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When the going get tough: Resilience's role in employee engagement

Muhammad Taufiq Amir
Bakrie University, Jakarta – Indonesia
taufiq.amir@bakrie.ac.id

Abstract

The main aim of the present study is to argue in support the model of resilience's role in employee engagement. It reviews literature on research evidence that showing the connections between the two concepts. Resilience is seen as developable capacity as positive organizational scholarship and positive organizational behavior suggest. The study discusses and concludes that there are potential relationships at dimensional level: between perseverance, meaning making, positive emotion, and commitment to growth and absorption, dedication and vigor. The implications and further research are discussed.

Keyword: Resilience; employee engagement

1. Introduction

Today's turbulence business environment that contains many pressures is always challenging for the organization and its employees. Employees have to adapt too many changes, improve their capabilities while still have to achieve demanding targets. These difficulties may have consequences on their engagement.

Engagement is a condition where employee experience a psychological connection with the works, committed to the high performance and aligned to the goal of the organization. Schaufeli (2002) posits that engaged employee have a strong dedication to the organization reflected in high involvement to attempts for organizational advancement. Employees who engaged see not only their role in term of responsibility (Hakanen, Schaufeli, & Ahola, 2008), but also the commitment to provide the best efforts expected.

The high level of commitment at work as a result of engagement is consistent with Bakker et al's (2008) study. They found that engaged employee is energetic and exhibit a positive attitude, initiative, and a high level of commitment (Bakker et al., 2008; Saks, 2011). Burke & El-kot (2010) found engagement influences work motivation, productivity in many work fields. The level of employee engagement may predict their performance, and this will help managers in improving institutional performance. Although several factors like competency, leadership, work environment has been studied in predicting employee performance in Indonesia, engagement seems overlooked.

Besides affecting engagement, over workload of employee may also produce stress. This will lower employee performance and avoid them in reaching their target. Studies on burn-out reveals that overloaded employees will dysfunctional (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004b) and this may risk their engagement level. They need a capacity that buffer the negative stress to maintain or improve their engagement level. Resilience may potentially has an important role.

Positive Organizational Behavior (POB) and Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) have a certain perspective on resilience. POB and POS are based on positive psychology that focusing on strength capacity of individual, and resilience is one of the vital elements (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003; Luthans, 2002a; Luthans & Youssef, 2007). Although previous studies demonstrate that resilience is important in innovation (Amir, 2014; Rothbard, 2001), in entrepreneurship (Der Foo, Uy, & Baron, 2009; Jensen, 2003; Jensen & Luthans, 2006), there is no study that specifically focusing on engagement, particularly on organizational

context. Investigate the relationship of resilience and engagement may provide new perspectives on organizational behavior and management field.

This study explores how employee resilience – the capacity to persevere under adverse event at work, and bounce back after difficulties – contributes on his or her engagement. The main thesis is resilience play an important role facilitating engagement, where then in turn could improve employee and organizational performance. After first briefly summarizing the concept of employee engagement and resilience in the context of organization, the study proposes the connection at level of dimensions. It concludes with managerial implications and further research agenda.

2. Literature review

2.1. Employee engagement

Employee engagement is one of the concepts that increasingly popular discussed by managers and practitioners. Since Kahn (1990) coined the term of "employee engagement" and characterized it as the employee presence psychologically in doing their role in organization, this concept continually attracts many parties. Rothbard (2001) also emphasizes that psychological present is reflected in two main elements; attention and absorption. Attention refers to the cognition and time availability that individual spends when thinking about their works while absorption refers to the intensity of focusing of one's work.

Some studies synonymize employee engagement with "organizational commitment", particularly that involve the affective commitment and commitment continuity (Bakker, Albrecht, & Leiter, 2011). Engagement is also connoted as involvement, work enthusiastically and even with something that closely related to "workaholic" (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010). Coherent with these, Maslach & Leiter (2008) suggest employee engagement involves with believe and psychological energy at work. While Schaufeli & Bakker (2004a) define it as positive thought that fulfilling and it involves vigor, dedication and absorbed in work. The latter conceptualization of engagement is used in this study. With all these properties, employees passionate about their workand dedicate their effort and time to pursue organizational achievements (Bakker et al., 2008).

Besides leading to dedication and commitment, *employee* engagement also influences employee loyalty. In their yearly study since 2010, Gallup Consultant found that engaged employee are more loyal employee compared to who are "not engaged" or "actively disengaged" (n.d, 2013). Furthermore, engaged employee more proud about their organization, have high intrinsic motivation and more trustful to their leader supervisor (Chalofsky & Krishna, 2009).

2.2. Recilience in general

Many studies see resilience as similar as patient, persistence and coping from difficulties (Youssef, 2004). Most of the definitions represent the individual capability to survive and adapt after experiencing difficulties and challenges (Yu & Zhang, 2007).

In its early development, many psychologists consider resilience as a personal trait (Block & Block, 1980). Further development from this concept leads to the view that resilience as developable capacity (Masten, 2001). Masten and Reed (2002, p. 75) define it as "a class of phenomena characterized by patterns of positive adaptation in the context of significant adversity and risk". Consistent with this, Bonano (2004, p. 20) also posits that individual have paths to improve their resilience, both cognitively and emotionally. However, Luthar, et. al., (i.e Luthar, Cichetti, & Becker, 2000) suggest individual should has substantial adverse events to claim their resilience.

2.3. Resilience as part of POB and POS

Organizations are increasingly dynamics and demanding so that resilience is "a must" for managers (Youssef, 2004). Employee often faces situations full of stress, unfriendly and high requirement of the job. The discussion of

resilience in POS and POB are developing to handle these challenges. POS and POB aim to improve the effectiveness of organization, by identifying the individual strength including resilience, and nurturing individual to perform extraordinary (Nelson & Cooper, 2007, p. 3). Luthans (2002a) is also suggest that resilience is more as *state-like* or developable, rather than a trait-like.

2.4. Developable resilience

At the individual level, POS and POB tend to see resilience as a dynamic process, not as something "fixed". Sutcliffe and Vogus (2003, p. 96) for instance, consider resilience as a capacity in restrain negative impact of problems and make individual well-functioning. More recently, focusing on the work context, Caza and Milton (2011, p. 896) define that resilience is a developmental trajectory that demonstrated by competence in handling difficulties at work and growth professionally.

Comparable to the developmental view, Reivich and Shatte (2003) characterize resilience as a capacity to cope with challenges while gaining a capability, experience and relationship and new meaning in life. Together with Masten and Reed (2002) and Bonano (2004), these studies suggest that resilience could be developable despite there has not been yet verified empirically.

Luthans and colleagues (Luthans, 2002b; Luthans, Youssef, & Avolio, 2007) tried to demonstrate preliminary evidences. Luthans et al. (2006) uses experimental intervention to develop resilience in students and managers. The intervention suggests resilience is found increasing significantly in experiment group, compared to the control group.

This founding is consistent with the idea that resilience is not only occurred when responding significant adverse event, but it is also could be developed in handling simple challenges in our life (e.g. Masten & Reed, 2002; Yu & Zhang, 2007). When individuals develop their internal and external resources, they improve their potential to coping from future problems (Richardson, 2002). The view that resilience is developable, both in routine and daily activities is assumed in this study. Amir's (2014) definition, *an individual's capacity to respond to adversity and challenge in ways that strengthen and develop him or herself to become a better person* is used as foundation in this study. This definition implies that there is a potential relationship between resilience and engagement. Four potential dimensions are suggested: *Perseverance*, *Commitment to Growth*, *Positive Emotion,* and *Meaning Making*.

Perseverance is defined here as *willingness to face adversity by continual struggle and self-discipline.* It describes the quality of not giving up when facing difficulties. It also implies self-reliance, a belief that by keeping going one's goals will eventually be reached, and one's self will benefit. Persevering individuals tend to endure in the face of adversity (Markman, Baron, & Balkin, 2005).

Commitment to growth is defined here as *facing adversity by becoming a stronger person.* Resilient individuals see difficulties as challenges or opportunities to strengthen and improve themselves (Richardson, 2002; Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003) by growing and increasing their capabilities (Reivich & Shatte, 2003).

Positive emotion is characterized as *maintaining a positive outlook when facing adversity*. In adversity, positive emotions help individuals broaden the scope of their cognition and attention (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005). Individuals become more creative, viewing problems or difficulties from a wider perspective and generating better solutions without panic or stress (Fredrickson, 2001; Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005; Luthans, Youssef, & Rawski, 2011).

Meaning making is suggested as *actively reflecting on and affirming personal values when facing problems.* Employees proactively seek to understand the nature and value of work in their lives through continuous sense - making. Using Huevel et al's (2009) model, Amir and Standen (2012) suggest meaning making involves integrating challenging or ambiguous situations into a framework of personal meaning, using conscious, value-based reflection (van den Heuvel et al., 2009, p. 509).

3. Resilience as potential antecedent of engagement

Large body of research has been revealed antecedents of employee engagement. For instance, Maslach et. al., model (2008) using social exchange theory (SET), explaining the employee interactions with parties in organization, creating trust, loyalty and reciprocal commitment. As organization provides economic and

emotional resources to the employee, then employee feeling obliged to "re-pay", including by being engaged. Employee devotes their physical, emotional and cognitive resources.

Gruman and Saks (2011) for example found that perceived organizational support as an important antecedent. Similarly, perceived supervisor support (Saks, 2006) and rewards and recognition (Maslach & Leiter, 2008), arise as antecedents of employee engagement. On the other side, resilience as a capacity has not yet been viewed as an antecedent (see figure 1).
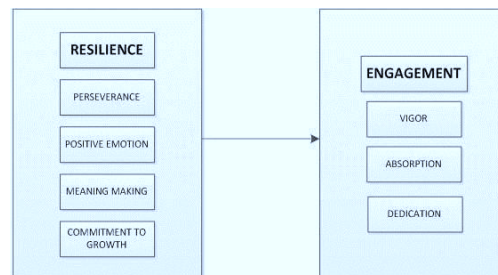

Fig.1 Relationship between resilience and engagement

The explanations of the relationship – from four suggested dimensions of resilience and the three dimensions of engagement are detailed below.

Positive emotion element of resilience helps individual dedicating their effort and time at work. Positive emotion easing the tension may arise psychologically and physically (Fredrickson, 2009) when individual in engaged stage for relatively long period. Recently Sweetman and Luthans (2010), using Fredrickson's (Fredrickson, 2003) concept of broaden-and built theory suggest that positive emotion may contribute to engagement in term of self-reinforcing upward spiral of outcomes. On the other hand, the same theory may explain mechanism of "undo" in decreasing disengagement especially when individuals exposed to negative emotion producing events such as burnout or job demand.

Persevering employee have a sense of responsibility to continue and finish her task (Markman et al., 2005) and willing to provide the dedication. Likewise, meaning making or commitment to growth element may have a role when individual absorbed in their works. Commitment to growth leads employee to experience learning and developing (Blatt, 2009) so that ignoring about time and the weariness that may occurred. Their strong belief in their ability to overcome challenges directs them to exert a high level of effort and endurance in the face of setbacks and failures, and to look continually for solutions. A desire to take personal responsibility and increase control over one's circumstances is consistent with the notion of resilience as facing adversity with the intention to grow.

Commitment to growth here is conceived holistically as a proactive attitude towards facing adversity with the intention to become a better-adapted and integrated person. Again, these characters may function as driver for individual in dedicating their efforts. Resilient individuals see difficulties as challenges or opportunities to strengthen and improve themselves (Richardson, 2002; Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003) by growing and increasing their capabilities (Maitlis, 2011; Reivich & Shatte, 2003). Spreitzer et al. (2012) found thriving individuals intentionally face adversity to learn something new about them, and are resourceful and determined. These characteristics may maintain absorption and dedication elements of engagement.

Meaning at work involves the idea that employees find the content or practice of their work valuable to others or themselves and are consequently energized to perform well (Wrzesniewski, 2003). Employees actively create meaning in their work by attempting to improve its content or social context (Wrzesniewski, 2003). As an active and conscious process rather than the automatic processes of sense-making, it could facilitate individuals in maintaining their dedication or absorption. Changing meaning may also provide additional energy to the employee. When employee consciously reflect on ambiguous or challenging events to revise their personal meanings, values and goals, helping them face setbacks keep up the work. Instead of giving up they see difficulties as a personal

calling in which they are deeply involved and which are consequently in some sense pleasurable (Wagnild & Young, 1993; Wrzesniewski, 2003).

4. Conclusion

This study helps meet the challenges of work demand and intense pressure of today's workplace by proposing the potential role of resilience in maintaining and improving employee engagement. It has discussed the dimensions to dimensions relationship; between positive emotion, perseverance, commitment to growth and meaning making as dimensions of resilience, and vigor, absorption and dedication as the elements of work engagement. Managers should consider practical ways in developing resilience capacity, such as individual interventions like "thriving" (Spreitzer, Porath, & Gibson, 2012), "positivity portfolio" (Fredrickson, 2009), or "happiness" (Lyubomirsky, 2007). The needed next step will be to use empirical tests of the proposed relationship and to examine fully the nature of causation between the two variables.

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