Improving Employee Performance through Engagement in Higher Education

Advancement: An Evidence-Informed Approach

by

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Capstone

submitted to the Faculty of the

Peabody College of Education and Human Development of Vanderbilt University

in fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

in

Leadership and Learning in Organizations

July 2023

Nashville, Tennessee

Contents

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to all who offered support, insight, and

encouragement throughout this rewarding learning process.

Executive Summary

University ABC (UABC) is a major private research university in New England with over 30,000 students, more than 10,000 faculty members, and over 300 academic programs across 17 schools and colleges. University Advancement is UABC's fundraising and engagement division employing nearly 400 professionals. During the 'Great Resignation,' an almost unprecedented number of employees voluntarily resigned from their positions and the fundraising profession was not immune to this economic phenomenon. To reduce this increased turnover, improve the employee experience, and maximize fundraising productivity in this new employment environment, UABC's leadership is interested in learning more about the relationship between engagement and performance among their frontline fundraisers.

Using a mixed-methods approach, I conducted a statistical correlation analysis and a focus group interview to investigate the relationship between employee engagement as measured by the annual Gallup engagement surveys and performance as measured by dollars raised, as well as a focus group interview to identify the factors that moderate engagement within this context. I found an overall weak positive correlation between engagement and performance while the focus group interview revealed significant evidence of Kahn's three psychological conditions for engagement: meaningfulness, safety, and availability. Based on these outcomes and drawing on findings in the literature, I recommend that UABC:

(1) <u>Continue talent and culture practices and annual engagement assessment</u>: Data suggest the team is highly engaged; hence, I encourage the Talent Management team to continue building engaged environments.

(2) <u>Seek individual-level data</u>: Individual-level data provide further detail with which to offer a more thorough analysis and to create engaged environments based on individual employee needs.

(3) <u>Use Kahn's characteristics of engagement in decision-making</u>: Kahn showed that engaged environments require meaningfulness, safety, and availability. Therefore, I

encourage UABC leadership to make decisions on behalf of the organization towards

those goals.

(4) <u>Educate managers on the employee-engagement performance model</u>: Training all

managers on the employee-engagement performance model provides them with another

tool to infuse into their routine management practices to improve performance.

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Organizational Context

UABC is a major private research university in New England with over 30,000 students, more than 10,000 faculty, and over 300 academic programs across 17 schools and colleges. In 2021, the university had an endowment of $3.35 billion and raised $225 million in philanthropic support. University Advancement (UA) is the fundraising and engagement arm of the university and employs nearly 400 fundraising, engagement, data, and support professionals who collectively engage with private donors, alumni, parents, and friends of the university to support UABC's mission and vision. UA's activities support students, faculty, and leadership initiatives that have implications across the university and the broader community.

UABC is part of a consortium of 17 universities that have worked with analytics firm Gallup to collect data on division- and unit-level UA employee engagement within a two-week time window since 2016. UABC has traditionally had high division-wide participation. Survey data are then used by division leaders to better understand organizational climate and culture, assess diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, and make decisions about resource allocation. After receiving the results, the division's talent management team analyzes and summarizes the data for division leadership. Next, the talent management team meets with team leads within the division to discuss the data and provide feedback on various parameters of employee engagement. Finally, the talent management team schedules team meetings during which each team is tasked with identifying an area of improvement and developing a change plan with their team leads and managers. The goal of this process is to improve the overall engagement of each team across the division by democratizing the process and allowing each team to embrace its goals and process while also holding managers accountable.

Problem of Practice

The economic phenomenon of the 'Great Resignation' saw a nearly unprecedented number of employees voluntarily resign from their positions and the fundraising profession was not immune to this reality (Haynes, 2021). Responding efforts aimed to reduce turnover, improve the employee experience, and maximize fundraising productivity in this new employment environment. In this study, UABC seeks to better understand the relationship between employee engagement among frontline fundraisers and their performance. To this end, I aim to elucidate the management actions and activities or circumstances that may further moderate engagement on the individual teams within this context.

According to Cannon (2011), "an organization's data are the fuel for fundraising" (p. 18). UABC specifically and universities in general, like other fundraising organizations, are always looking to improve operations, especially as economic realities force university leaders to rely on diverse revenue streams. Often, fundraising operations struggle with data accuracy and availability in their donor databases and, when data are available, leaders need to be comfortable interpreting the information and translating that information into decisions that improve organizational performance (Canon, 2011).

In the 2022 CCS Philanthropy Pulse Report, survey respondents noted that the third leading fundraising challenge faced by organizations today is 'leveraging data to make better decisions,' only after 'donor acquisition' and 'donor retention' which were first and second, respectively. However, understanding and leveraging data is essential to running modern comprehensive campaigns, to making decisions around resourcing and staffing, and can be a critical tool in solving the increasingly difficult recruitment and retention challenges in the field.

Understanding the relationship between engagement and frontline fundraiser performance is important due to ever-increasing pressure for universities – both public and private – to raise more philanthropic dollars to supplement tuition and fee revenue to remain competitive in an increasingly complex and competitive higher education landscape. Brittingham

and Pezzullo (1990) suggested that fundraising is "thinly informed by research" (p. 1). Drezner (2011) further advocated for a greater understanding of philanthropy claiming: "A greater understanding of philanthropy in the higher education setting is critical because of the increased reliance on voluntary giving at all colleges and universities […]" (p. 3).

Moreover, the fundraising profession has attempted to address short tenure for some time. According to Shaker et al. (2022), "[prominent] industry studies report rates of organizational turnover as high as 50% among fundraisers" (p. 3). The authors further discovered that 45% of fundraisers have been in their jobs for less than two years. Such rapid employee turnover is expensive for organizations and disrupts their ability to raise money consistently, effectively, and efficiently. If fully understood, managers will be able to use feedback along with other metrics to raise more money faster, empowered by both a clear process for decision-making and crafting a highly engaged organizational culture.

Literature Review

Higher education increasingly relies on private philanthropy to function. Drezner (2011) explained:

> Institutions of higher education, private and public alike, are turning to private giving to meet budgetary demands. As external support of higher education decreases and the cost to educate a student rises, the need for alumni support to maintain higher education's eminence and to increase access heightens. (p. 2)

As universities seek to increase their fundraising results to meet demands, leaders seek to better understand how to optimize the performance of their fundraising operations. Similarly, Buchner (2007) explained that organizational leaders seek to respond to economic realities by improving performance management.

Many organizational psychology studies have consistently observed a relationship between employee engagement and performance – improved engagement leads to improved performance. These findings are important to managers as organizations seek to continually

enhance employee performance. By fully understanding the factors that contribute to employee engagement, managers can curate workplaces that are both engaging and high performing. There are many best practices available from both literature and business publications on fundraising organization, practice, and management. For this study, I sought literature that (1) established the relationship between employee engagement and performance, (2) presented specific frameworks for creating engaging work environments, and (3) provided context for performance in a fundraising organization. Much of the literature on the relationship between employee engagement and performance is grounded in William Kahn's paper 'Psychological Conditions of Personal Engagement and Disengagement at Work' (1990).

Defining Employee Engagement

The current body of literature illustrates a wide variety of definitions of employee engagement. Gallup, one of the primary data sources for this study, defined employee engagement as "the involvement and enthusiasm of employees in both their work and workplace" (2018). Most cited in the literature, Kahn (1990) described employee engagement as "the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances" (p. 694). The author suggested that employee engagement is both a physical and psychological investment in one's work as an employee is performing the functions of their job duties. Conversely, Schaufeli and Salanova (2007) contrasted this definition of engagement with burnout, which they described as low energy and lack of identification with the work.

Employee Engagement and Performance

As organizations increasingly focus on performance management systems to measure and promote improved performance, extensive research has sought to clarify the relationship between employee engagement and performance. Nazir and Islam (2017) examined this relationship and determined that employee engagement was a significant moderator of employee performance. Further research by Cesário and Chambel (2017) developed a work

engagement scale that outlines the relationship between employee commitment to the work and performance which illustrated a strong positive relationship between employee performance and work engagement. Similarly, Carter et al. (2018) suggested a strong correlation between employee engagement and job performance. Additionally, Knight et al. (2017) concluded that interventions to increase engagement at work may be an effective approach when done through groups. Earlier literature from Gruman and Saks (2011) suggested that the effective introduction of performance management helps organizations develop sustainable levels of employee engagement that lead to improved performance.

Determinants of Employee Engagement

Beyond establishing a positive relationship between employee engagement and performance, Gruman and Saks (2011) developed an effective performance management model to enhance and sustain high levels of engagement and therefore improve performance. Kahn (1990) outlined the three specific psychological conditions of meaningfulness, safety, and availability that consistently influenced how employees were engaged in their roles:

> Together, the three conditions shaped how people inhabited their roles. Organization members seemed to unconsciously ask themselves three questions in each situation and to personally engage or disengage depending on the answers. The questions were: (1) How meaningful is it for me to bring myself into this performance? (2) How safe is it to do so? and (3) How available am I to do so? (p. 703)

Kahn (1990) defined meaningfulness as a "sense of return on investments of self in role performances," safety as a "sense of being able to show and employ self without fear of negative consequences or self-image, status, or career," and availability as a "sense of possessing the physical, emotional, and psychological resources necessary for investing self in role performances" (p. 705). Gruman and Saks (2011) suggested incorporating Kahn's psychological conditions into a modern model of performance management, termed the

Engagement Management Model of performance management, which drives performance enhancement through increased employee engagement.

J (2014) observed that desirable work environments, including quality physical spaces as well as healthy and collegial co-worker relationships, were the most significant factors that influence employee engagement, even more so than compensation or training. Similarly, Andrew et al. (2012) found that coworker support significantly influences employee engagement. These findings align with Kahn's ideas on meaningfulness, safety, and availability.

Fundraising Management in Higher Education

American higher education fundraising has significantly advanced and professionalized over the past century. The Council for Advancement and Support of Education (2017) estimated over 81,000 education advancement professionals worldwide. In the United States, philanthropy plays a significant portion of higher education funding. In 2017, American colleges and universities raised $43.6B from private fundraising sources. This represents the highest reported amount since the Council of Aid to Education (2018) began tracking philanthropic giving to universities in 1957.

From talent management to tracking key organizational initiatives, data have become increasingly useful in managing fundraising organizations. David Lively, author of *Managing Major Gift Fundraisers* emphasizes the crucial importance of data-informed decision making for organizational leaders. Lively (2017) explained that data-informed decision making is necessary in determining the best use of scarce resources, advocating, and negotiating for additional resources from academic leadership, projecting revenue, organizing portfolios, as well as understanding and improving performance. Talent management in higher education advancement relies on various performance data sources often including metrics and surveys. While typical performance metrics can explain how an individual or a team performs on various activities and outcomes, they do not reflect quality or inputs such as employee engagement. Therefore, surveys can provide profound insight into organizational climate and culture as

factors that moderate performance. As leaders seek to enhance performance to meet increasing demands on fundraisers, it is important to identify all factors that contribute to individual fundraiser performance. Lively considered three primary incentives for fundraiser performance: salary increases and bonuses, promotions, and public recognition. On metrics specifically, Lively further contended there are four primary metrics higher education fundraising managers should focus on: the number of major gifts secured, the number of solicitations made, total dollars raised, and the number of donor visits made. Each of these metrics are data offering insight into fundraiser activities. However, they do not allow organizational leaders to fully understand the factors that either enhance or hinder individual or team performance. (Lively, 2017)

Worth and Lambert (2019) recommended using metrics to guide organizational culture of which engagement is a component of a high-performance fundraising organization. For example, fundraising managers should take a proactive approach to engage fundraisers in conversations about organizational culture and expectations. Ronald Schiller (2021), the author of *The Chief Development Officer*, contended that successful organizational fundraising leaders must "shape and reinforce" organizational culture (p. 25).

Conceptual Framework and Study Questions

As organizations focus more on enhancing employee performance through increased employee engagement, organizational leaders and managers have turned to developing and implementing performance management systems that drive engagement and therefore performance. Mone and London (2010) suggested that "performance management, effectively applied, will help you to create and sustain high levels of employee engagement, which leads to higher levels of performance" (p. 227). Research from Gruman and Saks outlined a model of engagement that is designed to drive engagement and performance.

Gruman and Saks' (2011) *Engagement Management Model* is an extension of many models that only outline the performance management process which primarily focuses on the

variety of inputs in establishing performance goals, assessing performance, and providing

effective feedback. This model clearly departs from other traditional models in that the focus of

the model is on employee engagement; it begins with clear expectations for employees and

integrates Kahn's three specific psychological conditions that create higher engaged

employees: meaningfulness, safety, and availability. Next, their model integrates goal setting,

facilitating engagement, job design, coaching, leadership, training, feedback, as well as trust

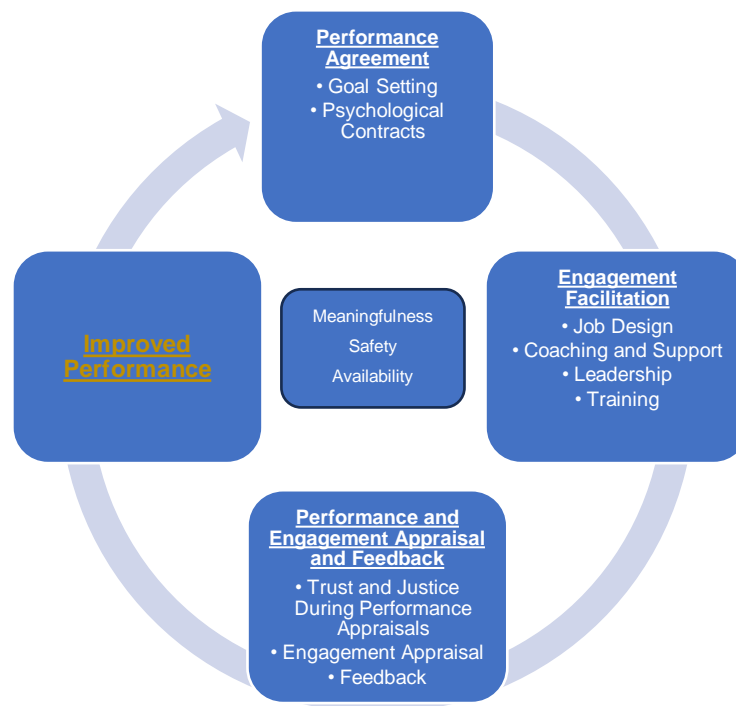and justice (Kahn, 1990), as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *Engaged Performance Process* adapted from Gruman and Saks' *Engagement Management Model* (2011)

Gruman and Saks (2011) suggested their comprehensive model of performance

management as an improved and more effective model to drive organizational performance

than traditional models that focus entirely on activities of performance management. Figure 1

visualizes how the model begins with a performance agreement or setting goals between

employees and the organization. Next, it outlines activities that facilitate engagement by

providing resources for employees to engage within the environment. Optimized job design should also be considered. Here, managers also provide ongoing coaching, social support, and training. At the end of the cycle, returning to the performance agreement, managers and employees engage in feedback exchange and evaluate the degree of engagement within the organization. Value considerations at this stage include trust and justice.

Central to Gruman and Saks' (2011) model are Kahn's (1990) characteristics of meaningfulness, safety, and availability. With these conditions in mind, the engagement management process leads managers to manage the work context rather than the activity performance. This model departs from other traditional models of performance management in that it relies on engagement rather than activities. Gruman and Saks (2011) explained:

> Concentrating on engagement produces a different managerial orientation than those produced at each stage of a more traditional approach to performance. […] Engagement facilitation recasts the role of supervisors as coaches whose goal is to design tasks and provide support and resources that energize employees and absorb them in their jobs. (p. 133)

In this way, the engagement management model of performance helps managers facilitate engagement within an environment and therefore improved performance. Therefore, this study seeks to answer two questions:

SQ1: Is there a statistical relationship between team employee engagement and performance at UABC?

SQ2: What factors moderate individual employee engagement at UABC?

Design and Methods

Study Design

This study used a mixed-methods approach inspired by Babbie (2017) who highlighted the value of a mixed-method approach in social research. Further, Ravitch and Carl (2021)

stated that a mixed-methods research design increases both validity and rigor: "Mixed-methods research designs, which strategically combine aspects of qualitative and quantitative methods, can be an additional way to seek qualitative rigor and validity depending on the research questions, goals, and arguments you are trying to make" (p. 188).

Gallup engagement data were used to examine the degree of team engagement and were then compared to productivity data. This allowed for correlation analysis between engagement and performance. A focus group interview then provided qualitative data to enhance the understanding of the relationship between engagement and productivity. The goal of the focus group was to illustrate the factors that moderate engagement within the context and identify evidence of Kahn's three psychological conditions.

Data Collection

Quantitative

The study site provided Gallup engagement survey data for frontline fundraising teams for the years 2018-2022 and the fundraising productivity data for the represented fundraising teams for the years 2018-2022. Gallup data are derived from an electronic Likert scale survey of 12 questions designed to gauge employee engagement sentiments. The aggregated responses can be specific to teams and functional units, and data can provide insight into each specific question (see Appendix). Gallup data were compared to overall team productivity in dollars raised annually, which is available through end-of-fiscal year productivity reports.

Qualitative

The study site identified five to ten frontline fundraisers and managers who have been employed with the site during the years 2018-2022 and are represented in the Gallup data to participate in the focus group interview. The focus group responded to the following questions:

(1) During your tenure at UABC, can you share an example of when you felt most engaged with your work?

(2) Can you share an example of when you felt least engaged with your work?

(3) Do you think your level of engagement affected your work performance? If so, how?

(4) What other factors might have contributed to or detracted from your performance?

Data Analysis

Quantitative

A correlation analysis identified the degree of relationship between the dependent variable (DV) fundraising productivity, and the independent variable (IV) employee engagement. To conduct this, I used the team engagement and fiscal year-end productivity data provided by the university. Data were analyzed using RStudio (Version 2023.06.1) to create a table of the Gallup engagement scores by team along with the average funds raised for each year by team. Once the tables were created, I ran a correlation test in R and plotted the data to generate visualizations to illustrate the positive, negative, or neutral relationship.

Qualitative

To gain insight into the factors that moderate engagement in this context, I conducted a focus group of seven frontline fundraisers selected from the induvial teams represented in the data. The interview was timed at sixty minutes and conducted virtually by Zoom and recorded. After the focus group interview, coding the conversation sought to identify key themes:

(1) Activities that moderate employee engagement – positively

(2) Activities that moderate employee engagement – negatively

(3) Environmental influences on engagement

(4) Evidence of Kahn's psychological conditions for engagement: meaningfulness, safety, and availability

Findings

In April 2023, UA provided a dataset that included the engagement scores and productivity data for the years 2018-2022 for five segments of frontline fundraising staff and managers. These segments included data for the school development, planned giving, major gifts, global leadership, and foundation relations teams. These team data allowed me to run a

correlation analysis. In June 2023, I conducted a virtual focus group interview of frontline fundraisers and managers who have been employed with the university during the years 2018-2022 and are represented in Gallup data.

Quantitative Correlation Analysis

The correlation analysis demonstrated an overall weak positive relationship between Gallup engagement scores and mean dollars raised – the value of mean dollars raised increased as the Gallup engagement score increased. The scatterplot in Figure 2 illustrates the overall weak positive relationship between mean dollars raised and engagement scores by team.
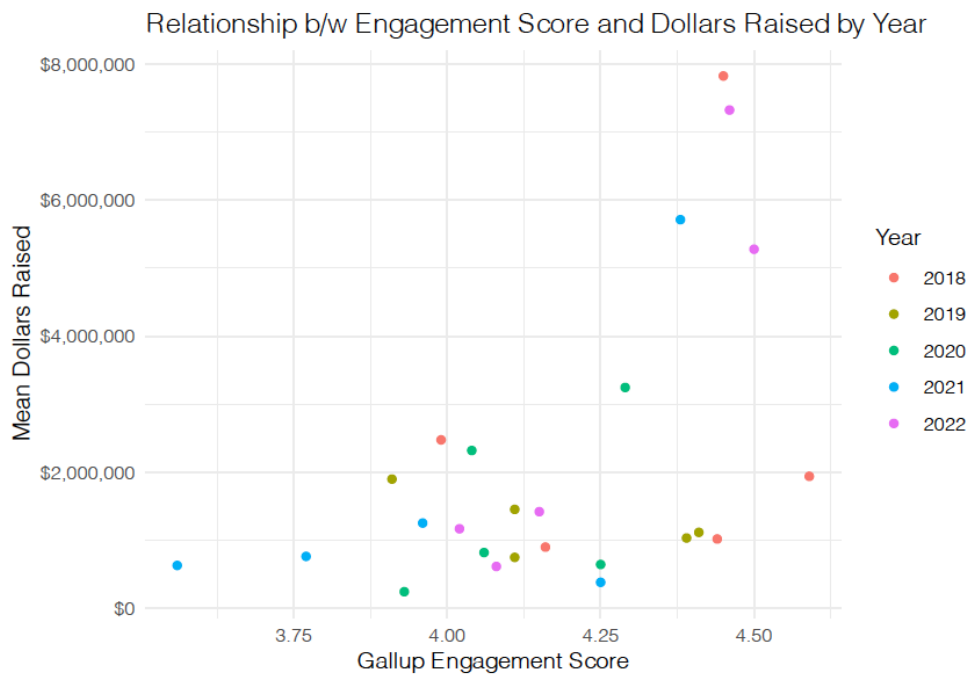

Figure 2. *Team Data for 2018-2022 Demonstrating an Overall Weak Positive Relationship*
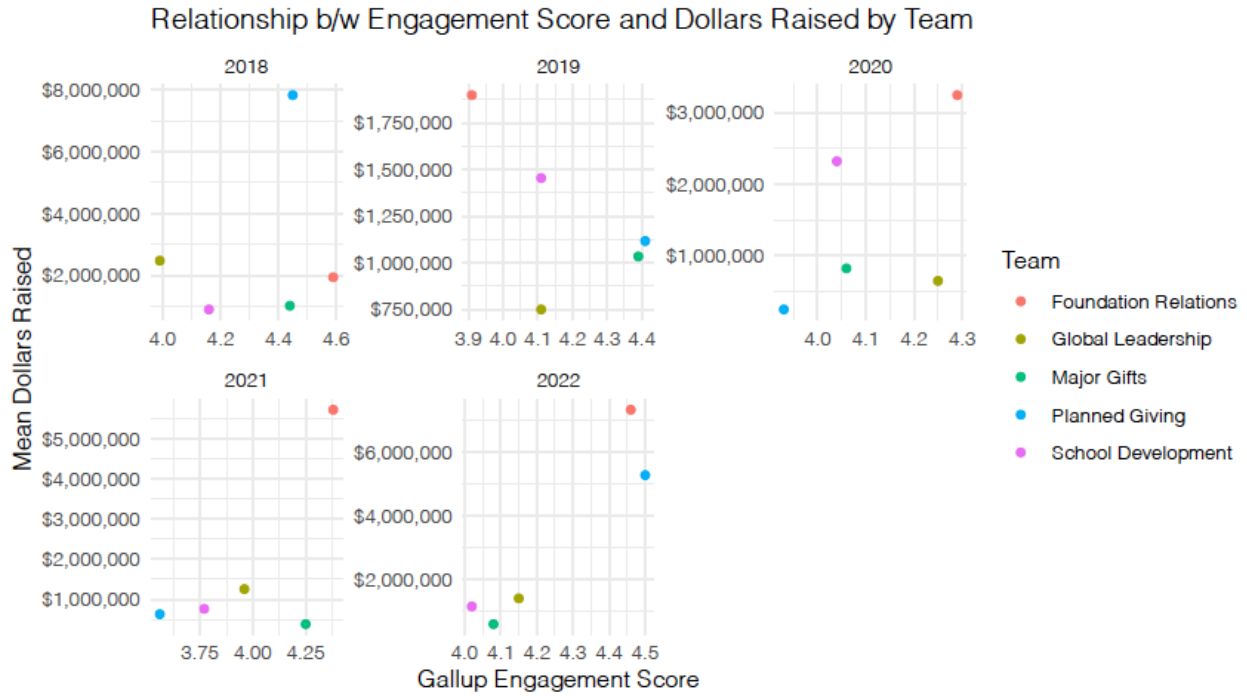
Figure 3. Engagement Data Broken Out by Year and Segmented by Team

Table 1. Mean Dollars Raised, Engagement Scores, and Participation by Team per Year

Year	Correlation Coefficient r=	Overall Engagement Score	Total Dollars Raised (Participant Group)	Participation
2018	.220	4.10	$90,005,140	84%
2019	-.617	4.08	$78,776,690	88%
2020	.516	4.05	$106,232,608	93%
2021	.631	3.96	$66,343,818	92%
2022	.934	4.24	$98,170,570	94%
Average	*.337*			

What follows is an interpretation of each year's data but, given the limited data set, any conclusions are made with caution.

FY 2018: There is a weak positive relationship (r = .220) between mean dollars raised and the Gallup engagement scores for year 2018. Planned Giving team generated highest dollars in 2018 followed by Global Leadership. School Development generated lowest dollars in 2018.

FY 2019: There is a moderate negative relationship (r = -.617) between Gallup engagement score and mean dollars raised as the value of mean dollars raised decreased with an increase in the Gallup engagement score. The Foundation Relations team raised highest dollars in 2019 followed by School Development team. The Major Gifts team has generated lowest dollars in 2019.

FY 2020: There is a moderate positive relationship (r = .516) between mean dollars raised and the Gallup engagement score as the value of mean dollars raised increased with increase in Gallup engagement score. The Foundation Relations team has generated highest average dollars in 2020 followed by the School Development Team. The Planned Giving Team has generated lowest dollars in 2020.

FY 2021: There is also a moderate positive relationship (r = .631) between mean dollars raised and the Gallup engagement score as the value of mean dollars raised increased with increase in the Gallup engagement score. The Foundation Relations team has raised much higher average dollars in 2021 as compared to other teams. The Major Gifts team has raised lowest average dollars in 2021.

FY 2022: There is a strong positive relationship (r = .934) between mean dollars raised and the Gallup engagement score. The Foundation Relations team has raised highest average dollars in 2022, followed by the Planned Giving team. The Major Gifts team has raised lowest average dollars in 2022 followed by School Development.

Correlation Analysis

The correlation analysis indicated an overall weak relationship (average r = .337) between employee engagement and overall performance. However, it is worth noting the outliers in this data: fiscal years 2019 and 2022 demonstrated the most extreme correlations with 2019 being the only moderate negative correlation and 2022 being a very strong positive correlation.

The specific outlier for 2019 is the Foundation Relations team with the highest productivity but the lowest engagement score. Similarly in 2022, the Foundation Relations team skewed the data along with the Planned Giving team with the highest productivity and engagement. In 2019, UABC concluded its $1.5 billion comprehensive campaign; employee fatigue due to the campaign end might be a contributing factor to the high productivity and low engagement. Further qualitative inquiry will provide additional insight into the factors that moderated engagement in this context over this period and provide additional information about moderate negative outlier FY 2019 and strong positive outlier FY 2022. It's also worth noting that, if the negative correlation results from 2019 were removed, there would be a consistently increasing correlational trend between engagement and productivity for the entire organization.

Focus Group Interview Analysis

An analysis of the focus group interview to determine the factors that moderate engagement within this context identified factors that both positively and negatively contribute to feelings of engagement, and that demonstrate the evidence of Kahn's psychological conditions of engagement.

Positive Moderators:

Activities that are most aligned with core job responsibilities and outcomes for frontline fundraisers were considered most engaging. These included working directly with internal partners and advancing mission-oriented goals, interfacing with passionate donors and having productive gift conversations, feeling safe to fully interact and share their opinions without fear,

realizing the results of philanthropic investment to advance institutional priorities, mutual trust between employees and leadership, transparency, and working as a team or engaging in community with peers. Participant 4 shared, "I feel most engaged when I feel close to the management of our team" (Focus Group Interview, 2023).

Others noted the importance of alignment between central and College-based teams as well as with leadership. Participant 3 explained, "One of the first things I thought about engagement is when there's alignment between what the central administration is hoping for and what the school is hoping for" (Focus Group Interview, 2023).

Negative Moderators:

On multiple occasions, activities that were not directly aligned with core job responsibilities and outcomes were cited as least engaging for participants. These included the frequency and content meetings where the purpose, outcome, or value was unclear, lacking trust between employees and divisional leadership which sometimes leads to feeling micromanaging, navigating an increasingly complex bureaucracy, and perceptions of catering to ego or disingenuous attitudes of divisional leadership towards frontline fundraisers. Further, Participant 3 felt their agency in their role was significantly suppressed leading to a lack of trust because of leadership expectations noting:

> When you're expected to do it one way, and that's in conflict with your personality and in your approach. That's where it feels like that trust is eroding; and that you're asked to do it in another way, to Participant 1's point, the administrative ego, in the ideal for the 1, 2 or 3 people. (Focus Group Interview, 2023)

Similarly, Participant 7 used the example of meetings to illustrate examples of disengaging. They offered, "I think we have some meetings that seem like they are designed because certain people are charged with bringing people together, but they are not a good use of our time at all" (Focus Group Interview, 2023).

Given the purpose of this study, it's also worth noting that two participants brought up

fatigue brought on by ever-increasing goals and expectations on frontline fundraisers.

Participant 7 also explained:

We always have to increase our goals. We don't stop to really, truly appreciate

everybody's hard work. I think lip service is given to that… it makes me tired. It makes

me weary about coming in and just being on the treadmill all the time, and I wish there

were a way that… can we just take a break and just celebrate what we're doing? I feel

like the atmosphere is one [where I feel] I've got to do more. I got to do more. (Focus

Group Interview, 2023)

Summary

In summary, the focus group participants can be characterized as conscious fundraising

professionals who want to create a positive impact on the institution through philanthropic

relationships with donors. Participant 5 explained:

I find a lot just intrinsically like motivating. I focus more on okay; I'm not going to worry

about what leadership is saying to me. I just know that if I hit these goals, if I reach out to

these new people, if I find this new prospect, I'm going to be happy with myself. (Focus

Group Interview, 2023)

Participant 4 noted that they did not feel it was necessary to be engaged at work; they

simply viewed work as being a place where you accomplish a particular role, are compensated,

and then leave:

No offense at all; this is a really good conversation. But we get into all of these

engagement situations, and we have wonderful leaders who are up there talking about

how to be engaged. And I'm like, you know, people. And this might just be me, and

maybe I'm cranky. But the point is, it's like this is work. It's work for a reason. And yes, I

appreciate the personal connections that I make with every single one of these people

on the screen, and that carries me through, and my own sense of motivation carries me

through. But honestly, the – you know – [being asked] Are you feeling engaged? I'm like,

give me a break. This is my job. I get paid for this. I gotta do my work, and I will find my

own engagement. (Focus Group Interview, 2023)

It's also worth noting that, on ten separate occasions during the interview, trust or

honesty were mentioned as significant factors that moderated engagement either negatively or

positively. This was the most frequently discussed topic during the conversation with Participant

2 sharing, "I'm less engaged than in prior roles because I find our environment isn't very honest,

and there's a lot of sort of bureaucracy" (Focus Group Interview, 2023). Some felt that the

organization used fear tactics through metrics as a means of motivating the division. Similarly,

some felt the metrics were irrelevant to their success while others found them helpful to

understanding their roles.

There were also seven instances focused on frontline fundraisers' relationship with

central leadership and leadership's role in moderating engagement paired with the perception

that leadership is more concerned about ego and self-preservation. Participant 3 shared, "I'm

interested in creating great opportunities for students to go to a great university and have a

great experience. And that's the rewarding part of the job, and as soon as that's not meaningful,

I love the work" (Focus Group Interview, 2023).

Discussion

Findings indicate that UABC's frontline fundraisers are decently engaged in their work

and are invested in doing quality work on behalf of the institution and its mission. As might be

expected of frontline fundraisers, those interviewed identified being most engaged when they

felt their activities aligned closely with Kahn's three characteristics of employee engagement:

when the activities were meaningful and mission-oriented; when the environment was safe for

them to participate; and when the circumstances encouraged their availability fully participate.

This aligns with Gruman and Saks' (2011) findings which detailed:

In particular, work that is challenging, clearly delineated, varied, creative, and

autonomous is most likely to be associated with the experience of psychological

meaningfulness. In addition, people feel safer when they have some control over their

work. Jobs that are high on the core job characteristics provide individuals with the room

and incentive to bring more of themselves into their work or to be more engaged. (p.

130)

Conversely, those activities that left ambiguity or that significantly deviated from

meaningfulness, safety, and availability made them feel less engaged and less motivated to

perform their roles.

Understanding the specific areas where frontline fundraisers feel the most and least

engaged provides organizational leaders with the information needed to assess organizational

practices and culture and make revisions that cultivate an environment that maximizes

employee engagement and minimizes the activities that inhibit meaning, safety, and availability

in the work setting. This is a worthwhile exercise to unleash the potential of fundraising teams to

remain highly productive and add more value to the organization, especially as fundraising

becomes increasingly essential for competitiveness in higher education.

Limitations

This study does have limitations. There are no individual-level data available for the

engagement scores, as data are grouped by teams. Therefore, only limited conclusions can be

drawn from the correlation analysis. There was also only one focus group of a limited number of

seven employees who could participate. The views expressed may not entirely represent those

of the entire organization but merely a small sample. Lastly, historic data were supplied by the

university and the survey was developed and conducted by an outside organization, Gallup.

Given the lack of data control, I rely on both the university and Gallup to provide the best data

available to conduct an analysis.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study of site data from the years 2018-2022 suggests an overall weak positive relationship between employee engagement and performance with two notable outliers, as well as focus group data which offered significant evidence of Kahn's three characteristics of employee engagement: meaningfulness, safety, and availability. These findings align with the literature and offer organizational leaders useful information to make decisions to continually improve performance through engagement. To that end, I offer the following recommendations:

1. *Continue talent and culture practices and annual engagement assessment*. Data suggest that the frontline fundraisers demonstrate a relatively high and mostly increasing degree of engagement. Maintaining this high level of engagement requires intentional effort. Therefore, I recommend that the talent management team continue their practices and activities that continually shape the organizational culture. I would further encourage leadership to focus on the team's culture and environment as much as the metrics around specific development-related activities. The Gallup engagement findings are highly valuable; without them, divisional leaders will be merely guessing about how the division's employees feel about the workplace environment and will not be properly equipped to adjust in response to that feedback. In addition to the annual survey results, leaders should consider adding interim mid-year check-ins to see where teams are excelling or languishing in their engagement.

2. *Seek individual-level data.* Having only team-level data limits the degree of analysis possible. Having access to individual- vs. team-level data for engagement empowers leaders to understand the feedback more deeply and curate personalized engagement opportunities for employees. Individual-level data might provide more insight into details that might be masked by team average data only and will clarify why outliers occur in data.

3. *Use Kahn's characteristics of engagement in decision-making.* The focus group

    interview data suggests there is significant evidence of Kahn's three characteristics –

    meaningfulness, safety, and availability – and this is currently happening unintentionally.

    Developing strategies to intentionally infuse Kahn's three characteristics of engagement

    into the organizational culture is a more defined action plan to lead the organization to

    greater fundraising performance. This also extends to assessing meeting structure and

    choosing transparency around decision-making, so fundraisers are more connected with

    their goals and have a fuller understanding of purpose. Additional transparency will also

    provide more context and clarity so fundraisers don't perceive that decisions are purely

    made for selfish reasons.

4. *Educate managers on the employee-engagement performance model.* Educating team

    managers on the employee-engagement performance model enables them to better

    reinforce the model in their interactions with their teams and to provide more structure

    that aligns the teams to be more engaged in their work. Managers that understand this

    model of performance will be equipped to manage for both activity and culture, creating

    an environment in which the culture places value on meaningful work, provides a safe

    environment to interact, and invites available employees to fully engage. These

    characteristics could also be incorporated into individual metrics, team plans, and annual

    reviews so managers can understand how the characteristics manifest for each

    individual employee and be tracked throughout the year.

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Appendix

Survey Questions and Reasoning

#	Questions	Why do we ask this?
1	I know what is expected of me at work	**Clarity in expectations is critical to performance**. Functional, Relational and Team's expectations
2	I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right	Having the materials and emotional needs. Having the **Hardware, Software and Humanware** to do the work they need to do.
3	At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best everyday	Helping people to understand, appreciate use their **talents** and **strengths.** Also learning about individual differences and the value each one brings to the team.
4	In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work	Recognition should be Authentic, Meaningful and Motivating. Need to **understand how each person prefers to be recognized** and to do it frequently
5	My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person	People need to know that someone is concerned about them as people first and as employees second. **Need to build caring and respectful relationships**
6	There is someone at work who encourages my development	**Employees need help navigating their career.** Employees need coaching, sponsorship, challenges and visibility
7	At work, my opinions seem to count	Employees want to feel valued and want to know that their input is important and that they are making a significant contribution. **Employees involved in decisions, take greater ownership of the outcomes.**
8	The mission or purpose of my company makes me feel my job is important	When people feel that their **job is important and have an impact**, they want to do more of it.
9	My fellow employees are committed to doing quality work	Employees need to be in an **environment where there is a mutual trust and a respect** for one another's efforts and results
10	I have a best friend at work	People with **trusting relationships at work** are happier at work
11	In the last six months someone at work has talked to me about my progress	Having **regularly conversations about grow and progress** help employees to learn and to receive guidance
12	This last year, I had the opportunities at work to learn and grow	In addition to having a need to be recognized for good work, most employees have **a need to know they are improving** and have chances to improve themselves.

Interview Coding (the numbers in parenthesis represents the participant number)

Examples of feeling engaged in the work. (21)	Examples of feeling unengaged in the work. (31)	How does your level of engagement affect your work performance? (12)	Factors that moderate performance - Evidence of Kahn's psychological conditions (24)
working with faculty members (7)	one of the first things I said about engagement when there's alignment between what the central administration is hoping for and what the school is hoping for. (3)	psychological safety (5)	the bureaucracy and touch on earlier (2)
to communicate about the important work they're doing (7)	trust and our ability to make the right calls and do and do what's best in our professional judgment (3)	intrinsically like motivating. I focus more on okay, I'm not going to worry about what leadership is speaking to me. I just know that if I hit these goals, if I reach out to these new people, if I find this new prospect, I'm going to be happy with myself. (5)	being trusted as someone who's able to to have information (2)
I find the work itself so interesting and so important (7)	The period of engagement is one leadership does trust (3)	I rely more on that on intrinsic motivation than I do the approval or disapproval of senior leadership. (5)	Trust (2)
every time we meet with a potential funder about it, or I hear him present, or he and I are just talking about how to convey the work, I feel very deeply engaged. (7)	aren't questioned at each step that they're either committed or (3) thoughtful	I'm comfortable that I've done the best that I can in certain situations. (5)	are willing to be straightforward. (2)
we work so closely with the faculty members on a wide variety of initiatives, It just really keeps me connected to the importance of what we do. (7)	I tend to be engaged and engaged with donor as well. (1)	there is a disconnect between needing to accomplish my goals and satisfaction in my job. (4)	trust and transparency (KPT readback)
when I feel most engaged it's usually when I'm working on a gift case. that's particularly engaging, and I feel like I've really gotten to a place with the donor that I understand what they're trying to accomplish. (4)	I'm less engaged than in prior roles, because I find our environment isn't very honest, and there's a lot of sort of bureaucracy (2)	I honestly feel like when I'm scrambling to try and get to my goal. I can't indulge in whether or not I'm feeling engaged. I just have to freak and put the pedal to the metal and roll. (4)	disingenuous and so wrong. (7)
I feel most engaged when I feel close to the management of our team, That just brought a lot of fun to the job and a lot of joy. So that's when I feel most engaged. (4)	we have some meetings that seem like they are designed because certain people are charged with bringing people together but they are not a good use of our time at all, not a good use of my time. (7)	to my mind, and honestly, no offense at all like this is a really good conversation. get into all of these engagement situations, and we have wonderful leaders who are up there talking about how to be engaged. (4)	disingenuous. (7)
when I have a really good donor visit. filling values for my opinion by management and leadership. feeling like I'm a partner rather than an employee (2)	It doesn't affect my success or the quality of my work, but I find myself feeling like there is a tone-deaf quality (7)	the personal connections that I make with every single one of these people on the screen, and that carries me through, and my own sense of motivation carries me through. (4)	I don't want to be manipulated or exploited. I want to actually engage. (1)
we're a centralized operation in the schools in a way or decentralized support. So the periods of highest engagement are when there is an agreement (3)	it's since in the last couple of years become very centralized, very process, heavy, very reporting check-ins every week, especially, you know (5)	the motivation is internal and it's personal, and it's me wanting to do good for me, (4)	Purpose of being engaged

an agreement on strategy and efforts between both the central administration and the school (3)

alignment, between fundraising leadership and school-based leadership (3)

from a team management standpoint is when I'm most engaged, and then from an individual standpoint, it's, you know, as any fundraiser would say, it's when you have a great donor (3)

who has a great passion for something that's really important to the school and university. (3)

you know you can do your best work to maximize the gift and maximize the opportunity for the school and the impact on the university. (3)

feeling of freedom and confidence that given by the Central Office or leadership to say it, knowing that they trust (5)

from a donor perspective for me here at the you, it's really that excitement of finding that new person (5)

understanding from leadership (5)

being able to be entrepreneurial and open minded (5)

Certainly the donor work, feeling that autonomy feeling supported by everybody up, down in sideways (6)

value the interpersonal connections with everybody in my work (6)

gratification in that authentic relationship. (6)

Under that theme of trust. (2)

strength, builder. And we actually did a group of exercise of it was on engagement. But when we ask "how I can work better (2)

how you could help me to work better, and a theme that came up with sort of like for me being undermined (2)

So speaking of trust, I don't trust that this room is confidential (1)

day to day, what I'm doing is supporting, administrative egos. So I'm showing up in rooms to support egos, and that does not make me feel engaged. (1)

interact really openly, honestly, and with trust and that those outcomes are targeted, that your outcomes are tied to whenever the activity is that you're doing at that moment (KPT readback)

you're least engaged when you're engaged in activities that are least tied, or at least relevant to your outcomes. (KPT readback)

Least engaged when the request doesn't align with the outcome. (KPT readback)

being asked to take actions that have no data-driven proof that the outcome is going to be better (1)

And the organization says it puts a value on diversity and inclusion, and we talk about strength finders (3)

when you're expected to do it one way, and that's in conflict with your personality and in in your approach (3)

that trust is eroding (3)

the administrative ego (3)

with management in the room, that that is not something that we can do, so I had to raise the flag with the donor. (4)
So that was a very disengaging, frustrating situation (4)
So standards for gift officers, for prospect management, and events. They just don't exist. And thee addition of those would really help cut down. (2)
not just the mere sense of invite me to a meeting to hear about it, but actually ask my what my opinions are, and what I see as like the solve for the problem you are trying to solve. (5)
We always have to increase our goals. We don't stop to really, truly appreciate everybody's hard work. I think lip service is given to that. (7)
it makes me tired. It makes me weary about coming in and just being on the treadmill all the time, and I wish there were a way that. (7)
I feel like the atmosphere is one I've got to do more I got to do more. (7)
That sentiment. I also think in terms of the fear based. I mean, it's more about management protecting themselves (1)
and taking action only out of protection of themselves and ego. and then instilling fear. (1)

I have never been motivated by the goals given to me. and I have never cared about my performance evaluation at the end of the year. (3)

what's always driven me is the quality of the work that I'm able to do (3)

I am not interested in the administrative ego. I'm interested in creating great opportunities for students to go to a great university and have a great experience. And that's the rewarding part of the job, and as soon as that's not meaningful, I love the work. (3)

idea that you're in senior leadership means you have access to information

need to entrust the people that you work with who aren't in senior leadership to be able to understand either the confidentiality or the intensity

when leadership treats its workforce in a way that they don't deserve the truth or can't handle the truth or understand the truth, or process it, or any of these things.

creating kind of a caste system where there are very few who are on the inside, and it's very evident who is (3)

disingenuousness (3)

manipulative (3)

infantilizing, or you're just not capable enough a professional to be able to handle everything that I know (3)

the metrics, to be productive, and like some of the processes that are in place to help drive my work towards success. (6)
I think I get excited, like when I meet my visit goals, and I think it does result in, you know, increased donor connection. And it's one way that I can, because sometimes our work isn't so black and white in terms of what is successful (6)

focus on the work. (6)

It's something that can be motivating as a goal post.

a direct supervisor for whom you feel is truly transparent and supportive (6)

I can authentically say, I don't want to do this? Or why is this happening? And I get empathy, and then a rationale that I either agree with or disagree with. But I can kind of move forward and not (6)

be demotivated by that work, paired with the internal intrinsic. (6)

there's also the institutional context (5)