their normal work activities if the program is temporary.

An organizational communication researcher, Elisa Juholin (2008, 148) categorizes employee influencing in an organization into three different types: formal, semiformal, and informal. Formal influencing refers to engaging employees in decision making and planning, and it includes official reporting and scheduling. Semiformal influencing refers to brainstorming and is usually related to a

specific issue, and informal influencing refers to occasional, free brainstorming that happens by chance. Related to formal influencing, she warns against disingenuous engagement in which participants are engaged even though the decisions have already been made. This can backfire – speculation can start instantly when planning starts, and these uncertainties may reflect outside of the organization. Similarly, informal influencing can seem demotivating if ideas do not result in concrete outcomes.

Engagement is sometimes also falsely connected directly to corporate responsibility. Business ethics researcher Michelle Greenwood (2007, 316–318) emphasizes that just because an organization aims to engage its employees, this does not mean that the organization is responsible towards them. An organization or its management and its stakeholders are still often of an unequal status which can lead to the more powerful party setting the rules of participation and cooperation.

When masqueraded as corporate responsibility, engagement may be a mechanism for consent or control in which an organization acts only in self-interest (Greenwood 2007). Many organizations still view engagement as a separate tool to be deployed when the organization's strategy and goals have been determined by the management and the organization wants to implement them (Pekkala & Luoma-aho 2019, 15).

Furthermore, it is important to note that not every employee endorses participative practices in every context. For example, communications scholar Eveliina Pennanen (2018, 53) studied health care employees' communication and discovered that some employees did not wish to engage and carry heavy responsibility at work. Management researchers Sofie Rogiest, Jesse Segers and Arjen van Witteloostuijn (2018) observed that if an organization consists mostly of employees who regard leadership to be the sole responsibility of the leader and the organizational context is stable, participative leadership may even lower the affective commitment to a change. In turn, in a volatile and complex environment, shared leadership has more potential and thus efforts should be put into developing employees' leadership orientation.

Additionally, employees may find engagement distressing (Pekkala & Luoma-aho 2019). If engaged employees become overly involved in work activities, they may experience negative consequences, such as work-family conflict (Bakker et al. 2011, 18.) It is also important to remember that engagement and participative leadership are not always possible or reasonable

approaches. For example, they fit poorly to situations demanding fast decision making, confidential security matters, and issues that require sensitivity (Pekkala and Luoma-aho 2019, 16).

Pennanen (2018, 59) argues that having the freedom to choose whether to participate or not may be more important than engaging employees. Thus, participative leadership can consist of creating opportunities to engage without demanding everyone participates in the same way and the same amount. In addition, it is important to remember that the decision to share power will not automatically lead to engagement – many practices and structures must first change before engagement becomes an actuality.

To conclude, all examples of engagement’s potential pitfalls in this section demonstrate that power relations are at the core of the engagement concept. If responsible employee engagement is pursued, it is thus crucial that it is not observed separately from power relations, and employee understandings are included in the discussions of the concept’s definitions and value. This is why my first question focuses on employee perspectives and includes the question about tensions and problems of engagement.

Next, I will examine approaches to understanding engagement’s value, offering alternative perspectives to engagement’s instrumental and individual-level understandings.

2.3 The “philosophy” of engagement: why should we engage?

What are the benefits of engagement and why should we engage in organizations? Recognizing negative outcomes of engagement does not mean that engagement could not have positive outcomes or that it does not have potential as an organizational practice. However, focusing only on the instrumental value of engagement does not sufficiently explain why engagement may, in some cases, truly be a worthwhile practice for organizations.

Instead of observing engagement’s instrumental value, it is crucial that we delve into the more fundamental, normative, and philosophical questions of why engagement can be a valuable and ethical practice in workplaces, if enacted correctly. For example, despite acknowledging engagement’s potential pitfalls, Greenwood (2007) argues that engagement may also act as a mechanism for accountability, a form of employee involvement and participation, a method of enhancing trust, or as a discourse to enhance fairness. Engagement can be a morally positive

practice when it enables cooperation in the context of a mutually benefitting relationship. Thus, perhaps we should not ask whether engagement is beneficial but rather, *what type* of engagement is beneficial.

It seems that the virtues of engagement are often presented in the field of civic and public engagement research. Political scientist Robert Putnam's famous book *Bowling Alone*, published in 2000, addresses the issues of civic engagement, social capital, and democracy. Putnam (2000) argues that the declining civic engagement in United States is connected to the decreasing social connectedness in society. Social relations and networks construct social capital which may have positive collective outcomes and be beneficial for democracy.

Communications scholar Robert Heath (2018) refers to the principles of deliberative democracy when arguing for engagement. Deliberative democracy assumes that ideas become wiser and arguments stronger once they are publicly vetted. Heath argues that similarly, engagement presumes that several minds are intellectually and ethically better than one. He observes engagement from the perspective of decision making and asserts that engaged decision making results in intellectually better and more socioemotionally satisfying outcomes. This occurs when self-interested parties engage with one another to align their interests to accomplish a common goal. Thus, engagement has pragmatic, moral, and normative dimensions and contributes to a fully functioning society.

Engagement can also be examined from the perspective of changes in organizational communications understandings. An ideal of organization as a unified entity with only one voice and one corporate identity has long been persistent in corporate communication research. However, organizational communication scholars have questioned these ideals, stating that they lean on outdated understandings of communication as mechanistic and one-directional, an entity that managers could "control". (Christenssen and Cornelissen 2011.) Organizational communication research no longer views communication only this way, that is, as a straightforward process in which messages are sent and received. More complex views have merged, and instead, communication is now often understood as a collaborative process of creating meanings and enhanced understanding between participants. (Juholin 2017.)

This shift in communication paradigms is better discerned when observing the changes in current working life. Contemporary work is characterized by networks, teams, digital platforms, remote work, projects, and specialist knowledge as well as freelancing, temporary work, and part-time

entrepreneurship. More often than before, employees think about the image, reputation and accountability of organizations when seeking a job. Work communities are no longer tied to a certain place or time, and hierarchies are diminishing. Information flood is abundant, and organizations cannot control messages as well as before – instead, all employees must share information and communicate in various arenas. (Juholin 2008; Juholin 2017.)

Knowledge workers have become some of the most valuable assets to organizations. These employees are active thinkers and communicators who want to belong to a community, be heard, and influence common issues. They expect more from their workplace than just an income – they wish to have a community and an opportunity to develop their professional identity. (Juholin 2008.)

As employees become increasingly more valuable stakeholders for organizations, these institutions must shift further from the ideals of efficiency, uniformity, and manager-focused leadership towards more participative practices. According to organizational communications researchers Kaisa Pekkala and Vilma Luoma-aho (2019), the transformation towards multiple voices and shared leadership challenges current leadership practices as it requires openness and the ability to relinquish control and tolerate uncertainties. In the future, it will be crucial that organizations find a balance between unity and diversity.

These developments in the working life and organizational communications indicate the need for a deeper and more complex understanding of employee engagement as a concept and for an exploration of its connection with communication. The managerial and instrumental approaches to engagement are narrow and insufficient in explaining the concept. They also steer far from the more humanistic values of engaging people, such as the importance of better decision making, meaningful work, and employees being heeded. These values should not be forgotten when organizations pursue employee engagement.

2.4 What is engagement, then?

In conclusion, the first two sections above introduce different dichotomies of analyzing engagement: a cognitivist, individual-level engagement as a state versus a constructivist, socially situated engagement as a process, and interpretivist versus instrumental approaches to engagement outcomes and goals. This kind of analysis is of course a simplification and approaching engagement from one perspective does not necessarily result in exclusively positive or negative outcomes in

actions. The different approaches and discourses may also both be in use at the same time in different organizational contexts.

Despite the complexity of defining engagement, in practice, engagement often refers to simple issues, such as employees' willingness and opportunities to introduce new ideas and alternative practices to their work community, influence shared issues, and take part in decision making (Laajalahti & Pennanen 2019). To engage and to be engaged signifies that the engaged are able to use power and influence. (Pekkala & Luoma-aho 2019). Engagement can be active or passive; negative, positive, or neutral (see e.g. Pekkala & Luoma-aho 2019; Lievonen, Luoma-aho, & Bowden 2018; Greenwood 2007).

The simplistic typologies introduced in this chapter can offer a useful tool for understanding how engagement has been conceptualized and how it has evolved throughout the years. However, they should be complemented with more thorough explorations of engagement's possible normative and ethical dimensions as well as the context of relevant changes in working life presented in the previous section.

Johnston (2018) offers a model that combines different approaches to engagement and addresses different levels of analysis. She defines engagement as follows:

Engagement is a dynamic multidimensional relational concept featuring psychological and behavioral attributes of connection, interaction, participation and involvement, designed to achieve or elicit an outcome at individual, organization, or social levels. (Johnston 2018, 19.)

This definition will function as the basis for understanding engagement in this thesis, in addition to placing further emphasis on the role of two-way internal communication and dialogue in enacting engagement.

My first research question asks how employees understand the concept of employee engagement and what tensions or problems they include in the definitions. In this chapter I have introduced different perspectives and approaches to defining employee engagement. These previous studies on engagement suggest a need for a more complex view on employee engagement which includes employee perspectives and does not ignore the more challenging aspects of employee engagement.

Therefore, my goal in my case study is to introduce more employee point of views into the engagement discourse, include the negative aspects of engagement in my analysis, and simultaneously deepen our understanding of the complex concept.

When examining the true complexity of the employee engagement concept, the debate about the term changes: It becomes less of a question of its definitions and value, and more of what engagement *should* be and *how* it should *be enacted*. This is further examined in the following chapter of the thesis as I will examine engagement practices from the perspective of organizational communications and dialogue research. This sets the ground for my second research question about dialogic communication's role in enacting engagement.

3. Communication and dialogue in enacting engagement

The previous section examined the theoretical framework for my first research question related to employee understandings about the definitions and tensions of employee engagement. I established that engagement discourse has been dominated by an instrumentalist approach and argumentation that focuses mainly on organization's economic goals. This seems to steer the concept far from the humanistic principles in which employee engagement has been rooted and the original idea of providing employees more influence in organizations.

Communication research is not the only area of research exploring the dilemmas of engagement, but it offers meaningful ways of deepening our understanding of better employee engagement practices. In fact, communication has a key role in facilitating and enacting engagement that has not thoroughly been addressed by previous research.

For example, Johnston and Taylor (2018) summarize the different understandings of engagement that emerge in their handbook: some scholars focus on the relational aspects of engagement, its socially situated nature, and the influence of context. To some, engagement is interaction and exchange where meaning is cocreated and social capital produced. Some scholars emphasize the multidimensional nature and complexity of engagement, already introduced by Kahn in the 1990s. Yet, in all these definitions, communication creates, nurtures, and influences outcomes of engagement. Thus, it is crucial to explore the perspectives communication research can offer for engagement research.

Accordingly, this chapter examines perspectives that the current communication research provides about enacting engagement in a more ethical way. This will lay the basis for my second research question that asks how employees understand the role of two-way communication in enacting engagement.

3.1 Organizational and internal communications today

First, I will briefly summarize the development of organizational communication that has paved the way for current communication engagement approaches and ideas. Communication's and dialogue's value to employee engagement can be better understood when we examine the recent changes in working life and organizational communication.

As I described in the former chapter, working life has changed in many ways. Especially in knowledge work, employees want to be heard and influence common issues. They want to develop themselves and their professional identities. The significance of employees' communication skills increases as work cannot be done without the ability to negotiate, argue, listen, and give feedback. (Juholin 2007, 25.)

Similarly, theories about communication have developed. The traditional process model of communication assumed that communication has succeeded when a message has been sent and received. The message was always designed in the interests of the sender. The model was based on the idea that simply informing people about issues was the best way to communicate and reach desired outcomes. This perspective of communication, sometimes referred to as the "hypodermic needle model" was produced during the early 1900s. (Juholin 2017, 23–24.)

The model worked in conjunction with an assumption that information is neutral, and managers are able to know what information employees need. Obtaining that information would make the message receivers satisfied and behave in a desired way. (Juholin 2008, 58.)

The process model is still useful in many communicational situations, but it has also faced considerable criticism. Today, the amount of information available is immense, and one person, such as the manager, is not able to have all the relevant knowledge. Information must also be shared quickly as information deficits can lead to harmful gossip and speculation. The party who communicates first is often able to determine how issues are understood and interpreted. (Juholin 2008, 66–67.) Sharing knowledge enhances learning as today, knowing where to find relevant information is more important than having that information for yourself (*ibid.*, 70–71).

Furthermore, the process model determined the success of communication based on how the desired message is accepted. Communication is rarely this straightforward. There can be many reasons for why communication fails despite the message consistently reaching its audience. It is possible that the audience is not interested in or does not understand the message. The audience can also reject or criticize the message. (Juholin 2017, 23–24.)

Later, other models of communication have risen to prominence. According to the semiotic model of communications, meanings themselves are valuable and different viewpoints are respected even

if they differ from our own. It asks what type of meanings we want to share, how will they be understood, and what type of meanings our stakeholders wish to communicate to us. It is based on an idea of dialogue and mutual respect with the goal of refining common views. (Juholin 2017, 27.)

In turn, the ritual model of communication argues that engaging in communal and collaborative thinking is of value in itself. This participative thinking can produce added value and versatility to the result of communication. (Juholin 2017, 27.)

These paradigm shifts in communication research partly explain why the role of dialogue and deliberation is now considered important when engaging employees. Today, many communication scholars suggest that the key to successful and genuine engagement is achieved through more equal, symmetrical, and dialogic communications.

3.2 Conceptualizations of dialogic communication

In this section, I introduce different conceptualizations of dialogic communication in organizational communication research. Simultaneously, I articulate the role dialogue plays in employee engagement.

Johnston and Lane (2021) argue that communicative interaction is a key constitutive element in engagement. Despite many studies presenting a connection between communication and engagement, communication's role has often been assumed and implicit. Johnston and Lane aim to elaborate on it by establishing a typology of interaction with implications for engagement.

The typology does not ignore the problematic aspects of engagement, but instead understands that there are different forms and purposes of communication in organizations. Communication may be merely one-way and utilized to provide information, which does not create engagement. In practice, this often refers to media releases or advertising. (Johnston & Lane 2021.)

In turn, low engagement may be reached with two-way communication that aims to advocate and persuade. This can be understood similarly to what Arnstein (1969/2019) described as "tokenistic". For example, a pre-determined decision or viewpoint is brought into discussion with the aim of convincing or gaining support for it. In the more simplistic form, an example of this type of

communication occurs when an organization posts on social media and the post receives likes. Engagement exists, but it is low. (Johnston & Lane 2021.)

Higher engagement can be reached with communication that aims to connect or build relationships. The difference between these two aims is that connecting communication is *episodic* – temporary, focusing on a specific issue, and has a clear timeframe. Communication that aims to build relationships is *relational* – continuous, creating shared meaning and producing relationships. (Johnston & Lane 2021.)

Connecting communication is two-way, long-term, and seeks to find solutions to specific issues. This can be, for example, organizations asking for feedback, comments, and input from employees to their proposals. Organizations will then consider the feedback and respond with counterproposals. In turn, communication for relationships develops connections that lead to shared meaning making and enhanced relationships between organizations and its stakeholders. It does not focus on only one issue or decision, but is instead ongoing, occurring over a longer timeframe and aiming to create opportunities for shared meaning making and new knowledge. This allows the participants to better understand each other and respect each other's differences. (Johnston & Lane 2021.)

The relational communication Johnston & Lane (2021) describe is close to public relations researchers, Maureen Taylor and Michael Kent's (2014) concept of *dialogic engagement*. They criticize the fact that engagement has mainly been enacted as a form of one-way communication and has been described from an organizational perspective, and they instead suggest including dialogic principles in engagement pursuits. Engagement and dialogue both share an association with the idea of relationships (Lane & Kent 2018, 61).

Taylor and Kent (2014) root their arguments in dialogue theory and theory of ethics in which dialogue is considered the most ethical form of communication, because it is able to mitigate power relationships and it attempts to involve participants in conversation and decision-making. Dialogic communicators aim for cocreation of reality and mutual understanding – individual goals and messages are secondary to achieving new possibilities and understanding. Dialogue can be understood as a continuum with propaganda or monologue at one end of the spectrum and dialogue at the other. (Taylor & Kent 2014.)

Pekkala and Luoma-aho (2019) refer to Taylor and Kent's ideas when describing their division of symmetrical and asymmetrical engagement. They see symmetrical engagement as a preferable form of engagement compared to asymmetrical engagement. *Symmetrical engagement* is dialogic in nature. It gives possibilities for genuine participation, in which different stakeholders can affect the goals, processes, and results of organizational decision-making instead of simply giving feedback to the outcomes. Engagement is seen as a continuous process that aims to answer certain questions while also accepting that new questions arise. In symmetrical engagement, stakeholders experience themselves as collaborative partners.

In turn, *asymmetrical engagement* starts when an organization believes that it needs feedback. The process is aimed at finding answers to pre-determined questions instead of creating new ones. The organization determines the channels, methods, deadlines, and other rules of the interaction. In the same way as Johnston and Lane (2020) refer to episodic engagement, asymmetrical engagement is project-based and has a clear conclusion. As a result, questions are answered and employees feel that they are heard, but no relationships are built, or social capital necessarily produced. (Pekkala & Luoma-aho 2019.)

Juholin (2017) also sees dialogue as an essential part of strategic organizational communication. She discusses *responsible dialogue* that enables employees to experience work as meaningful, to engage, and to have opportunities to influence. If responsible dialogue succeeds, it empowers employees, strengthens collegiality, and results in better mutual decision making.

However, responsible dialogue can also be understood incorrectly. Juholin (2017, 127) warns against meaningless dwelling on issues without conceiving any decisions and results. Sometimes a satisfactory result could merely be that certain issues are brought into everyone's awareness.

Of course, the concepts described above have been inspired by each other, and most organizations are positioned somewhere between the different extremes of a spectrum. There lies a danger in creating another set of simplified dichotomies, such as asymmetrical and symmetrical, or dialogue and monologue. Nevertheless, the concepts offer a useful tool to understand the challenges and complexities that lie in engagement and enacting it via communication. They also offer pathways towards more ethical and genuine communication engagement that was described in the previous chapter with the ideas of creating social capital and a fully functioning society with deliberative decision making.

In conclusion, these concepts appear to explore the same question: What benefits lies in utilizing two-way, dialogic communication to enact engagement? That is, engagement that genuinely involves its participants. In this thesis, I aim to expand the understanding of the employee engagement concept. Accordingly, the conceptualizations above recognize that there are different forms and levels of engagement, and that one of these form, dialogic engagement, may be a method of tackling the challenges of disingenuous or “tokenistic” (Arnstein 1969:2019) engagement.

I will now consider these concepts jointly to examine the content of this communicative understanding of engagement in more depth and to describe what dialogic communication would mean in practice.

3.3 Features of dialogic two-way communication

For dialogue to succeed, interlocutors need to have an interest in the topics at hand. Thus, organizations need to focus on issues that are relevant to stakeholders and tailor their messages to the preferences and needs of communication participants. This allows for better engagement and continued response from interlocutors. In addition, discussing a range of topics may lead to new perspectives, innovative approaches, and potential solutions for problems. (Lane & Kent 2018, 67.) Employees are not merely the receivers of information but active subjects, producers of knowledge, and communicators (Juholin 2008, 62).

Dialogue is situated in the “now” in time. Communication occurs before and during action, messages are sent and received in real time (Juholin 2017, 125; Lane & Kent 2014, 66). For example, this means that a feedback box at an office or conducting an online staff survey are not dialogue, nor is informing employees about decisions.

Dialogue also includes the idea of equality and mutual respect (Juholin 2017, 125; Alhanen 2016, 51–52). Alternative experiences are allowed to be expressed (Alhanen 2016). Conversation is based on respectful turn taking – both the organization and its stakeholders send, receive, and respond to communication (Lane & Kent 2018).

Hierarchy does not coincide well with dialogue. When communications scholars Birgitta Kemppainen and Anne Laajalahti (2016, 18) studied experts’ perspectives about how their

communicative agency can be supported at work, the experts emphasized permissive leadership. They wished that managers would treat them as equal partners and appreciate their increasing communicative responsibilities. Instead of hierarchical structures, they expected management practices to emphasize shared power among different professionals and experts.

A key factor in dialogue is accepting risk. When we share our own ideas, thoughts, and opinions, we set ourselves in a vulnerable position. Organizations and managers must be willing to transform and to appreciate alternative perspectives. These perspectives may sometimes be disruptive, contradictory, or confounding to organizational aims. Thus, dialogue entails an idea of inclusivity – differing opinions are not avoided or ignored. (Lane & Kent 2018.)

In Kemppainen and Laajalahti's (2016, 18) study, interviewed experts hoped for interaction that would enable the expression of multiple opinions and perspectives instead of aiming towards perfect mutual understanding. This is one of the main aspects about dialogue: accepting different opinions does not mean that interlocutors must end up in an agreement. Instead, dialogue allows criticism and difficult questions because they may reveal new information and critical perspectives (Juholin 2017, 125–126). In fact, differences in experiences are at the focus of attention and interest in dialogue (Alhanen 2016, 52).

Many scholars emphasize the importance of trust in dialogic communication. People need to perceive that they can voice their opinions openly and choose how they participate (Pekkala and Luoma-aho 2019). If people believe that their ideas will be ignored or their input is merely symbolic, they will not engage in an organization. Dialogue cannot occur without the interlocutors trusting each other. (Taylor & Kent 2014, 390.)

In conclusion, dialogic two-way communication includes risk-taking, trust, mutual respect, reduced hierarchies, listening, and employee-oriented mindset. In addition, dialogue requires an organization culture and atmosphere that is permissive, allows open communication, and enables the expression of alternative opinions.

3.4 Dialogue is not a solution to everything

This chapter provided the theoretical framework for my second research question that asks what is the role of two-way dialogic internal communication in employee understandings of enacting

engagement. Indeed, the models of dialogue and communication engagement presented in this chapter suggest that dialogue has the potential to create more ethical employee engagement that results in a mutually benefitting relationship for the organization and employees. Here, focus no longer rests on instrumental outcomes, organizational goals, or individual benefits. In turn, the dialogic engagement approach explores the value of engagement from the perspective of increased mutual understanding, and a continuous conversation that allows for new perspectives to arise.

However, it is also important to understand that dialogue hardly solves all problems in engagement. Furthermore, it is not an all-encompassing answer to larger organizational issues. For example, clarity and direction can also be important factors in formal processes of employee influence and engagement. According to Juholin (2008) employees must know what is expected of them, who is allowed to participate, where engagement occurs, and what impact their participation genuinely has. Employees are motivated to influence by explaining the meaning and larger context of their actions. Personal invitation to participate is better than a general request to everyone.

Indeed, even if dialogue is understood as an important factor in engagement, the role of other factors should not be ignored. For example, the concept of self-determination emerged in my case study analysis results. Self-determination is a concept relevant in current working life: as knowledge workers today increasingly share and produce information at workplace, the importance of employees' and teams' self-determination becomes more crucial (Juholin 2017). There appears to be few studies that address the connection between self-determination and engagement, and the prevalent ones appear to focus on self-determination as a psychological, individual need instead of exploring its possible social aspects or implications (e.g. Meyer 2014).

We should also not forget that there may still be employees who prefer not to engage. In Kempainen and Laajalahti's (2016) research, the interviewed experts wished for both more freedom as well as directions and clarity to support their communication agency. Thus, the challenge of engagement may then be about balancing different factors. In some cases, the *possibility to choose* whether to engage or not may be more crucial in communication engagement than engaging itself (Pennanen 2018, 59, italics added).

Despite organizational communication research offering alternatives to understanding engagement compared to previous engagement research, employee perspectives are still not thoroughly explored. Thus, in my case study, I aim to explore how employees understand the role of

communicative practice in enacting engagement. I am interested in how the key factors of dialogic two-way communication presented in this section – such as organizational trust, mutual respect, accepting risk, permissive culture, and listening – are present in the employee experiences. I will maintain a critical perspective and be sensitive to the problematic aspects of dialogic engagement that may occur.

4. Methodology

I carried out a case study in a Finnish energy company that aims to engage its employees where I interviewed 10 employees about their engagement experiences. The interviewees work in different departments and on different tasks. Semi-structured, anonymous, individual interviews were held via Teams video calls due to the Covid-19 pandemic. I performed qualitative content analysis for the collected interview data.

In this chapter, I will introduce the methodology utilized in this thesis as well as examine its validity, reliability, and ethical aspects.

4.1 Interviewing as a method

Employee perspectives have received little attention in previous engagement research despite employees being the object of employee engagement practices. Thus, I decided to answer my research questions with the method of interviewing employees about their personal engagement experiences. According to Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2008, 35), interviews are often conducted when the researcher wants to highlight the agency of the research subjects – interviewees are considered active participants who create meanings. Interviewing is also a suitable method for situations in which the topic has not been thoroughly researched and where it is difficult to anticipate what information the respondents' answers may reveal.

In addition, interviewing enables the exploration of more profound meanings related to employee engagement which corresponds with my aims of expanding the understanding of the complex concept. Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2008, 35) emphasize that in interviewing, the researcher can direct the course of data collection as it is possible to seek clarification and elucidate motivations behind the answers which may deepen the information gathered.

Interviews can be structured, semi-structured or unstructured. I conducted semi-structured interviews, in which some aspects of the interview were decided in advance, but not all (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2008, 47).

4.2 Gathering data

4.2.1 Sampling

My aim was to find an organization where I would conduct a case study by interviewing employees about their experiences and views about employee engagement. Initially, I sought an organization that explicitly states that they aim to engage their employees and where I would be able to interview both top management and regular employees. I did not consider the organization type to be relevant for my research.

However, finding an organization proved to be an arduous task. Many organizations politely declined to participate in the research. The main reason presented was their lack of time. The difficulty of gaining access to organizations is not uncommon. Interviewing organizational members, especially in private sector companies, can be considered as interviewing elites. Organizing interviews with busy elites is a difficult task as interview research is often not given priority, and no one has an obligation to give interviews to researchers. (Mykkänen 2001.)

When trying to gain access into a powerful organizational setting, it is pivotal to frame and “sell” the research correctly. The research must have an explicit “payoff” for the organization, and it cannot pose any significant risks or disruption to the organization (Yeager & Kram 1990). Academic research that is not useful to the subject leads to disinterest. It is important to immediately and clearly state how the data gathered is used and what is the level of anonymity at the time of contact. (Mykkänen 2001.) Thus, in my requests, I aimed to be as explicit and open as possible about my research topic and the practicalities of the interviews.

Eventually, an energy company operating in Finland agreed to participate in my study. I selected this organization because they aim to engage their employees and were interested in exploring the topic through my study. I believe that an organization that wants to engage its employees, functions as a good case for exploring employee perspectives of engagement. The employees may have experienced engagement and are likely to have opinions of its value or how it should be enacted.

My contact person in the organization coordinated the selection of interviewees for me. I requested interviewees who may have had some level of experience with engagement, either as a participant or a person trying to engage others. I also asked for both regular employees and employees in managerial positions as well as people from different departments. I hoped for a variety of people

from different contexts to gain diverse views and perspectives on engagement that would not be tied to a person's position or to a department in the organization.

4.2.2 Data

I conducted 10 interviews in a Finnish energy company. The company produces electricity, heat, and cooling to households and businesses and offers solutions for regional and renewable energy, smart buildings, and electric transport. They operate in Finland and can be defined as a large company based on their staff size and annual net sales and profit.

The company describes their current strategy, culture, and values as having been created together with the staff, the management, and the board of the company. They articulate that leadership practices must evolve if a company wants to succeed amid the rapid changes affecting the energy field, such as climate change and digitalization. According to the company's website, a key factor in adapting to these changes is engaging employees. However, the goal of engaging employees is not explicitly stated in the company's strategy, values, or other official materials.

My contact person in the company worked in communications, and although they were not one of the interviewees, they provided me with general information before the interviews about the company's practices with engagement and communication channels as well as the departments from which I interviewed employees. This helped me conduct the interviews more proficiently. I had no previous knowledge or familiarity with the organization's industry or their internal practices prior to this research.

I was not able to gain access to interview the top management of the organization. This excludes examining top management motives for pursuing employee engagement as well as their perceptions about engagement definitions.

Instead, I conducted 10 individual, anonymous, semi-structured interviews with employees working in six different departments in the company. Each employee was interviewed only once. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the interviews were held via Teams video calls in the spring of 2021. Most of the interviewees worked in an office environment with tasks related to topics, such as sales, business development, or strategy. Three of the employees worked at a power plant, as a manager, a mechanic, or in maintenance. Five of the interviewees worked as team leaders or supervisors to

other employees. None of the interviewees took part in the executive committee or the board of the company. The interviewees included an employee in the role of a workplace steward, representing the on-site employees, as well as an employee working in work safety. Thus, these two employees had a more general view of the work community opposed to the other interviewees.

In addition to background questions, I included three main themes in my interview topic guide (see appendix): experiences and definitions of employee engagement, methods and antecedents of employee engagement, and value and meaning of employee engagement. In part, the first theme functioned as a method to ground the topic in practical situations that the interviewees could relate to. At the same time, I was able to gain information about the employees' understandings of engagement in their own work context.

The other two themes included questions about the ways in which engagement could succeed or fail, which outcomes could be reached with engagement, and how important engagement was to the interviewees. I also inquired the interviewees' opinions about how successful engagement was reached. The questions stemmed from my theoretical framework which explored similar themes, such as possible positive and negative aspects of employee engagement, its value, and outcomes as well as methods to enact it in a desired manner. I found these themes to be the most relevant for my research questions about the definitions of engagement, its tensions or problems, and the role of dialogic communication in enacting it.

In the beginning of the interviews I introduced the following definition of engagement to ensure that we discussed engagement in relatively similar terms: Engagement refers to the willingness and opportunities to introduce new ideas and practices to their work communities, affect common issues, and possibly even take part in decision making (Laajalahti & Pennanen 2019). Despite establishing this general definition, I encouraged the interviewees to express their own understandings of engagement as their views are the focus of my research.

The interviews were held in Finnish which is also the language of the transcripts. I transcribed all sound recordings, excluding the video material from the research data. The interview excerpts in this thesis are self-translated to English.

4.3 Qualitative content analysis

I analyzed my interview data with the method of qualitative content analysis (QCA) in which qualitative material is classified based on categories of a coding frame. QCA enables systemic description of the meanings in a research material. In practice, a coding frame is built, tested, and modified; the research material is divided into units of coding; and then all the material is explored with the constructed coding frame. (Schreier 2012.)

I chose QCA as my method because I am interested in the employees' experiences and ideas, and the themes that emerge from observing the data. For example, I will not be focusing on the language of the interviewees or the emerging discourses as I would when conducting discourse analysis. Instead, the purpose of the analysis is to construct a clear description of the phenomenon that is studied (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018).

QCA is different from many other qualitative methods in the manner that the research questions specify the perspective for examining the data, instead of an attempt to gain a holistic overview of the material. The method is suitable for analyzing large amounts of data, such as interviews as in my thesis. QCA both reduces data and creates new information. Through classifying specific information into categories, the information is subsumed under a more general concept. Categorization produces new information about how the explored cases differ from each other. (Schreier 2012.)

QCA may be conducted in a data-driven or a concept-driven manner, or by implementing both approaches. I performed a combination of the two. In data-driven content analysis, the researcher inductively, through interpretation and categorization, constructs a more conceptual understanding of the phenomenon studied (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018). In turn, concept-driven strategy refers to basing the analysis on previous knowledge, such as a theory, prior research, or an interview topic guide. The prior knowledge functions as a deductive framework for building the coding frame. (Schreier 2012.)

I created my main categories in a concept-driven way, based on the themes in my interview topic guide (see appendix). My main categories are:

1. Definitions and challenges of employee engagement (incl. neutral accounts of engagement and non-engagement definitions, evaluations of what may be determined successful and unsuccessful engagement, and possible challenges related to employee engagement)

2. The value of employee engagement (incl. opinions about the positive and negative consequences of both engagement and non-engagement)
3. Antecedents of employee engagement (incl. opinions about what is needed for employee engagement to succeed, in terms of communications, resources, or actions in the organization)

These categories are based on my interview topic guide as follows: definitions and experiences of employee engagement (analysis category 1), methods and antecedents of employee engagement (3), and value and meaning of employee engagement (2). However, some of the segments that fit into these categories did not always appear as direct answers to the questions of the corresponding theme in the topic guide. Thus, the topic guide merely functioned as a guiding tool for forming relevant main categories and thus maintained the influence of the theoretical framework in my coding.

After creating the main categories, I continued constructing my coding frame in a data-driven way, forming subcategories from themes that emerged from examining the material. I summarized and subsumed segments in the data to find similarities and differences between different parts of the material. I set my unit of coding loosely – depending on the category, it may have included an individual sentence or a longer passage.

Consequently, my first main category includes interviewees' neutral accounts of engagement and non-engagement definitions, evaluations of what may be determined as successful and unsuccessful engagement, and possible challenges related to employee engagement as suggested by the interviewees. The second main category includes interviewees' opinions about the positive and negative consequences of both engagement and non-engagement. Non-engagement's positive consequences were not asked in the interviews nor did they emerge from the interview data, so it remains merely a theoretical category.

The first research question about employee understandings of engagement and its challenges is answered mainly with the first two main categories in my coding frame. As my aim is to expand the understanding of the employee engagement concept, I believe that including employees' ideas about both the positive and negative aspects of engagement as well as its value allows me to elaborately answer the first research question. Thus, my analysis entails both interviewees' neutral and value-laden definitions of engagement, an exploration of their thoughts about the difficulties

related to employee engagement as well as seeking positive and negative consequences of engagement.

The second research question about employee understandings of the role of dialogic communication in enacting engagement is addressed with the third main category. To determine dialogic communication's role in enacting engagement, it is important to explore different antecedents instead of just focusing on communication or other individual antecedents. Thus, the third main category entails interviewees' opinions about what is needed for employee engagement to succeed, in terms of communications, resources, or actions in the organization. These are the major subcategories that emerged from the data.

Additionally, I determined segments that appeared irrelevant with respect to my research questions. In addition to trivial warmup questions or general background information, I excluded segments about topics that were not thoroughly explored in the interviews or did not bear relevance to my main coding categories.

In general, all interviewees had experienced being engaged and most had also engaged others. Their satisfaction with the experiences – whether related to engagement in their own team, unit, or on the level of the organization – varied substantially depending on their team or unit or on the frequency and types of activities they were requested to engage in. However, my aim in this thesis was not to evaluate how well or adequately the case organization engages its employees, as it would not be possible with only 10 interviewees. Instead, my aim was to explore employee experiences and examine what are employees' understandings of engagement, successful engagement, and its value. Here, similarities and differences can be found.

Throughout the process of forming my subcategories, I kept revising and reflecting upon the definitions and boundaries of different categories. Finally, when the coding frame was completed, I performed the main analysis for the entire interview data.

4.4 Ethical considerations, validity, and reliability

4.4.1 Validity and reliability

A method is reliable to the extent that it yields data that is free of error (Schreier 2012). However, evaluating reliability in qualitative research is different than in quantitative research. Less focus is directed to generating objective and generalizable results, at least in the sense that the findings from a sample would be valid in a larger population. Instead, focus is on systematic analysis and the reliability of interpretation. (Ruusu vuori, Nikander & Hyvärinen 2010.)

Validity refers to a method's accuracy in measuring what it was intended to measure. For example, in content analysis this means that the coding frame adequately represents the concepts in the research questions and captures the material analyzed. This is one of the reasons why the coding frame is usually in part data driven. (Schreier 2012.) In this thesis, my strategy for conducting content analysis combines both concept-driven and data-driven approaches. My aim was to explore the research questions from a theoretical perspective but not to test a specific theory. By combining the two strategies I was able to address issues that were not part of my original theoretical framework but that emerged from the data.

Firstly, to enhance reliability and validity in a qualitative study, the grounds for interpretations should be made transparent so that it can be shared by others. Secondly, the plausibility of the interpretations should be tested by assessing their consistency. (Schreier 2012.) I have aimed to be transparent and clear about the motivations and decisions related to the research questions, sampling, data collection, and analysis. When carrying out my main analysis, I maintained a consistent approach about implementing my coding frame in my data. I continuously reviewed and assessed the quality of the coding frame before proceeding with my main analysis. In the analysis stage, I aimed to explore different possible interpretations of the results and explain my final conclusions extensively.

However, when employing interviews and content analysis as methods, the researcher invariably and inevitably plays a part in the data collection and its analysis. Thus, reflexivity is pivotal. (Schreier 2012.) In the interviewing stage, the interviewer may direct the conversation too much, or the interviewee may be inclined to give socially acceptable answers. Thus, interviewing requires a great deal of time, experience, and skills to fully succeed. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 35)

My earlier experience with conducting research interviews is not extensive. I was also not familiar with the industry of the case organization or the general work performed at power plants. This may have influenced the way I was able to adequately interview the participants and interpret the data. In

general, at times it was difficult to discuss certain themes at a sufficiently practical level with the interviewees. Naturally, this can be explained by the above-mentioned reasons, but in part, it could also be an indication of the vagueness and multiple meanings related to the employee engagement concept.

There may also be challenges in data sampling. My contact person at the organization coordinated the selection of interviewees. This was mainly due to time constraints and challenges I had faced while attempting to find an organization to participate in the research. I was uncertain whether I would be able to move forward with the research quickly enough if I would have, for example, made a general invitation to the staff.

I requested interviewees who may have had some level of experience with engagement, including employees both in managerial and non-managerial positions as well as people from different departments. I hoped for a variety of people from different contexts to gain diverse views and perspectives on engagement that would not be tied to a person's position or to a department in the organization. However, as the employees' work tasks varied considerably, it was difficult to compare some answers to each other. Therefore, it might have been preferable to define the sample to employees who performed more similar tasks in order to produce more comparable data. I am aware that these aspects of sampling affect the results of this thesis to some degree.

4.4.2 Ethical considerations

When contacting the interviewees, I asked for their willingness to participate in the interviews regarding this thesis. I informed all the interviewees about the purpose of this thesis and explained the manner in which the interviews would be conducted and how the interview data would be utilized and managed. Participation in the interviews and in the case study was voluntary.

In the transcription stage I removed all parts of the interview material from which individual interviewees might be recognized, such as the names of people, places, or organizations. The video recordings were deleted, and the sound recordings will be deleted immediately after the thesis is completed. All interview material was handled with care and full confidentiality.

I encountered an interviewee who had extremely negative experiences related to their work community, and I could detect their desire for this thesis to improve their situation. I had aimed to

be as transparent and open as possible about the practicalities as well as the goals, scope, and purposes of this thesis. Providing a comprehensive evaluation of the organization's practices was not the goal or even possible in the scope of this thesis, nor can I directly affect the ways in which the results will be considered. Despite these efforts of transparency, I could have focused even more attention to further clarifying the goals and scope of this thesis to the interviewees. Above all, I aimed to maintain a neutral, respectful position towards all topics, issues, and thoughts introduced by the interviewees, both during the interviews and when describing the interview data in writing.

5. Analysis

I analyzed my interview data with the method of qualitative content analysis (QCA) in which the material is classified based on categories of a coding frame. I implemented both data-driven and concept-driven strategies in creating my coding frame. The main categories were determined in a concept-driven manner with my interview topic guide (see appendix) functioning as the basis. For determining the subcategories, I applied a data-driven approach, categorizing the material through summary and subsumption.

The main categories of the coding frame are as follows:

1. Definitions and challenges of employee engagement
2. The value of employee engagement
3. Antecedents of employee engagement

In the first portion (5.1) of this chapter, I will focus on the first two main categories and interpret the material in relation to my first research question. My first research question asks what are employee understandings about employee engagement and its possible challenges. My analysis entails both interviewees' neutral and value-laden definitions of engagement, an exploration of their thoughts about the difficulties related to employee engagement as well as seeking positive and negative consequences of engagement.

In the second portion (5.2), I will focus on the third main category of my coding frame and aim to examine my second research question. It asks what is employees' understanding about the role of two-way, dialogical communication in enacting employee engagement. The third main category entails interviewees' opinions about what is needed for employee engagement to succeed, in terms of communications, resources, or actions in the organization.

The different interviewees are marked with a number in the interview excerpts. Quotes by me, the interviewer, will be marked with a "Q", and interviewees' quotes are marked with an "A", when both are quoted. The interviews were conducted in Finnish, and the excerpts in this chapter have been self-translated to English.

5.1 Definitions, evaluations, and the value of employee engagement

In this first portion (5.1) of the chapter I analyze the interview material to answer my first research question which asks what are employee understandings about employee engagement and its possible challenges.

These definitions and evaluations were mostly solicited via asking the interviewees to describe their engagement experience in their respective teams, units, or in the overall organization, whether they were in the role of being engaged or engaging others. In more general discussions about what engagement should or should not be and what are its outcomes, the interviewees may have additionally reflected upon experiences from their former positions or workplaces.

5.1.1 What is engagement?

When discussing the different forms in which the organization engages its employees or when asking about the definition of engagement on a more general level, the interviewees' accounts included a variety of descriptions and definitions. Most respondents determined engagement as having an opportunity to influence issues or voice opinions. This was also reflected in the ways the interviewees described non-engagement: decisions come from "above", "higher-up" or are "ready-made", and they are far from the reality of the actual day-to-day work.

In addition, engagement was often referred to as asking for someone's opinion or input related to different issues in the form of staff surveys, online conversation threads, or a separate idea system, to which everyone could send work-related proposals. A few interviewees described engagement as listening to or mapping people's views, and some considered that it could also refer simply to informing employees of important topics.

Conversations in their various forms were often described as engagement. These conversations could happen between two people or in a group, in informal meetings or casual day-to-day discussions, online or face-to-face. The interviewees also recognized engagement to be an activity in which employees plan or develop something together, in the form of organized workshops or regular meetings.

Thus, the types of engagement mentioned by the interviewees ranged from one-way communication (*soliciting opinions*) to two-way communication forms (*conversation and discussion*). Additionally,

many described *working on or planning something together* or *having the opportunity to influence issues* as engagement.

5.1.2 What should engagement be?

In the same manner to the more neutral accounts, interviewees described desired engagement as an *opportunity to influence* issues and voice opinions. In their descriptions, some interviewees focused on the feeling or the experience of being heard, but others also included the idea that the opinion was genuinely considered, or it had made a genuine impact. Additionally, successful engagement was often described as gaining *a collection of different opinions* from different teams or departments in the organization. That is, engagement had succeeded when multiple voices were included in decision-making.

To some interviewees, desired engagement related to *having freedom and autonomy* at work. A few employees described this with the term self-determination (in Finnish: itseohjautuvuus), which refers to working without extensive external control. The connection between independence and engagement appeared to stem from the idea that instead of orders coming “from above”, employees should have the opportunity to influence and affect their own work. This is clearly articulated in the following passage:

“We got a new supervisor -- the situation changed radically for us, in a way that we got a lot of freedoms but a lot is also expected of us in return. When you do your job, no one breaths down your neck here, there is no watching or asking about where you are and what you are doing. -- In that way, everyone gets to influence their own work and doing.” (H9)

Here, the respondent describes how getting freedom and independence allows for the employees to have an influence as no one is continuously making orders. Thus, self-determination refers to having a say regarding your own work.

In addition, many respondents described desired engagement as *flexible and unpretentious*. For example, a few respondents emphasized the importance of many stages in engagement. One respondent stated that it was important that an engagement process had included discussions about controversial aspects of the topic. This assured that all relevant points were considered before the completion of the project.

Correspondingly, unfavorable engagement experiences were described to involve *stiff, hierarchical processes* or forcing people out of their comfort zone. For example, one respondent was dissatisfied with the protocol of introducing new business ideas to management – the pitching meetings were infrequent and involved preparing long drafts. The interviewee preferred the former protocol of frequent meetings, short presentations, and quick decision-making.

Most interviewees referred to failed or poor engagement when describing situations in which their views seemed to have been asked just for “show” – decisions had already been made and their opinion had no impact. Almost all respondents had experienced this type of *disingenuous or insincere engagement*, either in their current work or previous jobs.

This type of engagement or non-engagement, depending on the interpretation, has been introduced as a major pitfall of engagement by the more critical voices in engagement research. For example, Juholin (2008) defines it as a process where employees are engaged even though decisions have already been made. This has the danger of backfiring against the interests of the organization. Arnstein (1969/2019) warns against “tokenism” where powerholders claim that all views have been heard despite maintaining their decision-making power. This results in feelings of emptiness and frustration of participants. Similarly, in the interviews, disingenuous engagement was often labeled as a “theater” or a “façade”, and the emotional reaction was a feeling of being duped, fooled, or lied to.

Engagement may be a mechanism of control for the organization’s self-interests (Greenwood 2007). There are organizations who still view engagement as a separate tool deployed only when management has determined the organization’s goals and must then implement them (Pekkala and Luoma-aho 2019). Accordingly, one interviewee contemplated that at times the sole aim of engagement appeared to be to gain acceptance for pre-made decisions, instead of stemming from genuine interest in employees’ opinions. They judged this as unfair or insincere. A few interviewees said that they had sometimes mistakenly engaged others in this way. They asserted that successful engagement requires that one compromises on their own ideas and authority and genuinely gives space for other people’s ideas. This was not considered to be always an easy task.

Another type of poor engagement introduced by many employees were processes that *did not lead to any proper result* or a desired change. Some employees felt frustrated because despite being

engaged via surveys or discussions, they believed it did not result in any change. This experience is akin to the feelings of being disingenuously engaged as it entails an idea that the engaged do not genuinely have an impact on issues. In turn, a few interviewees described projects that did not progress past a brainstorming stage as frustrating. At times, these experiences entailed poor planning or having no structure or clear goals for engagement. For example, Juholin (2017, 127) has mentioned that one of the dangers of dialogue are in ending up with meaningless dwelling on issues without conceiving any decisions and results.

However, many employees stated that it is acceptable that not everyone's opinion is always be considered in decision-making. In fact, several interviewees emphasized that having a genuine influence on issues required that the impact or its absence was communicated:

"—it would be good to always report later on about how [the project] is moving forward. – Often when people participate in something and then nothing can be heard of it afterwards. Like: what happened to that now?" (H1)

"So at least in some ways it is taken into account that [your point of view] is considered, even if it has not been taken into account as it is, but at least how it has had an impact. So some type of dialogue about the feedback and how it was utilized is important." (H5)

"But maybe what is easily forgotten is the presentation of results afterwards and demonstrating how this idea came from there and now its refined version is visible here. So maybe the people themselves no longer necessarily recognize it [the idea]. They have brought up an issue and then along the way it has become refined -- the connection isn't necessarily recognized. So that would probably be one significant factor." (H7)

In the first excerpt, the interviewee highlights that it is important to let engagers know how a project has moved forward. This way, the participants do not feel as if their effort was irrelevant. The employee in the second excerpt emphasizes that it is important that your opinion was considered at least to some degree and to know how it had affected. Lastly, the interviewee in the third excerpt, states that people often forget to demonstrate how everyone's input is visible in the end result of a given project. The ideas may have changed along the way even if it genuinely had influenced the result. Thus, reporting is important.

Interestingly, the excerpts above demonstrate that “having a say” does not necessarily mean that all decision-making power should be transferred to employees or that all opinions should always have a direct impact. Instead, *communication about how the opinions affected* appears to be significant. Several interviewees believed this to be a crucial part in a successful engagement experience.

In addition, the interviewees recognize many types and forms of engagement. This has also been the understanding of engagement research. Already in the first definition of engagement offered by Kahn (1990), engagement was defined as a multidimensional concept, occurring at a physical, cognitive, and emotional level. Johnston (2018, 19) expands this understanding and refers to engagement as a concept that has psychological and behavioral attributes, and that has designed to elicit an outcome at individual, organization, or social levels. The interviewees also differentiate between desired and undesired engagement. Research has discussed this more recently. For example, Johnston and Lane (2021) differentiate between episodic and relational communication that contribute to different types of engagement. The former is temporary, focuses on a specific issue, and has a clear timeframe. In turn, relational engagement is continuous, creates shared meaning, and produces relationships.

These observations also correspond well with the themes of my thesis. My aim is to expand the understanding of employee engagement by including more critical point of views and the perspectives of employees in the discussion about engagement. The question about what type of engagement (e.g. sincere vs. disingenuous) should be enacted and how the engagement is enacted (e.g. communication about the true influence of engagers) may be more relevant in determining engagement’s value than to solve a discussion about what engagement is and whether it is beneficial.

5.1.3 What are the challenges of engagement?

Most interviewees reported that despite many efforts made towards engaging employees, some employees still *did not engage*. This was considered one of the main challenges of engagement in the case organization. As I mostly interviewed people who were keen on being engaged or engaging others, it was impossible to get first-hand knowledge of why some employees were not engaging. The interviewees suggested a variety of explanations. Some people may want to focus on their “main tasks” and not get involved in other issues, some may simply not be interested, and some may not dare to share their thoughts if they considered the threshold for voicing opinions to be too

high. Previous experiences with disingenuous engagement were also considered as a possible explanation for current reluctance to engage.

However, most respondents considered obligatory engagement a poor idea, especially if people were required to participate in something that was believed to be trivial or irrelevant to one's own work, or if the engagement involved moving too far outside of one's comfort zone. In fact, the interviewees believed that this would hinder interest in engagement activities.

Previous studies show that not all employees want to engage, at least not in every context. For example, Pennanen (2018) observed this when studying health care professionals' communication. Some employees did not wish to engage and carry heavy responsibilities at work. She argues that in some cases, the possibility to choose whether to engage or not may be more important than engaging itself.

Issues related to *group dynamics and different working cultures* were considered another major obstacle for succeeding in engagement. For example, some supervisors considered it challenging to encourage quieter employees to participate when more talkative employees dominated the conversations. A newer employee reported that sometimes the employees who had worked in the organization for longer periods rejected certain suggestions and ideas because the ideas were not considered "new" and thus, engagement efforts were deemed as futile. One interviewee described their team's general atmosphere to be such that colleagues did not encourage each other to voice opinions.

In general, engagement activities had increasingly moved online due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Online conversations did not generate conversations as desired. Some interviewees suspected that the online platform Teams was considered distant, especially for those who worked at power plants and rarely used computers at work. It was also regarded as challenging to engage people in online meetings due to difficulties in interpreting people's interest when cameras were not used, and microphones were muted. Even though the effects of remote working during Covid-19 pandemic was not the focus of my thesis, this is certainly an important aspect to consider in relation to engagement as working from home may become more common even after the pandemic.

A third major challenge related to engagement, introduced by a few of the interviewees, included *undesired responses* to engagement efforts. Some interviewees believed that staff surveys or the

idea proposal system were at times mere channels for “complaining” or platforms where opinions were shared without filters. Additionally, a few interviewees occasionally experienced situations where people were eager to engage in the brainstorming or planning stage but were unwilling to participate in putting their ideas into practice.

The challenges introduced above suggest that the concept of engagement entails also more negative aspects. In addition, pursuing successful employee engagement is hardly a straightforward process.

5.1.4 Why is engagement important and what may be achieved with it?

All interviewees thought that engagement generated positive outcomes on *the emotional level* for employees. Engagement created a feeling of meaning and purpose, functioned as a motivator, and committed employees to projects, the organization, or work in general. Some interviewees stated that they would not want to work in an organization that did not engage its employees. For many of the interviewees, engagement represented an opportunity to participate in fun and inspiring activities.

Accordingly, experiences of non-engagement were regarded as having a negative effect on motivation, satisfaction, and commitment as well as producing feelings of futility and absurdness. The latter is well articulated in the following excerpt:

“And then, when [the decisions] are made really far from the reality, those who execute the decision, that has been given, are wondering ‘why are we doing this, this makes no sense’.”
(H2)

In the above excerpt, the employee describes that when decisions are made far from the people who eventually execute the decisions, i.e. without employee engagement, it results in feelings of confusion or insignificance for the employee.

As already stated in the previous section, experiences of disingenuous engagement or being engaged without it having true impact decreased the motivation to engage in future occasions as is clearly stated below:

“We have a few who have the energy to [try and influence issues], but some people have tried a few times and maybe then established that they are hitting their heads against the wall and let go.” (H9)

In addition to the consequences on an emotional and personal level, employees reported *consequences for behavior or practices*. Most interviewees believed that engaging employees in issues lead to better decisions, ideas, and other concrete results, whether related to a singular project or the organization’s entire performance. A few respondents also stated that employees accepted decisions better when their understanding of the issue increased after being engaged. One interviewee explains this as follows:

“The strategy is useless unless its actualized and it is likely that for that to happen people have to change some ways of acting. They need to believe in that the strategy makes sense.” (H5)

Here, the interviewee again explains that engagement is needed when a decision must be executed by employees. They also assert that without the implementation of a strategy, which happens via the employees, the strategy is “useless”.

In general, these outcomes of engagement appear to reflect the more traditional approaches to engagement which emphasize its instrumentalist value (Johnston 2018). However, the interviewees only occasionally argued for the value of engagement with organizational-level outcomes or terms prevalent in the managerial engagement discourse, such as “top performance” or “efficiency”. In addition, none of the interviewees referred directly to statistical evidence or bottom-line values to support their views of engagement’s value – that is, arguments that are typical in the consultant employee engagement discourse (Keenoy 2014; Pieczka 2018). However, the interviewees were not part of top management and perhaps it is possible that they were thus less exposed to consultant and management discourses.

Above all, almost all employees highlighted the importance of gaining crucial viewpoints, a variety of perspectives, new knowledge, and increased understanding between teams or units. For example, an employee described how an engagement process had made one team understand the nature of another team’s work. This led to an experience of unity, instead of confrontation between the teams.

A couple respondents considered that gaining different viewpoints or utilizing the knowledge of other employees was a necessity.

“And then if something is done in a very constricted way, I argue that afterwards something comes up that should’ve been considered beforehand, but it didn’t come up because too small of a group was doing it.” (H6)

”Whether it is about a communication channel or a coffee machine or the functionality of a computer or team spirit, in these contexts the employees are ‘customers’ of the employee experience.” (H8)

The first excerpt suggests that one person or a unit is not equipped with all the necessary information to produce a desired outcome. An important aspect may be missed if alternative or varying perspectives are ignored. Some interviewees also connected engagement with the idea of customer understanding which is demonstrated in the second excerpt above. They state that employees are the “customers” who should be heard when the issue is related to them. Point of view of the employees was understood as crucial when the matter was related to their own work.

To conclude, interviewees asserted engagement’s value to be in sharing knowledge and increasing understanding within the work community, which may then lead to better work results or decisions. These reflect the more fundamental, normative arguments for the value of employee engagement. For example, Heath (2018) states that when several people align their interests and work together to accomplish a common goal, more ethical and intellectual decisions are made, and engagement contributes to creating a fully functioning society.

However, many interviewees also recognized potential negative consequences of engagement. Almost all interviewees stated that *engagement requires time*, on occasion to an excess extent. Active engagers may feel overwhelmed or exhausted. Engagement research has recognized this “dark side” of engagement. For example, employees may find engagement distressing or experience negative consequences, such as work-family conflict (Pekkala & Luoma-aho 2019; Bakker et al. 2011).

Interviewees often connected engagement’s time-consuming nature to an experience of engaging in trivial activities that stole time from “actual work” and entailed ineffective dwelling on issues.

Indeed, Juholin (2017) mentions that if responsible dialogue, an important factor in engagement, is not understood correctly, it may lead to meaningless dwelling on issues.

5.1.5 Discussion

To summarize, in this section I have examined the interviewees' understandings of the definitions and value of employee engagement as well as its possible challenges. Next, I will elucidate the main findings for my first research question that asks what are the employee understandings of engagement and its possible tensions or problems.

Firstly, interviewees' views demonstrate that employees' understandings of engagement are far more complex than the hyperbolic conceptualizations in consultant or management discourses may suggest. The interviewees include the opportunity to voice opinions, flexibility, autonomy, clear goals, and sincerity in their definitions of desired engagement. Some people's reluctance to engage, social dynamics, and undesired responses were reported as the main challenges for employee engagement efforts. Thus, in addition to various positive engagement experiences, the interviewees also recognize several challenges, potential pitfalls, and even negative outcomes of engagement.

Eminently, Arnstein's (1969/2019) "tokenistic", disingenuous engagement seems to be a well-recognized phenomenon among all interviewees, and it appeared to create strong negative emotions of being treated unfairly. A few interviewees asserted that employees are extremely sensitive and easily triggered by signs of disingenuous engagement. Furthermore, the interviewees emphasized the importance of communicating the ways in which their opinion has made an influence, instead of simply having an impact on issues. These observations suggest that employees are thoroughly aware of engagement's potential caveats, and perhaps to them, the "tokenistic" arguments of the importance of merely "being heard" are no longer relevant. Then again, the interviewees' familiarity with disingenuous engagement may also indicate the significance this type of engagement still bears.

Secondly, the wide variety of employee experiences and the multiplicity of their views about engagement definitions and its value signal that there are still challenges in defining the employee engagement concept. Academics have raised concern whether employee engagement can be considered a serious scientific construct due to the increasing hype among consultants and practitioners as well as the varied definitions introduced by scholars (Welch 2011). For example,

Johnston and Taylor (2018, 1) state that the concept of engagement seems to be “everywhere and has been used to describe just about every type of interaction.” Accordingly, in the interviews, engagement was understood to represent a range of communication forms, from sending e-mails to staff surveys, conversations, and brainstorming workshops.

This suggests that forming a common understanding of what employee engagement is and what form of engagement should be pursued may prove to be a difficult task in work communities. Especially in a large company, as the one in this case, some extent of differing working cultures are inevitable and hard to monitor. This may set a challenge for successful engagement. As Pekkala and Luoma-aho (2019) argue, balancing between multiple voices and unity will challenge future organizations.

Thirdly, the interviewees assert that being engaged at work is important and valuable. According to the respondents, engagement has both emotional and behavioral benefits as well as both individual-level, instrumental outcomes and social-level, constructivist outcomes. These include motivation and commitment as well as increased understanding between employees and gained knowledge.

However, interviewees also recognize possible negative outcomes, such as a feeling of triviality or lack of time, and challenges, such as some people’s reluctance to engage. These understandings move beyond the hyperbole of focusing only on the positive aspects of engagement in relation to organizational outcomes. Instead, they suggest that employees’ willingness to engage should not be taken for granted, and the methods by which engagement is enacted becomes crucial. Thus, in the next portion of this chapter, I will focus on the antecedents that are relevant for enacting engagement.

My first research question examines employee perspective of engagement and its possible tensions or problems. To conclude, employees recognize that there are many types and forms of engagement, and not all forms are desirable. They also recognize general challenges and possible negative outcomes to engagement. Thus, according to employee perspectives, engagement is far more complex of a concept than the hyperbolic conceptualizations in consultant or management discourses may suggest.

5.2 Antecedents of employee engagement

To answer my second research question about the role of two-way communication and dialogue in employee understandings of enacting engagement, I examine the material from the point of view of antecedents.

For engagement to succeed, what is needed in terms of actions, structure, and communication? I explore this question by categorizing the material according to the themes that emerged from the data: resources, formal meetings and informal conversations, agency and autonomy, guidance and frameworks, and a culture of open conversation.

5.2.1 Resources: time, tools, and skills

One of the main themes introduced by employees as an antecedent of engagement were resources, in the form of facilities, time, methods, professional workshop facilitators, engagement skills, or preparation.

The office workers in particular emphasized the role of either *facilitation skills* or the opportunity to use *trained facilitators* in engagement workshops. These enabled preparing for the workshops properly, maintaining the participants' interest, and anticipating possible problems related to, for instance, social dynamics. Managers and supervisors were not preferred as facilitators as the possibility of confrontation and unequal power positions was considered an issue. Thus, some interviewees believed that an outside facilitator would be a better alternative. Many interviewees also mentioned the importance of employees' knowledge of different facilitation methods or online tools as well as their possibilities to utilize them.

Interviewees also wished for *time and support* from their supervisors or management. This meant that sufficient time was reserved for discussions or possible longer engagement projects. A couple interviewees also mentioned the importance of *suitable physical facilities or online platforms*. For example, one interviewee who worked in an office environment, emphasized that when Teams was taken into use it was important to make sure that it became the main platform for working, such as sharing documents and discussing them. In this way, online conversations were more likely to occur.

5.2.2 Formal and informal conversations

In general, interviewees emphasized the opportunity to discuss issues. This included organizing *regular meetings*, where open conversation was possible, or which were dedicated to planning something as a group. This is clearly stated in the excerpt below:

“So that there would be a monthly meeting where you could go through, with the supervisor in the group, that ‘Now there has been these types of proposals, would there be something we want to improve or should we endorse this as a group and carry it forward?’” (H10)

Most supervisors aimed to organize regular meetings, and employees considered them essential for engagement as the above excerpt demonstrates. The occurrence of regular meetings appeared to depend heavily on the team.

One interviewee asserted that discussions and open conversation enabled more genuine engagement compared to the one-way nature of staff surveys:

“Then a workshop was organization for the staff. – There we really went deep into the issues. Of course, the issues were the same as the ones that had been brought up in the surveys, but in the workshop, we were able to better grab onto the causes and what had really been meant by the issues. -- So, in my opinion that was what genuine engagement is.” (H7)

The interviewee states above that after staff surveys, it had been useful to engage the respondents in discussing the results with the respondents as this way, problems were more easily explored. They assert that this type of discussion is genuine engagement. Thus, open conversation allows further exploration of issues that have been observed through one-way communication, such as staff surveys.

Face-to-face, casual encounters were also considered meaningful. This referred to small talk and chit-chat on coffee breaks as well as open conversation about ongoing issues. It was emphasized that supervisors or even top management should lead by example, thus fostering a culture where conversation could form.

5.2.3 Providing both agency and frameworks

As discussed in the first section of this chapter, the interviewees viewed autonomy and self-determination at work to be important factors of engagement. The same ideas were emphasized in relation to engagement antecedents which I will examine now.

This agency – the ability and willingness to work independently and have an influence on issues – was often introduced in opposition to stiff structures, hierarchy, and bureaucracy. Accordingly, hierarchical structures were understood as obstacles for genuine participation, as an interviewee describes in the following passage:

”Q: What factors, in your opinion, function as obstacles for being able to influence at the moment?”

A: Probably in some ways the level of hierarchy, it does, I mean in every company, when bosses make a decision, the lower ‘caste’ shouldn’t be involved in that, so to speak.” (H10)

Similarly, several supervisors and employees who had engaged others emphasized that avoiding pushing their own agenda and providing freedom to participate are key factors in enacting engagement. In general, many interviewees suggested that engagement should involve discovering ideas and solutions on your own. At the same time, this autonomy was understood as a method of avoiding disingenuous engagement.

The connection between self-determination and engagement is interesting as they are both contemporary management terms involving hyperbole. However, little research explicitly connects the two terms. When I directly asked about self-determination and engagement’s connection, two employees described it as follows:

“Even if you would think that they don’t... that on the one had engagement is about working together and on the other, self-determination is about working independently, but I still think that engagement requires that a person is active themselves. I mean, otherwise it goes a little bit so that we put up a survey and then we interpret the results, and I don’t think that that’s... that’s asking opinions, I don’t think that it’s engagement.” (H7)

“You get to or have to think things through yourself and that way, you also bring the information about how things could be done in this way or should we do things together like that -- It does, it does have an effect.” (H9)

The first excerpt suggests that active participation contributes to making engagement more dialogical and thus, self-determination is important for engagement. The second excerpt states that when an employee has independence, they introduce important information and ideas to teamwork (i.e. engagement). This excerpt includes the idea of employee activity as an obligation instead of a right. Thus, it is evident that interviewees perceive some level of *employee agency and autonomy* as decisive for employee engagement to occur successfully.

It is true that self-determination is often understood as a necessary part of contemporary working life. For instance, the increase in information has highlighted the importance of communication and communication skills, at least in knowledge work. Distribution of messages and information is not limited to managers' or other powerful actors' control, but all employees must continually share information in different communication forums which then requires autonomous behavior. (Juholin 2017.) Therefore, if knowledge sharing is an important outcome or goal of engagement, it is evident how self-determination may play an important part in engagement.

However, one supervisor emphasized that successful engagement does not mean full empowerment to subordinates or other employees participating in engaging practices. He described the definition of self-determination as follows:

“And the self-leadership or self-determinations doesn't mean that you work without a supervisor or limits or role. Perhaps it is more so that you know your goals and tasks, so you go towards them, independently motivating yourself.” (H1)

Thus, self-determination means that an employee directs themselves by understanding their work goals and by motivating themselves. Self-determination is understood as a combination of guidance and freedom.

In fact, many employees, subordinates, and supervisors alike, appeared to hope for *clear structures and frameworks* for engaging. Interviewees considered it important to have a purpose and meaning as well as shared, concrete goals in engagement activities. Otherwise, there was a danger of wasting time for a futile process with no end results. For example, one employee wanted clear rules about when decisions were in their own hands and when managerial acceptance was required. Similarly,

Juholin (2008) states that employees are motivated by explaining the meaning and larger context of their actions in engagement.

Engagement without frameworks seemed to produce other challenges as well. An employee criticized the idea system for giving people the opportunity to suggest arbitrary ideas that then had to be turned down due to lack of resources, time, or other reasons. This appears rather problematic, as another interviewee thought that the ideas proposed in the system led nowhere and this created yet another experience of ineffectual or disingenuous engagement. Therefore, clear structures and frameworks in engagement can function as another method of avoiding poor employee engagement experiences.

Additionally, many interviewees also suggested that *the openness and transparency* about engagement's purpose or the engagement process in general were antecedents of successful engagement. Yet again, it was understood as a method of avoiding a perception of disingenuity.

” – you should be very open about the goals. If we have already locked certain values and the goal of the workshop is to familiarize [employees] with them, that it is then a training session in the form of a workshop. That is a completely different matter than -- developing something together. So, it is not 'co-development and engagement' but an engaging training.” (H8)

Here an interviewee makes an important observation. They state that it is important to be open about the goals of the engagement activity. If the goal of a given workshop is to inform and familiarize employees about already-made decisions, it is more of a training session. This is different from a workshop in which employees are genuinely given the opportunity to co-create and develop something new. Hence, transparency about the goals and interests of engagement is crucial. It contributes to managing employees' expectations, and thus ensures a better engagement experience. This call for transparency is very similar to what was discussed in the previous section about communicating the influence an opinion had:

“Then if someone's contribution doesn't [end up into the final result], then one must communicate that. So, 'this did not fit into these parameters, let's look at it again later, but here it's not included.'”(H3)

Here, the interviewee highlights that it is important to explain to employees why their ideas were not considered in a certain situation. Thus, the impact of one's opinion should not be left to "hang" but should be clearly articulated afterwards.

As both excerpts above demonstrate, continuous communication about the entire engagement process, in the form of reporting, documentation, or loops of feedback between participants and engagers, is a pivotal antecedent of engagement. Communication research recognizes this connection between transparency about the process and the success of engagement. This again reflects against how Johnston and Lane (2021) differentiate between episodic and relational engagement. Relational communication is continuous, creates shared meaning, and produces relationships. In turn, in episodic engagement solutions are sought to specific issues by asking feedback or input from employees. It produces high levels of engagement but lacks similar possibilities for new knowledge, meaning-making, and relationship-building as in relational communication.

A similar categorization is made by Pekkala and Luoma-aho (2019) who divide engagement into symmetrical and asymmetrical engagement. Symmetrical engagement offers possibilities for genuine participation, and engagement is understood as a continuous process in which new questions can emerge. In turn, asymmetrical engagement occurs when an organization seeks feedback to predetermined questions and engagement is project-based.

In conclusion, both relational and symmetrical engagement include an idea of a continuous process and dialogue. These ideas are also present in the interviewees' understandings of engagement antecedents – employees appreciate continuous conversation, transparency about engagement efforts as well as clarity and autonomy. Thus, an organization may benefit from understanding engagement as a process that involves continuous feedback loops and relational, dialogical communication.

5.2.4 Culture of open conversation

Most interviewees mentioned a culture of open conversation as an antecedent of engagement. The desired conversation culture entailed openness and respect, and *a lack of excessive hierarchy*. The significance of leadership culture for the overall culture of an organization was emphasized by several interviewees:

“-- in my opinion we clearly had a view that the supervisor must know all the same things as its whole team. That they are the one who has all the knowledge of the team and then they are the one -- who have the final say. But fortunately, in my opinion, we have been able to move away from that thinking -- it is not good with engagement if in every issue we turn to the supervisor.” (H7)

Here, the employee describes how before the team or the organization believed that supervisor alone carries all relevant knowledge. They find it fortunate that this is no longer the case, but instead, people’s autonomy is embraced. Thus, managers and supervisors should encourage independent thinking instead of setting unnecessary hierarchies as depicted in the above passage.

In general, according to the interviewees, the manager’s role was to *act as an example* and at times to *participate* in engagement activities themselves. For example, some interviewees wished that managers would be more visible in conversations, whether they were online or face-to-face. Some supervisors stated that it helped them to increase engagement activities in their own team when their respective managers showed that they also engaged others and encouraged different point of views to be expressed.

Some interviewees asserted that engagement occurred in their team naturally, as part of the culture. In general, changing culture was considered difficult – it was connected to traditions and habits, the “small things”, and people’s understandings of managerial power. This is demonstrated in the following passages:

“I believe that [the organizational culture] has a huge impact on everything. For example, it is depicted in whether we have cameras on in meetings. If one person has the camera on and all the others don’t, that one person will eventually turn it off as well. So, it is about the small things, such as this.” (H8)

”—maybe in [organization] such as this where we have a long history and traditions and maybe before the leadership model has also been that the supervisor always knows best. It has been built up in a way that the supervisor will then tell us what to do. And now this world turns upside down, I’ve brought it up as well that ‘let’s turn this thing upside down’” (H1)

The second excerpt suggests that managerial thinking needs to change radically for a culture to change – engagement may still be an example of a new way of working and leadership, even for an organization who actively pursues to engage its employees.

However, one interviewee emphasized that a permissive culture of open conversation does not happen by itself, and thus it is possible to build one with planning. Promoting open conversation can be scripted into events as is explained here:

”I mean, you have to construct it and script it if you wish to generate conversation. If it is not deeply part of the culture, it won’t happen on its own. -- I always agree beforehand that if no one raises a hand then you or you will ask a question and then it starts from there, little by little.” (H8)

Respect meant that everyone’s ideas and thoughts were listened to, taken seriously, and not mocked or dismissed. A positive and encouraging atmosphere for new ideas and different opinions, genuine interest in and listening to what everyone have to say as well as knowing one’s co-workers well were considered important factors in creating a permissive culture.

In addition, interviewees appreciated *the expression of critique and challenging questions* because it enabled the generation of better ideas and thus, development of the entire organization. However, a few respondents emphasized that one should be cautious with critique as it can easily turn into fruitless negativity, especially in online conversation forums. Therefore, critique must include respect towards others and a willingness to compromise. For example, one interviewee thought that only respectful critique provided genuine dialogue.

Respect, openness, permissiveness, and willingness to accept challenging questions and critique are all essential factors of dialogue. Alternative point of views are permitted, and conversation is based on respectful turn-taking (Alhanen 2016; Lane & Kent 2016). Allowing critique may reveal new information and important viewpoints (Juholin 2017). In Kemppainen & Laajalahti’s (2016) study, employees hoped for management practices to emphasize shared power among professionals, instead of pursuing hierarchical structures.

However, the interviewees did not explicitly mention trust as a factor in the creation of open culture, even though this is often understood as an important aspect of dialogic communication (e.g. Pekkala & Luoma-aho 2019; Taylor & Kent 2014). They did refer to this implicitly by stating that it is important to feel that opinions are heard, taken seriously, and not ridiculed. Still, I find it interesting that trust was not explicitly stated as an antecedent of open culture and engaging.

5.2.5 Discussion

My second research question asks what is the role of dialogic communication in enacting engagement in employee understanding. The findings in the second portion of the chapter suggest that according to the interviewees, dialogue and two-way communication do have a role in building and enacting engagement. Respect, permissiveness, allowing different opinions, and continuous communication were understood as important factors in creating a culture that encourages engagement practices. The process-nature of engagement was also recognized – engagement efforts can be in vain if dialogue does not continue after the “main” engagement stage. Communication about *how* opinions are heeded appeared to be important to most of the interviewees.

However, it is crucial to note that dialogue and a culture of openness are not the only antecedents for successful engagement. Interviewees reported the need for structure and frameworks as well as material and immaterial resources to both engage others and to be engaged. For example, the skills in facilitating workshops or discussions were understood as important factors in successful engagement. Additionally, participating in trivial engagement activities with no defined goals or direction frustrated many employees. Therefore, in addition to an open culture and dialogue, it is important to construct a framework and give meaning to engagement activities, as well as manage social dynamics that may hinder engagement goals.

To conclude, the findings in this section suggest that achieving desired engagement is not easy and may demand significant changes in the perspectives of managers, and others who aim to engage. For example, accepting engagement as a process may be a challenge, as it also means allocating sufficient time for it. One supervisor mentioned that sometimes “one ends up having to change one’s own opinions” after engaging others and hearing their viewpoints. Thus, sharing power and accepting differing views demands great risk-taking from the organization as it may have to discuss opinions that are contradictory to organizational aims (Lane & Kent 2018).

6. Conclusions

Employee engagement is a topical theme in today's working life and management literature. However, previous engagement research and practitioner discussions have been dominated by simplistic and instrumental arguments of employee engagement's benefits and a focus on outcomes at an individual and organizational level.

The problems associated with the narrowly defined conceptualizations and instrumental approaches demonstrate that we need a more multidimensional understanding of engagement. For instance, the hyperbole surrounding the concept has obscured the relevance of power relations that are at the core of the employee engagement concept. Employee perspectives and voice have been scarce in employee engagement discourse, and the important role of internal communications for enacting engagement has not been thoroughly recognized.

Based on these observations, I conducted a case study in a Finnish energy company, interviewing 10 employees from different positions and departments. With the method of qualitative content analysis, I examined my interview material to explore the employee experiences and understandings of employee engagement: its definition, value, and challenges as well as the role of two-way communication in enacting engagement.

My research questions are the following:

1. How do employees understand the concept of employee engagement and what tensions or problems can be attached to it?
2. What is the role of two-way, dialogical internal communication in the employee understandings of enacting engagement?

To answer my first research question, the results of the study suggest that employees recognize many benefits as well as challenges related to employee engagement. According to the interviewees, successful engagement includes flexibility, autonomy, clear goals, sincerity, and the opportunity to voice opinions. This results in increased motivation, commitment, meaning, knowledge sharing, better ideas, and understanding between participants. However, employees also listed challenges and negative outcomes of employee engagement. Engagement may be time-consuming, disingenuous, or trivial engagement cause feelings of futility, some people do not wish to engage, and some engagement activities result in unnecessary negativity.

All interviewees emphasized the importance of having the opportunity to influence and genuinely participate in a work community. Previous management practices of strict hierarchy were no longer desired. This opinion was shared among the office workers and employees working in power plants.

The findings demonstrate that employee understandings of engagement are far more complex than the hyperbolic conceptualizations in previous research and discourses suggest. Both benefits and challenges of engagement are recognized, and the value of engagement lays in various outcomes. The “tokenistic” nature of disingenuous engagement is not appreciated.

However, the employees had multiple understandings of engagement and forming a cohesive image of them was a challenge. For instance, some employees described desired engagement as dialogic conversation, others as one-directional informing. This may suggest that the role of a work community’s culture is significant in creating successful engagement – the interviewees were from different departments and teams and reported differences in practices related to employee engagement. Then again, the wide variety in views may also be a demonstration of the struggle that academic research has encountered in trying to establish engagement as a unique scientific concept. Forming a common understanding of employee engagement appears challenging.

When considering my second research question, employee perspectives demonstrate that dialogue and two-way communication have an important role in enacting engagement. Respect, permissiveness, allowing different opinions, and continuous communication are important factors in creating a culture that encourages engagement practices. However, dialogue is not the only antecedent for successful engagement. For example, clear goals and structures, sufficient resources, and regular meetings were also considered important.

The employee understandings presented in this thesis bear interesting implications for organizations and future research. Firstly, employee engagement based on dialogue requires balance in many fronts. Organizations must give space for multiple voices and criticism so that a permissive culture of open conversation can form. This challenges the former models of corporate communications where emphasis was put on uniformity, the control of messages, and an idea of an organization with only one voice. Additionally, empowering employee communications demands autonomous employees, but interviewees appreciated both agency and autonomy as well as structures and guidance in relation to engagement. Therefore, organizations must continue to find balance in

combining differing cultures and voices, unity and diversity, criticism and respect, and agency and guidance.

Secondly, narrow definitions of engagement no longer suffice, and new perspectives must be sought. Disingenuous engagement simply does not appear to succeed. Then again, despite interviewees recognizing the dangers of disingenuous engagement they noted that not all employees wish to frequently engage or demand that decision-making power should be entirely given to employees. Instead, interviewees seemed to emphasize openness, transparency, and discussions about the purpose of engagement and the ways in which their opinion had mattered. Thus, genuine employee engagement appears to refer to dialogue and openness about issues instead of full decision-making power.

Engagement and communication research should also explore new aspects of employee engagement. For example, the role of self-determination in enacting engagement should be further studied as it was discussed by multiple interviewees. In turn, despite being a popular topic in organizational psychology, trust was not explicitly mentioned by the employees in relation to engagement. The connection of trust and engagement should be examined further.

To some degree, employee engagement has emerged because of a shift from stiff hierarchies predominant in the former working life towards more responsible and equal practices in organizations. Thus, it is crucial that engagement is not observed separately from power relations, and employee understandings are included in the discussions of the concept's definitions and value.

Finally, academic research, consultancies constructing engagement surveys, and different organizations engaging employees should not forget to listen to employees' views about engagement. They reveal what successful engagement means in practice: conversations, meetings, presence and listening, clear goals and frameworks, continuous communication, and genuine consideration of employees' views. Workplaces need a deeper understanding of engagement and resources as well as knowledge and skills to pursue it. Furthermore, in addition to the relevance of engagement for the individual and organizations, its value for the work community should be explored and recognized to a greater degree. Here, social sciences and communication research, in particular, may bear an invaluable role.

7. References

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Appendix

Interview questions

(self-translated from Finnish)

Background questions

- Can you tell me a bit about yourself and describe your background, work-wise and education-wise?
- What do you do at work? What is your typical workday or workweek like?
- How long have you worked in this organization?
- Do you have subordinates? How many? How long have you been in a managerial position?

The experience and definitions of engagement

- Can you describe a situation where you felt you were engaged, in the general organization or your own work community?
- Can you describe the ways in which employees are engaged in the organization, in your opinion?
- Can you describe the ways in which employees are engaged in your own team? How have you engaged other employees or your subordinates?

The meaning / importance of engagement

- What kind of need/desire do you have for bringing up your thoughts in the work community?
- In what kind of situations do you think it is important to engage employees? In what kind of situations it is not important?
- Have you noticed that there would be employees who do not wish to engage? What do you think about that?
- In your opinion, what can be achieved through engagement? Can it have negative outcomes, what kind? What do you yourself think that you “get” from engaging?

The methods of engagement

- What kind of practices or communication channels is there for engaging employees, either on the organizational level or in your own team?
- Which issues are important so that engagement succeeds? Can it / in what ways can it fail?

- What kind of things do you need yourself so that you are able to bring up your thoughts at work?