RE-ENERGIZING EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT USING COMBO LEADERSHIP

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Abstract:

Employee engagement is really a means to an end, and organizations that want to drive high levels of business success, need motivated and engaged employees to get there. A number of studies have shown definite links between employee engagement and financial success in organizations. However, employee engagement is ultimately an individual choice. It is entirely a personal decision on the part of an employee on whether to stretch himself (or herself) and offer an outstanding performance or to contribute at a minimum level, or be dysfunctional. The likelihood of employees remaining engaged and productive is more when the environment is relatively happy and stress free. At times of crisis however, the environment within the organization takes a turn for the worse, and it is during crisis period that leadership comes under stress. This paper analyses leadership and employee engagement and offers suggestions for better leadership strategies. This paper also introduces "Combo Leadership" as a possible strategy of customized leadership intervention, to reduce possible negativism in the organizational environment, in a situation where an external leader, brought in as a Change Agent in an ailing organization, causes the environment to not remain condusive to Employee Engagement, due to predominance in "Task Orientation" at the cost of "People Orientation". Combo Leadership proactively utilizes existing trust on an anchor and positive grapevine as means of establishing confidence within the organization, and thereby re-energizing employee engagement in the face of leadership crisis.

Keywords: *Combo Leadership, Employee Engagement, Leadership Crisis.*

Introduction:

The study of leadership has been a hot favourite of researchers, the world over, since long and continues to be an expanding field of research, which has been scholarly recognized as a topic worth recognition. The early studies of leadership had a focus on the persona of leaders and have been termed as trait theories of leadership. Later studies turned towards behaviour of leaders and accordingly, behavioural theories emphasized the mutual interaction of the leader with others.

Leadership has always focused on a top-down approach, wherein one central figure (the leader) plays an anchor's role. However, the leader, being a flesh and blood human, has the same set of psychological and other challenges that he has to overcome, before be can prove himself to be first among equals.

In a high stress situation, for example in a challenged (or ailing) organization, where time and resources is always at a premium, it is quite natural that remedial decisions taken by a leader (especially those affecting past practices and norms), would have mass psychological effects within the organization. Left unattended, this immediately would result in disengagement of employees.

For long term sustainability of the organization, it is essential that a high rate of employee engagement is maintained even in the fact of crisis. It is proposed in this paper that "Combo Leadership" can be used as a strategy to counter the ill effects of negative leadership, so that employee engagement levels continue to peak even in adverse situations, resulting in continued organizational excellence and sustainability.

The Organization in Crisis:

Rate of change today, in every sphere of life, continues to accelerate. With every passing day, organizations, worldwide, are facing greater and greater complexity. Competition today has become relentless. The need for effective leadership therefore is critical for organizations to even sustain their effectiveness in the current scenario.

Most of the top management in the various organizations across the world are from the generation of "Baby Boomers" or early "Generation X", who have reached or are fast approaching the age of superannuation. A number of surveys across the world have indicated that most organizations have very little time to prepare and fill the void that would be

inevitably created in a few years time, and that most organizations have shown little evidence that they will achieve it (RHR International 2005, Hay Group 2007, Wellins et.al. 2007).

The enormity of this problem becomes more compounded when you realize that the talent pool from which future leaders can be tapped is actually diminishing. In the book *War for Talent*, (Michaels et. al. 2001) it is opined that the number of 25-44 year olds has shrunk by 6%, but the overall employment numbers have increased by 12%. In a more recent update, McKinsey has asserted that the problems of the shortage of available talent are increasing (Axelrod et.al. 2001).

This brings us to the significance of the crisis. If there is a shortage of available leaders, how will organizations continue to have effective leadership?

This, coupled with the urgent need for organizations to be increasingly effective and competitive in delivering world class performance, while still controlling costs, it falls on the leaders to get *more, more and even more* from their staff……..not only in a cost effective way, but also in a way that *does not reduce their motivation and well being*. This is essential, not only from an ethical point of view, but also because, if productivity is at the cost of motivation or well being, the accruing benefits would definitely be short lived.

This raises the critical questions about *the nature of leadership and the use of human and social capital in the organization.*

It is perceived that the solution to this crisis is to capitalize on the social capital of the organization by leveraging employee engagement, by customizing leadership style to suit current and emergent organizational requirements.

Nature of Leadership:

The word "Leadership" invokes a meaning in the mind and it has been used in three very different contexts. (Rost, 1993).

The first reflects the excellence theory of leadership. Leadership is "being the number one", leadership is "producing excellence".The second use of the word is as a substitute for "the collective leaders who are in office". Headline writers often use this.The third notion is that of one person directing other people, like the conductor exerting leadership over an orchestra.

Authors and Practitioners have defined leadership in very many ways right since the early 1900s. Most literature tends to focus on the psychological, personal and other characteristics that can make one person a more effective leader than another, including for example managerial mindsets and managerial roles.

Scherr and Jansen, 2007, in their research paper titled *A new Model of Leadership*, have defined leadership as that set of actions, including language actions (words), whether taken directly or by empowering others to act which fulfills visions, and produces results, outcomes, and consequences that otherwise would not have occurred.

They have modeled leadership on four aspects. A successful leader will create an environment or culture in which the four aspects of leadership are highly valued and are therefore nurtured, created, applied, and effectively implemented. The four aspects of leadership being as under:

- **VISION:** Creating a vision for the future – a vision that goes beyond what is predictably going to happen and therefore goes beyond what anyone now knows how to accomplish.
- **ENROLLMENT:** Enrolling sufficient numbers of others in making a voluntary and personal commitment to realizing the vision.
- **BREAKDOWN:** Creating systems that quickly identify and widely communicate the existence of breakdowns – any perceived gap between the committed vision and what predictably will be accomplished given current circumstances and knowhow that is seen as a threat to the realization of the vision. Widespread awareness of a breakdown increases the likelihood that a solution – a breakthrough – will be discovered or invented.
- **MANAGING BREAKDOWNS:** Creating an environment that successfully resolves the breakdowns. Such an environment supports people in the organization (on the team if it is a project) so they renew their commitment to the realization of the vision in the face of the breakdowns.

Joseph Rost (1993), in his book Leadership for the Twenty-First Century has said, "Leadership is a relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that

reflect their mutual purposes." From this definition, Rost explains four essential elements that must be present if leadership exists or is occurring:

1. The relationship is based on influence.
    a. The influence relationship is multidirectional.
    b. The Influence behaviours are noncoercive.
2. Leaders and followers are the people in this relationship.
    a. The followers are active.
    b. There must be more than one follower, and there is typically more than one leader in a relationship.
    c. The relationship is inherently unequal because the influence patterns are unequal.
3. Leaders and followers intend real changes.
    a. *Intend* means that the leaders and followers purposefully desire certain changes.
    b. *Real* means that the changes the leaders and followers intend must be substantive and transforming.
    c. Leaders and followers do not have to produce changes in order for leadership to occur. They intend changes in the present; the changes take place in the future if they take place at all.
    d. Leaders and followers intend several changes at once.
4. Leaders and followers develop mutual purposes.
    a. The mutuality of these purposes is forged in the noncoercive influence relationship.
    b. Leaders and followers develop purposes, not goals.
    c. The intended changes reflect, not realize, their purposes.
    d. The mutual purposes become common purposes.

Leadership in times of Crisis:

Any crisis brings in questions pertaining to short-term survival as well as long-term sustainability. When leaders are pressed by demands to cut costs and increase efficiency, many leaders scramble to revise strategies, reduce headcount, categorically cut budgets, or

simply changed their stated priorities and hoped for better results. Most simply ignore the power of talent within their organizations.

Pricewaterhouse Coopers and Franklin Covey, 2010 say that this could be a big mistake. Uncertain economic realities only increase the need for consistent and dependable strategy execution. Successful leaders recognize that a more effective and sustainable approach lies in narrowing their focus to what is most important. They enhance their ability to execute on a few critical goals by instilling basic behaviours and disciplines into their organizations that will unleash the talent inherent in their workforce.

Execution focused leadership fuses a system of execution with a principled, participative decision-making style that unleashes employee talent, inspires trust and motivation and consistently delivers remarkable results.

Franklin Covey's 4 Disciplines of Execution ™ summarize as under:

- Focus on a few critically important goals
- Act on the lead measures that impact goal achievement
- Measure success and motivate employees through visible, compelling scoreboards.
- Hold one another accountable through a weekly "cadence" of accountability.

Execution, as per Pricewaterhouse Coopers /FranklinCovey (2010), is the discipline that empowers an organization to accomplish its strategic objectives. It is a systematic process that requires leaders to precisely identify and narrowly focus on the most impactful goals, concentrate teams' efforts on high impact actions, transparently share real time results, make timely course corrections, and ensure mutual accountability among team members. Effective execution is grounded in principles of clarity, commitment, translation of strategic goals to daily tasks, enabling sponsorships, synergistic teamwork, and accountability.

Execution focused leadership requires that the following principles are adhered to and answers to the relevant questions are in the affirmative:

- **Clarity:** Do we all know what is most important?
- **Commitment:** Do we believe in the goals and want to achieve them?
- **Translation to action:** Do we know what we have to do to achieve the goals?
- **Enabling sponsorship:** Do we remove barriers?

- **Synergy:** Do we work effectively together to improve our ability to achieve the goals?
- **Accountability:** Do we report results to one another regularly?

The benefits of a properly designed and consciously managed strategy execution are many, and it can help an organization to achieve short term goals and realize long term strategies. It can help boost efficiency by enabling an organization to more effectively align overall organizational objectives and allocate finite resources, time, and efforts to new initiatives.

While this strategy if implemented effectively would prove to be a boon in leading organizations in crisis, if it is not implemented in the right spirit and with adherence to all the above principles, transparency would become a major issue and commitment levels would wane to the extent that active disengagement would become a strong likelihood.

The success of leadership in times of crisis, depends largely on the relationship between the leader and the followers. This is a dynamic relationship and is ever-changing in its strength and affinity.

Leadership success today is definitely a celebration of teamwork, a celebration of employee engagement.

Employee Engagement:

Engagement has been described (Robinson et al 2004) as *"a positive attitude held by the employee towards the organization and its values. An engaged employee is aware of business context, and works with colleagues to improve performance within the job for the benefit of the organization".*

Engagement therefore is ultimately an individual choice that an employee makes. It is entirely a personal decision on the part of the employee to either contribute to a minimum level of performance or to stretch himself (or herself) and offer a simply outstanding effort….or on the other hand to sabotage the positive efforts of the others in the team.

There have been a number of studies that have been carried out abroad, which show definite links between engagement and various measurements of financial success in organizations. (Sirota Survey Intelligence 2006, Towers Perrin 2005, Watson Wyatt, 2008).

Moreover, high job and organization commitment, which are affected significantly by levels of engagement, also lead to reduced absenteeism and turnover.

It is interesting to note however that in one of the studies (Towers Perrin, 2005), it was found that *while people are keen to contribute more at work, the behavior of their managers and culture of their organizations is actively discouraging them from doing so.*

This discretionary effort on the part of an employee is contingent upon, not only on the intrinsic factors of the employees' psychological makeup, but also on the omnipresent but ever changing extrinsic factors of the organizational environment. That is where leadership plays a vital role. Leaders themselves have a significant impact on whether an employee would be engaged or not.

Employee Engagement is really a means to an end. That is, organizations that want to drive high levels of business success need motivated and engaged employees to get there. So it is of paramount importance for Leaders to be aware of the impact of their own behaviors in instilling higher levels of engagement.

Research indicates that only 14% to 30% of employees are engaged at work. Unfortunately however, inspire of so much of interest shown in employee engagement, there is still a lot of disagreement about what employee engagement really is, and how to go about achieving employee engagement. There is still no available benchmark for what a realistic level of employee engagement is, which can be used as an authoritative scale.

In a situation of extreme competition, and continuous change, it is imperative for organizations "*to do more, with less",* and the only asset which can make that happen is the Human Capital, i.e. the employees. Experts claim that engaged employees do more, and therefore, to get more out of less, the simple logic would be that *managers simply get to engage their people.*

For organizations to be able to do that, leaders need to understand the factors that drive employee engagement. That way they are better equipped to create conditions that are conducive to drive higher levels of organizational performance. Following is the summary of factors that drive employee engagement and the personal investment that employees make in an organization (Molinaro & Weiss, 2005):

1. **Being part of a winning organization:** Everyone wishes to be part of a winning organization. This could mean an organization that is financially successful, or that it is recognized as a thought leader among customers, or that the organization has an ambitious vision, core purpose, and well articulated business strategy in place.
2. **Working for admired leaders:** "Admired Leaders" are one of the most important non-monetary drivers of performance (Corporate Leadership Council, 1998). Organizations with a strong network of admired leaders, create the conditions for high engagement.
3. **Having positive working relationships:** Employees value positive working relationships with high caliber and professional colleagues.
4. **Doing meaningful work:** Meaningful work is often defined as work that makes a difference or has an impact to the organization. Employees often want to see how their work impacts the organization's vision and strategy. They also want to know that the organization's stakeholders are touched by their work.
5. **Recognition and appreciation:** Recognition may mean monetary rewards and compensation, but it can also refer to the appreciation and direct feedback that employees receive from their managers. This recognition and appreciation demonstrates that employees are valued and that their contribution is acknowledged by their organization. Recognition also means that leaders notice the "often unnoticed" things that employees do, to make their organization successful.
6. **Work-Life Balance:** Organizations that create cultures that value work-life balance, and assist employees to achieve the same are rewarded with highly engaged employees. Work-life balance does not mean that employees are not loyal, nor committed to their organizations, it means that employees want to lead whole lives, not lives solely centered on work.

Firms win in the market when they develop human resources in a way that is not easily replicated by their competition. Theresa M. Welbourne, has suggested a role based performance model as an option for providing definition of the behaviours of employee engagement. She defines five key roles that employees occupy at work:

- Core job-holder role – whats in the job description
- Innovator role – improving process, coming up with new ideas

- Team Member role – participating in teams
- Career role – learning, engaging in activities to improve personal skills and knowledge
- Organizational member role – citizenship role or doing things that are good for the company

The roles that are not easily copied are the non-core job roles. When employees put in enough time within an organization to understand how to innovate, they add value that a new employee cannot contribute.

When employees are part of a team and all team members develop company-specific knowledge, that asset is something that cannot be easily copied by a competitor. As employees move from job to job within the organization and they build their own company-specific career knowledge, or as they teach others within the firm, the advantages of this firm-specific, career-based action cannot be easily imitated by another organization. When employees understand the inner workings of the organization, and they begin to engage in behaviors that support the company overall (instead of just their own job), this type of activity is not easily replicated by another organization, and these behaviors bring high value.

Leadership in a challenged organization:

The enormous complexity of current organizations and the immense challenges that organizations are facing today, is forcing organizations to adapt their behaviors continually to sustain their competitive advantage. The need for change induces a high degree of stress (Kets se Vries & Balazs, 1998; Liechtenstein, 2000).

Changing mindsets is never easy, and usually a strong jolt is required to trigger action. Awareness of the need for change is achieved most effectively when the organization come under pressure.

This pressure from external sources come in the form of threats from competitors, declining profits, decreasing market share, scarcity of resources, deregulation, technological demands, and problems with suppliers and groups of customers (Kets de Vries, 2001).

Negative Leadership in challenged organization:

In circumstances such as these, organizations at times bring in a new leader in the form of a "Change Agent", who is expected to implement sweeping changes in established systems, with a view to increase productivity or reduce costs in a relatively short span of time.

The first kind of negative leadership is by "Transactional Leaders", described by Northouse (2001) as leaders who do not focus on the individual needs of their followers, but instead look to exchange things of value to advance their own and their subordinates' agendas. It focuses on the exchange between leaders and followers, with both parties receiving something of value (Boerner et.al. 2007). This give and take philosophy used by transactional leaders also makes use of negative motivation, which focuses on negative feedback, threats, or disciplinary action (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999).

The second kind is by "Destructive or Toxic or Dysfunctional Leaders", who, whether intentionally or unintentionally cause separation, division or unrest within teams. Research has also shown a connection between toxic leadership tendencies and charismatic tendencies (Lipman – Blumen, 2005). This negative leadership comes as a result of the charisma, charm, intelligence and influence of the leader; the hero worshipping admiration of the followers and also an environment which supports such negative behaviors (especially in times of crisis and overbearing challenges).

The "Catch-22" situation:

These elements ultimately result in feeding the power of the negative leader (Klein & House, 1995). Lipman-Blumen (2005) have also suggested that the toxic leader will use charismatic tendencies to manipulate, isolate, and ostracize his or her followers. This is precisely where camaraderie and team work is affected and transparency and employee engagement take a back seat.

Often this causes a high drama in the organization, where emotions run high; and anxiety, sabotage and gossip prevail. This causes an interesting Catch-22 situation. The attention is drawn away from the leader and onto the dysfunctional team. The negative leader then continues with his toxic inputs without check.

When the leader is then called upon to intervene and set right the dysfunctional team, he almost always turns to his devoted followers, at the cost of the other members of the team.

This invariably leads to sudden attrition, or slow down, and an overall dampening of the motivation level of the team, which ultimately plummets the overall engagement level of employees, and given the negative environmental conditions prevailing in the organization, in the first place, this more often than not causes a drain of resources.

Gallup has estimated that a typical organization has $3,400 in lost productivity for every $10,000 of payroll due to "disengaged employees" – one of the primary symptoms of dysfunctional toxic leaders (Buckingham and Coffman, 1999). Negative leadership can have high human and financial costs by disengaging employees who are more likely to resign and increase turnover in the organization, with consequent higher search, hiring and training costs (Branham, 2005). The false perception of the negative leader's high performance is unmasked by hidden costs in the organization, or by the "carcasses of those who work for them" (Reed, 2008:68).

This brings us to the crux of the problem. Another Catch-22 situation. The New Leader seems to be a boon for the organization because:

1. His task orientation has resulted in an improving trend, which is what the Top Management vehemently desires (the prime reason why he was brought in….in the first place).
2. Old mindsets are definitely changing and the initial resistance to change is crumbling. Another trend that the Top Management vehemently desires.
3. Discipline is being enforced at last and responsibilities are being continually vetted.
4. Low productivity is being discouraged by weeding out the straggling employees and fresh talent is being inculcated.

But on the other hand:

1. Teams are disintegrating and silos are coming up.
2. Sense of ownership has reduced and employees seem to be more concerned with "passing the buck".
3. Camaraderie has reduced.
4. The Happiness Quotient in the organization has significantly diminished.
5. Employee Engagement has taken a back seat.
6. Motivation levels across the organization is dismally low.
7. Fear psychosis is at a peak and performance levels of even star performers is diminishing.

Such a situation is apparent in many organizations that have not been able to manage negative leadership, especially when the same is demonstrated by a new incumbent, who was brought in to set right the ailing organization in the first place.

By the time the Board intervenes to rectify the detrimental effects of this negative leadership, it is already too late and redeeming motivation and productivity levels becomes a very long drawn and costly exercise.

So what is the recourse to this very common problem: that of reducing the effect of negative leadership…..especially when the negative leader cannot be immediately removed from the system.

Combo Leadership:

Combo Leadership is being presented here as a strategy which is willfully executed, as a customized leadership intervention, in a situation where an external leader has been brought in to play the role of "Change Agent" in an ailing organization, and where there is a likelihood that the Change Agent may end up displaying negative leadership behavior. Combo Leadership, it is felt, would also aid in Leadership Grooming, when the new leader is a promotee from within the organization.

Combo leadership utilizes the position power of a second leader, who has an equal or higher rank than the incumbent. Ideally, he should be a full time member of the Board, who has been in the system (organization) for long and enjoys positive vibes with the workforce.

The Combo Leader plays the role of an indirect mentor for the workforce at large. His role is more of a tacit auditor for the Change Agent (or the new leader), and a pressure valve for individual members of the workforce.

Any turnaround strategy, executed over a short time span necessitates hard decisions to be taken at times, in the form of stringent guidelines, enforcements and weeding out of non-productive and less-productive team members. Each of these hard decisions, affect individual employees. Yet the cascading repercussions are never individual, but felt across the organization in the form of "group mind".

Multiple separations over a short span of time immediately makes the entire workforce assume that their "jobs are at stake". A couple of disciplinary proceedings immediately fires the Trade Union into raising slogans of "exploitation and autocracy".

Introduction of a single austerity measure immediately triggers depression across the length and breadth of the workforce.

In such volatile environment, employees normally deal with the situation by either fanning the "group mind" or by withdrawing into a shell. Both these behaviors are detrimental to the organization, and left unabated, it only leads to a point of no return, where redemption is either extremely costly or extremely time consuming.

Combo Leaders act as pressure vents by being available as a transparent and fair listener and mentor for individual employees.

Mentoring is a process for the informal transmission of knowledge, social capital, and the psychosocial support perceived by the recipient as relevant to work, career, or professional development; mentoring entails informal communication, usually face-to-face and during a sustained period of time, between a person who is perceived to have greater relevant knowledge, wisdom, or experience (the mentor) and a person who is perceived to have less (the protégé). (Bozeman & Feeney, 2007)

It can be argued that encouraging individual discussions with disgruntled employees, would be detrimental to the overall focus of the organization, especially when it is a follow through of a thought out and strategic "hard decision".

The counter argument is that the Combo Leader focuses on giving a patient hearing to the disgruntled employee, without making any value judgments. He acts also as a source of factual information and Top Management Vision. He plays a vital role in dissemination of information which focuses on long term strategy of the Organization and possible roles of the team member concerned.

The Combo Leader further strives to nurture the core competencies of the team member, which are relevant for organizational success, and motivated the team member to excel in his professional domain.

The culture of an organization stems from the top, and the Combo Leader has the opportunity to be seen as the custodian of employee goodwill. By portraying transparency, the Combo Leader strengthens the hand of the Change Agent, by complementing his efforts. As a silent auditor, he also picks up clues for appraising the Change Agent of the state of the Human capital in the Organization.

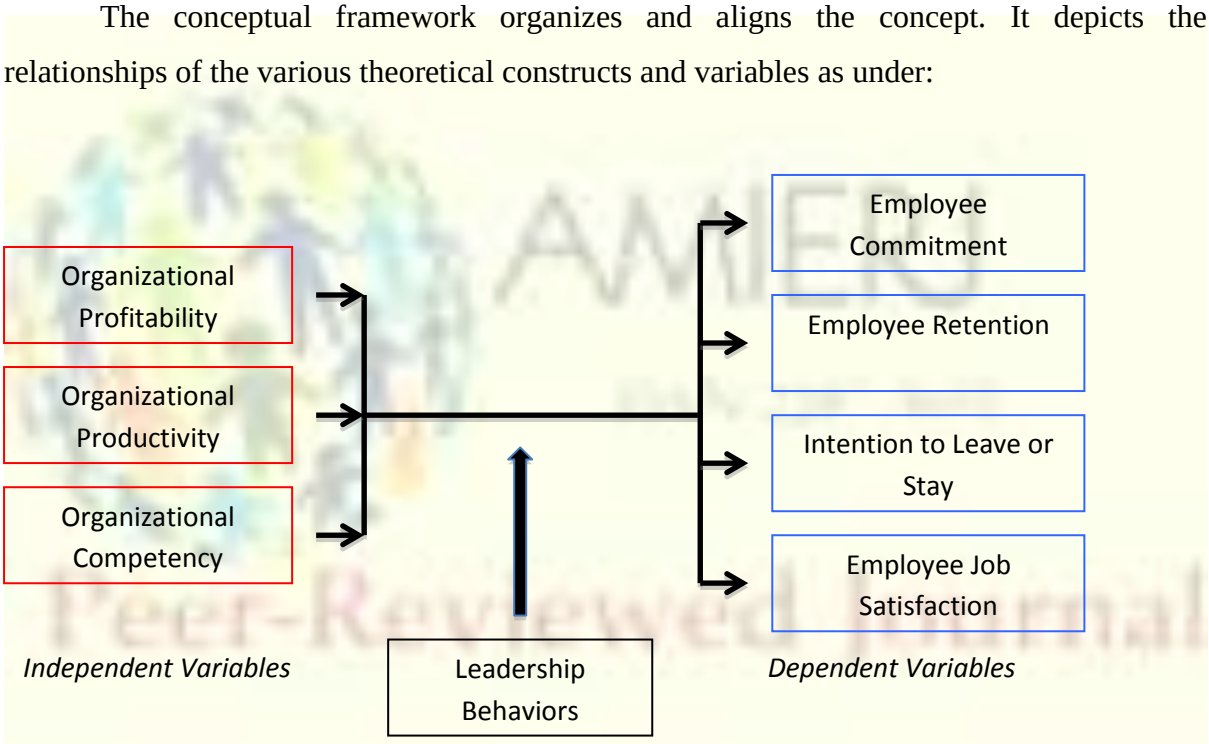
Combo Leadership - Challenges:

Since this concept involves two unique power centers in the organization, it needs to be handled with maturity and foresightedness, for the long-term benefit of the organization. This is possible when it has complete buy-in of the Top Management (the Board) and there is adequate information flow between its members.

It requires also the perseverance of the individuals concerned to give precedence to organizational requirement over personal satisfaction.

The Conceptual Framework:

The conceptual framework organizes and aligns the concept. It depicts the relationships of the various theoretical constructs and variables as under:



Since Leadership Behaviors are mediating variables, the continued success of an organization, especially one which is exposed to major upheaval due to emergent changes in work processes and conventions, spearheaded by a leader who is very strongly "Task Oriented", at the cost of "People Orientation", depends on an equally competent Combo Leader, who can mitigate the ill effects of negative leadership, so that Employee Engagement levels continue to peak, resulting in continued Organizational Sustainability and Excellence.

Conclusion:

Leadership has always focused on a top-down approach, wherein one central figure (the leader) plays an anchor's role. However, the leader, being a flesh and blood human, has the same set of psychological and other challenges that he has to overcome, before be can prove himself to be first among equals.

In a high stress situation, for example in a challenged (or ailing) organization, where time and resources is always at a premium, it is quite natural that remedial decisions taken by a leader (especially those affecting past practices and norms), would have mass psychological effects within the organization. Left unattended, this immediately would result in disengagement of employees.

For long term sustainability of the organization, it is essential that high rates of employee engagement is maintained even in the fact of crisis, and for that Combo Leadership can be a strategic approach.

While most Leadership Theories so far, have taken a TOP-DOWN approach, the concept of Combo Leadership is fundamentally a BOTTOM-UP approach, and it tries to present a model of customizable leadership style, which focuses specifically on positive Employee Engagement, as an outcome.

Although Combo Leadership has been demonstrated in a few Indian Organizations as an emergent Leadership style, which manifested spontaneously as the result of turbulence within the organization, its merits cannot be undermined, especially when it is executed as a strategic intervention.

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