Positive Intervention at Work: A Longitudinal Pilot Study of Intentional Compassionate Acts of Kindness (ICAK) on Employee Engagement in Service Employees

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2

Introduction

Employee engagement is key.

- **Employee engagement** is “a positive, fulfilling, and work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption” (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004, p. 295).
  - Linked to **positive organizational outcomes**, such as low turnover, employee performance, customer satisfaction, and financial performance (Macey & Schneider, 2008; Christian et al., 2011; Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2009; Vance, 2006; Wagner & Harter, 2006; Czarnowsky, 2008; Ketter, 2008).
  - However, employees have been seen to perform at suboptimal levels due to disengagement (Wright & McMahan, 2011).
    - Estimated to cost U.S. businesses **300 billion dollars per years in lost productivity** (Fleming, Coffman, & Harter, 2005).
There are many ways to increase employee engagement, such as acts of kindness (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2010).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual-based Interventions</th>
<th>Organizational-based Interventions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Behavioral</strong></td>
<td><strong>Volitional</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being kind, Practicing virtues</td>
<td>Setting goals, Increasing resilience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- An **act of kindness intervention** is intentional, individual, and behavioral. When it is added to one’s job, it becomes an organizational-based relational job design intervention.
- A job can be designed to hone in on **prosocial motivation** (Grant, 2007, 2008a, 2008b).
Introduction

The research on Acts of Kindness is sparse but with promising results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acts of Kindness Built on Broaden &amp; Build Theory (Fredrickson, 2001)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Life</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjective well-being (Lyubomirsky, Tkach, &amp; Sheldon, 2004; Tkach, 2005),</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-acceptance (Tkach, 2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness and gratefulness (Otake et al., 2006)</td>
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</table>
Introduction

We looked at the relationship between intentional compassionate acts of kindness (ICAK) & employee engagement in service employees.

Objectives

1. To empirically test the ICAK on employee engagement relationship
2. To examine the process mechanisms
3. To observe effects over time from pre- to post-intervention
Introduction

Our hypotheses across our three objectives.

1. To empirically test the ICAK on employee engagement relationship

H1: A positive relationship between number of ICAK performed and employee engagement.

2. To examine the process mechanisms

H2a-c: A positive relationship between number of ICAK performed and employee engagement through the inducement of positive affect at work.

H3: Prosocial motivation would moderate the relationship between number of ICAK performed and employee engagement.

3. To observe effects over time from pre- to post-intervention

H4: Prosocial motivation levels will endure pre- and post-intervention.

H5a-c: Employee engagement, number of ICAK, and positive affect would increase through each phase.
Methods
Six-week longitudinal A-B-A time series design with three phases.

1. T0: Pre-test
2. T1: Intervention
3. T2: Post-test
Methods

We recruited restaurant employees to voluntarily participate.

- **Population**

- **Sample Participants**
  - Quick-service restaurant employees ($n = 26$) in Southern California that were English or Spanish-speaking over 18 years.
  - 65% of all the restaurant’s employees. Attrition: 19% of the initial sample.
  - 69.20% female and 30.80% male employees.
  - Avg. age was 25.64 years.
  - Customer-facing with most of their time in the front-of-house (FOH; 73%) or not customer-facing and worked only in the back-of-house (BOH; 27%).

- **Recruitment**
  - Flyers, in-person, and email sent by business owner invitation to info. session.
  - 15 min. info session on the study at all-staff meeting.
  - “Service employee experience”
  - Voluntary and not related to any employee bonuses.
  - Compensated their normal work wages.
  - Incentivized with a raffle for a chance to win cash prizes that ranged from $50-$150.
## Methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Measure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IV: Intentional Compassionate Acts of Kindness (iCak)</td>
<td>An intentional act of kindness of which someone notices another person’s need or suffering, empathetically feels for the person, and acts in a manner intended to meet the need or ease the suffering (adopted by Lilius et al., 2008).</td>
<td>• iCak cards included: daily positive affect (6 items), work engagement (6 items), and iCak (13 items) measures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DV: Employee Engagement</td>
<td>“A positive, fulfilling, and work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption” (Schaufeli &amp; Bakker, 2004, p. 295).</td>
<td>• From participants on bi-weekly study cards: 6 adapted items of the Utrecht Work-Engagement Scale UWES (Schaufeli et al., 2006). Xanthopoulou (2009) included two items per dimension.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediating Variable: Positive Affect</td>
<td>Work-related positive emotions are described as relatively intense, short-lived affective experiences that are focused on specific objects or situations at work (Gray and Watson, 2002)</td>
<td>• From participants on bi-weekly study cards: Job-Related Affective Well-Being Scale (Van Katwyk et al., 2000; shortened to 6 items by Schaufeli and Van Rhenen, 2006).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderating Variable: Prosocial Motivation</td>
<td>Prosocial motivation is the desire to expend effort in order to benefit other people (Grant, 2008a)</td>
<td>• From participants on initial survey: Prosocial Motivation Scale (Grant, 2009; 5 items).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Methods

The conceptual model and measures mapped out.

ICAK
- Gestures of emotional support
- Giving material goods
- Providing time or flexibility (Lee & Allen; 200 OCBI - 8 items; 5 tailored to org)

Positive Affect
JAWS (shortened to 6 items by Schaufeli and Van Rhenen, 2006)

Work Engagement
UWES (Schaufeli et al., 2006; Xanthopoulou, 2009 6 item shortened version)

Prosocial Motivation
(5 items, Grant & Sumanth, 2009)

H1
H2a
H2c
H3

H2a – Employee engagement to increase
H5a – Number of ICAKs to increase
H5c – Positive affect to increase

H4 – Prosocial Motivation to endure
Results

1. To empirically test the ICAK on employee engagement relationship

   H1: A positive relationship between number of ICAK performed and employee engagement.

2. To examine the process mechanisms

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   H4: Prosocial motivation levels will endure pre- and post-intervention.

   H5a-c: Employee engagement, number of ICAK, and positive affect would increase through each phase.
Results

Preliminary analyses

- All variables were normally distributed.
- Variables that were relatively skewed were within an acceptable range (from .82 to 1.9), and there were no particular outliers.
- Prosocial motivation at pre-test was $M = 6.59$, $SD = .42$ and at post-test was $M = 6.22$, $SD = .77$.
- Amongst day-level variables on survey cards that were aggregated by study phase, all were normally distributed with skewness in an acceptable range of (.82 to 1.9)

Table 1. Day-level measures through T0, T1, and T2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>T0</th>
<th>T1</th>
<th>T2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Engagement</td>
<td>4.81</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>.87**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Positive Affect</td>
<td>4.84</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>.88**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Emotional Support</td>
<td>13.01</td>
<td>8.83</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Time Flexibility</td>
<td>11.33</td>
<td>5.22</td>
<td>.67**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Material Goods</td>
<td>4.84</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>.70**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. M = Mean, SD = Standard deviation, *p < .05, **p < .01
Results

H1: Relationship was supported at T0.

- Regression analysis controlled for age, gender, work team (FOH or BOH), tenure.

# of ICAK Total
- Time and Flexibility
- Emotional Support
- Material Goods

(β = .45, p = .04**)

Employee Engagement

Note: p < .10*, p ≤ .05**, p ≤ .01***, p < .001****
Results

H2a-c: Positive affect mediation was supported at T0.
H3: Prosocial moderation was not supported.

(Barron & Kearny, 1986)
The same mediation was present in the relationship between material goods and employee engagement.

(Barron & Kearny, 1986)
### Results

Interesting results across time and different groups of employees using repeated samples $t$-test.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prosocial Motivation (H4)</th>
<th>Employee Engagement (H5a)</th>
<th># of ICAK (H5b)</th>
<th>Positive Affect (H5c)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Significant decrease</td>
<td>- No change in whole sample</td>
<td>- Significant decrease in ICAK throughout study</td>
<td>- No change over time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Means difference of 2.25 ($t$ (19) = 2.60, $p = .02**$) from pre- to post-test</td>
<td>- Significant increase in Customer-facing (FOH) &amp; scheduled to work at least half of the workweek</td>
<td>- Mean decrease of 8.06 ($t$ (25) = -5.83, $p = .007***$)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Low levels of engagement at baseline</td>
<td>- Material goods</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- T0 to T1 with mean decrease of 2.80 ($t$ (25) = -5.83, $p &lt; .001$)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- T1 to T2 by mean decrease of 1.18 ($t$ (25) = -2.30, $p = .030$)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $p < .10^*$, $p < .05^{**}$, $p < .01^{***}$, $p < .001^{****}$
Results

Engagement increased in employees who were customer-facing (FOH) & scheduled to work at least half of the workweek from T0 to T1.

Note: p < .10*, p < .05**, p < .01***, p < .001****
Results

Engagement increased in employees with low levels of engagement at baseline throughout the study.

Note: p < .10*, p < .05**, p < .01***, p < .001****
Discussion

We were able to support the acts of kindness on employee engagement relationship, however we had some limitations...

- Small sample size for pilot
- Not all employees within the organization participated
- May have increased extrinsic motivation and decreased intrinsic motivation toward ICAK by mandating an ICAK a shift & offering a cash incentive to participate → Decreased prosocial motivation.
  - Researchers differ on what’s better counting ICAKS vs. performing ICAKS intervention (Otakeet al., 2006; Lyubomirsky, Tkach,& Sheldon, 2004; Tkach; 2005).
- We may have unintentionally stifled material good ICAKS after T0 → Lack of intervention effect on whole sample over time.
  - Intervention narrative of “1 MG ICAK a shift at most”, which was implicit even in the post-test T2 phase.
Discussion

Directions for future research

- Larger sample and different sites to compare findings across groups (e.g., control, counting ICAKs intervention, performing ICAKs intervention).
- Examine counting number of ICAK vs. asking participants to perform an ICAK.
- Consider asking participants to free-hand their recollection of ICAKs throughout the day.
- Use technology instead of paper cards.
- Three instead of six weeks may suffice.
- Appropriate incentives & promoting meaningfulness to keep from hindering intrinsic motivation to act prosocial (Gagne & Deci, 2005).
- Explore under what conditions positive attributes (e.g., prosocial motivation) change pre- and post-interventions.
- Learn which types of ICAKs are more likely to affect engagement in different contexts and industries, e.g., service-providing knowledge work, manufacturing, etc.
Discussion

*Implications for practitioners*

- Weigh potential costs to the employee and business of such interventions prior to implementation.
  - What’s the ideal number of ICAKs or material goods to give away before diminishing return?
- Offer interventions to employees with low levels of engagement based on the results (Ouweneel et al., 2013)
- Tailor ICAK interventions to be most beneficial for the workplace context.
Questions?

Thank you!
Appendix

Supplementary Details
Introduction

Competition for service talent is fierce.

- Service providers depend on their human capital to deliver quality customer service, which leads to customer loyalty (Salanova, Agut, & Peiró, 2005) and, in turn, impacts revenue (Williams & Naumann, 2011).

- Increasing competition for customer service talent and retention through engagement
  - The service-providing sectors have seen an increasing trend in the last decade and will continue to rise at an escalating rate (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, Henderson, 2013).
  - Customer demands of standard service have elevated (American Express, 2012).
  - 2013 Fair Minimum Wage Act
Introduction

Methods

Average employee demographic snapshot in our sample (n=26)

- Single Female
- English-speaking of Latino descent born in the USA
- 26 years old
- Some college
- 11 months tenure (in March)
- Part-time team-member who works less than 30 hours a week
## Methods

### Team demographic profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Front-of-House (73%)</th>
<th>Back-of-House (27%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• English-speaking of Caucasian descent born in the USA</td>
<td>• Spanish-speaking of Hispanic descent born in USA or Mexico</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Single, 22 years old</td>
<td>• Single, 37 years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 2 year college degree</td>
<td>• Some college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 10 months tenure (in March)</td>
<td>• 12 months tenure (in March)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Part-time = 79% Full-time = 21%</td>
<td>• Full-time = 100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Team member = 79% Team leader = 21%</td>
<td>• Team leader = 57% Team member = 43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Female = 79%, Male = 21%</td>
<td>• Male = 57% Female = 43%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Results

### Marginally Significant to Significant Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Antecedents: Agreeableness predicts engagement</th>
<th>$r$</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
<th>Effect Size</th>
<th>$p$-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Antecedents: Negative Affect predicts engagement</td>
<td>-.38</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antecedents: Conscientiousness predicts engagement</td>
<td>-.47</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intervention: T0-T1 Change in engagement for FOH, 6+ (repeated t-test)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$\eta^2 = .50$ (sml-mod)</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intervention: T0-T1 Change in engagement for Low EE baseline (repeated t-test)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$\eta^2 = .73$ (mod-lrg)</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intervention: T0-T2 Change in engagement for Low EE baselines (Wilcoxon paired)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$r = .51$ (lrg)</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distal Outcomes Trends: Engagement predicts Intent to Stay</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distal Outcomes Trends: Engagement predicts Team Effectiveness</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distal Outcomes Trends: T0-T1 Increase in Self-Rated Employee Performance (repeated t-test)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$\eta^2 = .29$ (sml)</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distal Outcomes Trends: Self-rated Employee Performance correlated with Team Effectiveness</td>
<td>T1 &amp; T2 = .40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&lt; .05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distal Outcomes Trends: Team Effectiveness correlated with Positive Affect</td>
<td>T1 = .43; T2 = .48</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&lt; .05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>