

Agency and Empathy as Catalysts of Engagement

Phillip M. Randall¹, Tywanda D. Tate², Susan Saurage-Altenloh¹, Franklin M. Lartey³

¹School of Business, Technology and Health Care Administration, Capella University, Minneapolis, MN, USA

²Prosperity Business Solutions Group, LLC., Garland, TX, USA

³Lartey Research & Management, Marietta, GA, USA

Email: Phillip.Randall@capella.edu, tywanda@pbsgrp.com, susan.saurage-altenloh@capella.edu, franklin@lartey.net

How to cite this paper: Randall, P. M., Tate, T. D., Saurage-Altenloh, S., & Lartey, F. M. (2025). Agency and Empathy as Catalysts of Engagement. *Journal of Human Resource and Sustainability Studies*, 13, 711-725.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/jhrss.2025.134034>

Received: November 21, 2025

Accepted: December 22, 2025

Published: December 25, 2025

Copyright © 2025 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

This literature review explores the interplay between employee agency and empathy as interdependent drivers of engagement in modern hybrid workplaces. Agency, defined by autonomy, voice, and impact, enables intentional action and self-reflection, while empathy fosters relational attunement to others' perspectives and emotions. Together, they function as mutually reinforcing capacities that align ethical awareness with effective behavior. Self-Determination Theory provides a foundation for understanding autonomy, competence, and relatedness, but requires refinement to account for decentralized, technology-mediated work. Building on emerging scholarship and the Lartey Empathy Measurement Scale (LEMS), we argue that psychological engagement cannot be fully understood without measuring agency alongside empathy. Although validated measures of empathy exist, no equivalent instrument currently captures agency at scale. This review establishes the theoretical basis for such a tool, outlines a pathway toward psychometric development, and integrates recent evidence demonstrating that empathy can shape an individual's sense of agency. By situating agency and empathy together, this review advances workplace engagement research and underscores their joint role in supporting ethical and effective practice.

Keywords

Employee Engagement, Employee Agency, Workplace Empathy, Self-Determination Theory, Hybrid and Remote Work, Employee Voice and Impact, Psychometric Scale Development, Organizational Behavior

1. Introduction

Employee engagement continues to be a critical determinant of organizational

performance, influencing productivity, retention, and innovation (Harter et al., 2002). However, conventional models of engagement often fail to address the realities of hybrid and remote work. These evolving contexts demand not only task alignment and satisfaction, but deeper sources of motivation and connection. This literature review explores employee agency and empathy as synergistic, underexamined constructs that may help close this gap. By integrating Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2018) with emerging and developing models of employee agency, we build a conceptual foundation for a new generation of engagement research. This paper concludes with a call for scale development to empirically test these interrelated factors.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Evolution of Engagement Theory

Employee engagement, a concept initially introduced by Kahn (2010), has traditionally centered on psychological conditions that support personal presence at work, namely, meaningfulness, safety, and availability. Early engagement frameworks emphasized organizational fit, job satisfaction, and task involvement as key predictors of engagement outcomes such as effort, performance, and retention (Harter et al., 2002). This view dominated much of the empirical landscape for decades, with engagement often operationalized through constructs like vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2002).

Employee engagement was originally conceptualized by Kahn (1990), who defined engagement as the harnessing of one's full self, cognitively, emotionally, and physically, during role performance. His foundational study highlighted three psychological conditions necessary for engagement: meaningfulness, safety, and availability. These insights predate and significantly inform later operationalizations of engagement, including the vigor-dedication-absorption framework (Schaufeli et al., 2002) and subsequent models that emphasize motivational and relational factors. Reintroducing Kahn's original conception underscores that engagement has always been a psychological experience situated within interpersonal and contextual conditions—an orientation highly relevant to today's hybrid and remote environments.

However, recent shifts in the nature of work, especially the rise of hybrid and remote environments, have exposed the limitations of conventional engagement models. These environments amplify the need for intrinsic drivers of motivation and for interpersonal cohesion mediated by technology.

Consequently, researchers have turned their attention to agency and empathy as emerging constructs that better account for modern engagement dynamics. For instance, Gagné and Deci (2005) emphasize that autonomy and volitional behavior are central to sustained motivation, while Edmondson (2018) positions psychological safety, a construct closely linked to empathy, as foundational for innovation and engagement in team contexts.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a widely accepted framework for

understanding the psychological underpinnings of engagement through three innate needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2018). Meta-analytic reviews of SDT's application in the workplace confirm that these needs are positively associated with engagement and performance outcomes (Vandenbroeck et al., 2016; Vansteenkiste et al., 2010). Yet there exists a demand for a more nuanced, contextualized research into how these needs are fulfilled in increasingly digital, flattened, and decentralized work settings—especially where interdependence and psychosocial dynamics are in flux.

In response, newer models suggest that engagement is less a static state and more a product of dynamic interplay between agency (the ability to act) and empathy (the ability to relate), both of which are critical in enabling psychological conditions for modern engagement.

2.2. Defining and Deconstructing Employee Agency

The construct of employee agency has evolved beyond its roots in self-efficacy and job control to encompass a broader understanding of how individuals exercise influence over their work roles, environments, and outcomes. Drawing on recent empirical work, we propose a tripartite model of agency composed of autonomy (the freedom and discretion to make decisions at work, see Lee et al., 2021), voice (the ability to express opinions and be heard, see Lee et al., 2021), and impact (the recognition that one's work makes a meaningful contribution, building on findings by Nie et al., 2023). Autonomy reflects the freedom to make decisions; voice denotes the ability to express opinions and be heard; and impact involves recognition that one's work makes a meaningful contribution. This framing aligns with Self-Determination Theory's emphasis on intrinsic motivation (autonomy, competence, and relatedness), but expands its operational utility in organizational design by specifying how agency can be structured through interventions on voice and impact as well as autonomy.

While SDT's autonomy construct provides a strong foundation for understanding volitional behavior, autonomy alone does not fully capture how employees influence or shape their work environments in contemporary organizations. The addition of voice and impact expands the construct of agency in two important ways. First, *voice* addresses an employee's perceived legitimacy and opportunity to express ideas, concerns, or innovations, an essential element in flatter, team-based structures where decision-making is distributed (Detert & Burris, 2007). Second, *impact* reflects whether employees see their contributions as meaningful and consequential, an outcome closely tied to work identity and purpose. Together, these dimensions address limitations of autonomy-only approaches by highlighting the social and structural conditions that enable employees not just to choose actions, but to shape outcomes and feel valued for their contributions.

Agency is not experienced uniformly across roles, departments, or industries. Saliency and expression of agency differ based on job complexity, task interde-

pendence, and leadership practices. In high-reliability organizations like healthcare, for example, autonomy may be constrained by safety protocols, but voice may be amplified through team-based decision-making. In contrast, in creative industries, employees often enjoy high autonomy but may experience inconsistent impact due to subjective performance evaluations.

Research by [Detert and Burris \(2016\)](#) demonstrates that voice is not only a mechanism for empowerment but also a driver of organizational learning and adaptive performance. However, many organizations fail to support voice structurally, either due to hierarchical constraints or risk-averse cultures, thereby limiting the expression of agency.

Despite its theoretical promise, agency remains under-measured in engagement research. Few instruments exist that adequately capture its cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. This gap reinforces the need to develop a validated agency scale that parallels well-established instruments like LEMS (for empathy) and EENDEED (for engagement).

2.3. The Role of Empathy

While agency addresses an individual's control over work, empathy centers on their emotional engagement with others. Research on psychological safety and high-quality interpersonal relationships highlights the importance of trust, collaboration, and relational quality as precursors to engagement ([Carmeli et al., 2009](#); [Edmondson, 2018](#)). Building on this foundation, we propose that empathy functions as a critical mechanism that enables these conditions, making it especially vital in hybrid and remote contexts where nonverbal cues are reduced and the risk of misunderstanding is heightened ([Goleman, 2006](#)).

The Lartey Empathy Measurement Scale (LEMS) by [Lartey et al. \(2025\)](#) operationalizes empathy through three validated constructs:

- Emotional perception: the ability to detect others' emotional states in written, spoken, or visual communication.
- Dispassion: the regulation of one's own emotional responses in high-stress or high-emotion situations.
- Dependability: the degree to which colleagues can rely on one another for emotional support and responsiveness.

Together, these components offer a behavioral and relational model of empathy that complements traditional measures of interpersonal sensitivity. Empathy, particularly when framed behaviorally rather than attitudinally, enables the formation of psychological safety climates, where employees are more likely to contribute, take initiative, and persist ([Edmondson & Lei, 2014](#)). Moreover, research shows that empathy is closely tied to social competence ([Tagini et al., 2025](#)), influencing how individuals interpret and respond to feedback, which in turn affects their sense of competence, a core SDT need ([Ryan & Deci, 2018](#)). In organizations where empathy is institutionalized through leadership behaviors, norms of feedback, and cultural rituals, employee engagement is measurably higher.

2.4. Comparative Perspectives on Agency, Empathy, and Engagement

Taken together, agency and empathy create a more complete model of employee engagement that aligns with but also deepens the SDT framework. While SDT outlines autonomy, competence, and relatedness as necessary conditions, our synthesis shows that:

- Autonomy is more meaningful when supported by emotional regulation (dispassion);
- Competence is reinforced through mutual trust and feedback, and;
- Relatedness is activated through behavioral empathy and psychological safety.

This integrative model also resolves a key tension in engagement literature, whether engagement is primarily individual (a function of motivation and mindset) or relational (a function of connection and climate). We propose that engagement is co-constructed: it emerges from an ongoing interaction between an individual's sense of agency and the empathetic responses of others in the system.

Recent scholarship supports this relational turn. Saks (2022) notes that engagement must now be understood as both emotional and behavioral, embedded in social contexts and institutional design. Edmondson and Lei (2014) likewise argue that individual motivation must be complemented by interpersonal safety and team norms.

By combining SDT with behaviorally grounded constructs like agency and empathy, this review offers a stronger foundation for future models of engagement. These models are more human-centered, interactional, and sensitive to organizational context. Such qualities are especially critical for navigating the post-pandemic, technology-enhanced world of work.

Although agency and empathy often reinforce each other, they may also produce tensions in practice. High agency, particularly strong autonomy or assertive voice, may conflict with collective needs for relational sensitivity, emotional labor, or team cohesion in environments where empathetic attunement is essential. Conversely, strong empathy may lead employees to suppress their voice to maintain harmony, even when speaking up could improve processes or outcomes. Acknowledging these potential tensions offers a more balanced theoretical model and identifies an important avenue for future research: understanding when agency and empathy align to drive engagement, and when they require deliberate balancing to avoid unintended relational or performance consequences.

2.5. Gaps in the Current Literature

While this review advances the integration of agency and empathy into employee engagement theory, several gaps remain that must be addressed through empirical investigation and psychometric development. These gaps fall into four critical domains: measurement, mechanisms, contextual factors, and scale development.

1) Measurement Deficit: The Missing Agency Instrument

Although validated scales exist for empathy (e.g., the Lartey Empathy Measure-

ment Scale) and for engagement (e.g., the EENDEED instrument), no comprehensive, psychometrically validated tool currently exists to capture the construct of agency. The EENDEED instrument measures nine dimensions of employee engagement: determination, efficacy, exchange, nurturance, dependability, empowerment, energy, dedication, and development (Lartey & Randall, 2022). These dimensions collectively assess emotional, cognitive, and relational drivers of engagement. Positioning agency alongside EENDEED highlights its distinct conceptual territory: agency focuses on autonomy, voice, and impact, capacities that shape how employees influence their environment, whereas EENDEED captures how employees experience motivation, connection, and involvement within their roles.

Existing measures, such as those developed within Self-Determination Theory, largely assess autonomy but neglect the additional dimensions of voice and impact. Without a validated scale, researchers are unable to quantify agency across organizational contexts, compare it to related constructs, or evaluate interventions designed to strengthen employee agency. Addressing this deficit is therefore a prerequisite for advancing both theory and practice in the study of workplace engagement.

2) Mechanisms of Interaction: Synergy or Sequence?

Although theory suggests that agency and empathy operate as mutually reinforcing capacities, the mechanisms underlying this relationship remain largely unexplored. It is unclear whether empathy functions as a moderator, amplifying the effect of agency on engagement; as a mediator, enabling agency to translate into prosocial behaviors that drive engagement; or whether the relationship is reciprocal, with empathetic environments fostering greater expressions of agency. Future research must employ rigorous methods such as moderated mediation analysis, longitudinal panel studies, and experimental designs to determine how these constructs interact. Understanding these mechanisms is critical for moving beyond conceptual synthesis toward causal explanation.

3) Contextual Factors: Boundary Conditions and Individual Differences

The relationship between agency, empathy, and engagement may not be universal but instead shaped by demographic, cultural, and structural factors. For example, employees in high-reliability industries such as healthcare may experience restricted autonomy but heightened opportunities for voice through team-based processes. Conversely, workers in creative industries may enjoy autonomy but struggle with perceptions of impact due to subjective evaluation criteria. Gender, identity, and cultural background may also influence how agency and empathy are experienced, particularly in hierarchical or male-dominated settings where voice is differentially valued. Future research should examine these boundary conditions systematically, identifying where and for whom agency and empathy most effectively predict engagement.

4) Psychometric Development: Building a Validated Employee Agency Scale

To close the measurement gap and enable empirical testing of the proposed model,

there is a pressing need for the development of a validated Employee Agency Scale (EAS). Such an instrument should be designed to capture the tripartite structure of agency (autonomy, voice, and impact) while ensuring conceptual clarity and statistical reliability. A rigorous, multi-phase research agenda should include a) qualitative item generation through literature review, expert panels, and interviews; b) exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses to test dimensionality; c) internal consistency reliability testing (e.g., Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability); and d) convergent and discriminant validity checks against established instruments such as LEMS and EENDEED. Once validated, the EAS should be administered in diverse organizational contexts to establish predictive validity and strengthen the empirical foundation for future engagement research.

3. Theoretical Contributions

This review advances employee engagement theory by extending foundational constructs and integrating emerging dimensions of workplace behavior. Specifically, it contributes in three interrelated ways: by enriching the application of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) with constructs of agency and empathy, by operationalizing engagement drivers in observable and measurable behavioral terms, and by situating engagement within the realities of hybrid, remote, and technologically mediated work contexts. Together, these contributions reposition engagement as a dynamic, co-constructed phenomenon that reflects both individual motivation and organizational systems.

3.1. Enriched Application of Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

While SDT has been extensively used to explain motivation in the workplace through its three core psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2018)—its application to engagement has often focused on individual drivers, neglecting broader relational and systemic factors. This review expands SDT by incorporating structural agency and emotional empathy as necessary elements for satisfying those needs in modern organizational contexts.

In particular, we position agency not merely as autonomy in the SDT sense, but as a socially and organizationally mediated experience, shaped by how voice and impact are structurally enabled. Likewise, empathy extends the concept of relatedness by translating emotional connection into measurable, behavior-based practices (e.g., dispassion and dependability). Together, these additions reframe engagement as a co-constructed phenomenon, where both internal motivation and external emotional climate play complementary roles. This enriched perspective echoes calls for an expanded SDT framework that integrates both intrapersonal and interpersonal mechanisms to account for the complexity of workplace functioning, especially in digital and remote environments (Deci et al., 2017).

3.2. Behavioral Operationalization of Engagement Drivers

Traditional engagement theories often conceptualize constructs like motivation,

satisfaction, and commitment in attitudinal or dispositional terms (Macey & Schneider, 2008). Our synthesis moves beyond such models by introducing behavioral operationalizations of agency and empathy, making them observable, measurable, and actionable.

- Agency, as defined by autonomy, voice, and impact, becomes visible through actions like decision-making latitude, expressions of voice in forums, and perceptions of one's influence on outcomes (Detert & Burris, 2016).
- Empathy, particularly as framed by the LEMS scale, is demonstrated in workplace interactions via emotional regulation (dispassion), consistency in social responses (dependability), and accurate emotional perception, often conceptualized as empathic accuracy, the ability to correctly identify and interpret others' emotional states (Ickes, 2021).

This shift toward behavior-based constructs enhances the practical utility of engagement theory. It also aligns with recent calls for integrating emotional and behavioral engagement into a unified theoretical model (Saks, 2022), capable of predicting both individual outcomes (e.g., performance, innovation) and collective outcomes (e.g., team cohesion, organizational resilience).

3.3. Contextual Relevance for Modern Work Structures

Perhaps most critically, the proposed integrative model speaks directly to the challenges and opportunities posed by hybrid, remote, and algorithmically mediated work environments. In these contexts, employee engagement can no longer be understood as a static trait or culture-bound feature; it is shaped continuously by the level of choice and connection afforded to employees through organizational systems.

By emphasizing context-sensitive constructs like structural agency and digital empathy, this framework reflects the evolving nature of work, where geographic dispersion, technological mediation, and fluid team structures redefine the boundaries of motivation and collaboration. For example, an employee's sense of agency may be constrained by algorithmic task assignment, while their empathy may need to be expressed through asynchronous communication tools, which are realities that traditional models overlook.

Ultimately, this integrative model not only extends engagement theory but also modernizes it for the realities of the digital-era workforce. By highlighting the role of structural agency and digital empathy, it addresses how engagement is continuously shaped in hybrid, remote, and algorithmically mediated work settings. This perspective provides scholars and practitioners with conceptual tools that are both theoretically robust and practically relevant for guiding future research, measurement, and organizational interventions.

By clarifying these unresolved issues in the current literature, we establish a foundation for the next stage of inquiry. The following section extends this analysis by outlining the research directions that will shape upcoming empirical work, including instrument development and the testing of our proposed framework.

4. Future Research Directions

Despite the conceptual coherence and applied potential of the integrative framework linking agency, empathy, and engagement, several key gaps remain that must be addressed to advance both theory and practice. These gaps fall into four critical domains: measurement, mechanisms, contextual factors, and scale development.

4.1. Measurement Deficit: The Missing Agency Instrument

While considerable progress has been made in measuring related constructs such as empathy (Mora-Peigrín et al., 2021) and engagement (Lartey & Randall, 2022), the construct of employee agency remains largely unmeasured using validated tools. Existing measures of autonomy such as the Work Climate Questionnaire (Deci & Ryan, 2000) do not capture the full range of agency elements, such as voice and perceived impact, which are two components crucial to understanding how employees influence and find meaning in their work.

Without a validated scale, it is difficult to assess the relationship between agency and other psychological constructs or to evaluate the effectiveness of organizational interventions aimed at enhancing employee empowerment. A measurement instrument grounded in psychometric rigor and aligned with workplace realities is urgently needed to move beyond conceptual discussion and into actionable research and practice.

4.2. Unexplored Mechanisms of Interaction: Synergy or Sequence?

Theoretical synthesis suggests that agency and empathy interact dynamically, producing greater engagement outcomes together than either factor alone. Yet the specific mechanisms of this interaction remain unexplored. Do empathy and agency operate in sequence (one enabling the other), or in synergy (mutually amplifying)? Future research must test whether empathy moderates or mediates the relationship between agency and engagement, or whether reciprocal causality exists between the two. Specifically, future studies should investigate:

- Whether empathy moderates the relationship between agency and engagement, e.g., does agency lead to higher engagement only in emotionally supportive environments?
- Whether empathy mediates that relationship, e.g., does a sense of agency enable prosocial behaviors (like empathy), which in turn drive engagement?
- Whether reciprocal causality exists, i.e., do empathetic cultures foster agency, or vice versa?

Multivariate statistical models, such as moderated mediation analysis or longitudinal cross-lagged panel designs, could be employed to test these hypotheses and establish the temporal and causal directionality of these effects (Hayes, 2018).

4.3. Contextual Factors: One Size May Not Fit All

Another significant gap is the lack of research into the boundary conditions of the

agency-engagement relationship. Specifically, how do demographic and contextual variables shape the experience of agency and its outcomes? For example:

- Gender and identity factors may influence perceptions of voice and autonomy, especially in male-dominated or hierarchical environments (Mor Barak, 2015).
- Job role or function (e.g., frontline vs. strategic roles) may affect how agency is enacted and whether it leads to engagement or stress.
- Industry norms such as safety constraints in healthcare or legal restrictions in financial services may limit perceived or actual autonomy, altering the agency-engagement dynamic.

Empirical evidence shows that the expression and valuation of voice vary significantly across hierarchical levels and cultural contexts. For example, Burris et al. (2013) found that leaders are more receptive to voice from higher-status employees, regardless of idea quality, suggesting that perceptions of credibility and risk shape whether voice is rewarded or dismissed. Likewise, cultural norms influence whether employees feel empowered to speak up; research by Liang et al. (2012) demonstrates that employees in high power-distance cultures exhibit lower voice behavior due to concerns about harmony and status. These findings reinforce the need to examine how demographic and contextual factors shape experiences of agency, particularly the voice dimension.

Understanding these moderating factors is essential for developing equitable and effective strategies to enhance engagement across diverse populations and organizational settings.

4.4. Psychometric Development: A Research Agenda for Instrument Validation

To address the measurement deficit and enable empirical testing of the integrated model, we propose a rigorous multi-phase psychometric research agenda to develop a validated Employee Agency Scale (EAS). Key stages should include:

- Item generation through qualitative interviews, expert panels, and literature review, ensuring relevance across roles and industries.
- Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) to identify underlying factor structures for autonomy, voice, and impact.
- Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to test the dimensionality and fit of the proposed model across independent samples.
- Internal consistency reliability (e.g., Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability) to ensure scale robustness.
- Convergent and discriminant validity testing against established instruments such as LEMS and EENDEED to position agency within the broader engagement construct space.

Ultimately, administering the EAS alongside LEMS and EENDEED in future field studies will enable the development of predictive models of engagement that are both theoretically rich and empirically grounded, offering practical guidance for workplace transformation.

5. Practical Implications

The integration of agency and empathy into a unified framework for employee engagement offers multiple practical pathways for organizational leaders, HR professionals, and workplace strategists. In today's dynamic environments where hybrid work, algorithmic management, and generational shifts are transforming employee expectations, traditional engagement interventions must evolve. Below are three key application areas with actionable strategies.

5.1. Structural Support for Employee Agency

To foster agency in meaningful ways, organizations must do more than offer autonomy; they must create systems that legitimize voice and enable impact.

- **Decentralized Decision-Making:** Flattening hierarchies and empowering employees to make decisions within their roles fosters ownership and engagement. This can be achieved through self-managed teams, agile project governance, and employee participation in strategic planning.
- **Flexible Role Design:** Allowing employees to shape their responsibilities, such as choosing project assignments, flexible schedules, or methods of task execution, enhances perceptions of autonomy and control.
- **Voice Forums and Open Feedback Channels:** Implementing regular “voice spaces” such as innovation forums, anonymous suggestion platforms, and cross-functional roundtables ensures that employee input is heard and acted upon. Based on extensive research, Edmondson (2018) reported that structured voice mechanisms increase psychological safety and innovation, especially when responses are transparent and action-oriented.

When structural support for agency is in place, employees are more likely to initiate improvement, report issues, and connect their daily tasks to broader organizational goals, hallmarks of sustained engagement. Such systems also signal that leadership genuinely values employee contributions, which strengthens trust and reciprocity between workers and the organization. Over time, this alignment not only improves performance outcomes but also cultivates a resilient culture where employees feel empowered to adapt and thrive amid change.

5.2. Empathy Development as a Core Leadership Competency

Empathy is often treated as a soft skill, but in high-performing organizations, it is increasingly recognized as a strategic leadership competency essential to employee engagement, collaboration, and retention. When leaders exhibit empathetic or compassionate behaviors, employees perceive greater psychological safety and trust in the leader, which in turn supports open idea-sharing and collaboration (Ramachandran et al., 2024). This makes empathy not just a desirable trait, but a critical driver of organizational adaptability and long-term success.

- **Emotional Intelligence Training:** Equipping leaders and team members with skills in emotional recognition, self-regulation, and perspective-taking fosters a culture of responsiveness and relational trust. Programs based on Goleman's

(2006) Emotional Intelligence framework or adapted from Edmondson's (2018) psychological safety practices are particularly effective.

- Empathetic Leadership Models: Training managers to demonstrate authentic listening, openness to feedback, and relational dependability leads to greater employee resilience and engagement, especially in times of organizational change.
- Modeling Vulnerability and Support: Encouraging leaders to express empathy through behaviors rather than mere words reinforces belonging and reduces disengagement among employees experiencing personal or professional stress.

Empathy does not replace accountability—it enhances it by ensuring that employees feel understood, valued, and supported as they stretch into new roles or navigate uncertainty. Empathetic leadership, when combined with transparent expectations and equitable standards, has been empirically linked to improved employee well-being, which then supports engagement and performance (Pansini et al., 2024). In this way, empathy functions as a catalyst that strengthens resilience and sustains engagement during periods of change or challenge.

5.3. Real-Time Feedback and Recognition Systems

Feedback is a core component of both competence and relatedness, two psychological needs central to SDT and engagement. Modern systems must provide feedback that is not only timely and specific, but also emotionally intelligent.

- Continuous Performance Feedback: Shift from annual reviews to real-time coaching conversations, micro-recognition, and pulse surveys to capture how employees feel about their contributions and influence.
- Peer Recognition Platforms: Tools such as Kudos, Bonusly, or internal Slack integrations allow colleagues to acknowledge each other's impact and empathy in visible, organizationally supported ways.
- Emotionally Attuned Feedback: Leaders should be trained to balance constructive feedback with relational affirmation, ensuring that critique is offered in a way that protects dignity and psychological safety.

Research by Goleman (2006) suggests that emotionally intelligent feedback loops not only improve engagement scores, but also reduce burnout and turnover in high-pressure environments.

5.4. Strategic Relevance in a Changing World

These practices are especially critical in remote, hybrid, and AI-enhanced workplaces, where the human elements of work (connection, purpose, and recognition) are often diluted. Designing with agency and empathy in mind ensures that organizations do not simply digitize old management practices but reimagine engagement for the future.

In sum, implementing these practical interventions can help organizations:

- Elevate intrinsic motivation.
- Strengthen relational trust and team cohesion.

- Enhance innovation and adaptability.
- Improve retention and employee well-being.

As technological and generational shifts continue, organizations that intentionally engineer agency and empathy into the work experience will outperform those that treat engagement as a passive outcome or HR metric.

6. Conclusion

Agency and empathy are no longer optional competencies in modern work: they are vital, mutually reinforcing drivers of employee engagement. Where traditional models emphasized static constructs like job satisfaction or performance alignment, this review argues for a behavioral, contextualized model that integrates choice and connection. As organizations continue to navigate hybrid structures, technological integration, and workforce diversity, those that operationalize agency and empathy will unlock deeper innovation, stronger collaboration, and long-term resilience. This paper provides the theoretical groundwork for a new agency measurement scale, setting the stage for future empirical studies that will refine how we understand and support human engagement in the evolving world of work.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- Burris, E. R., Detert, J. R., & Chiaburu, D. S. (2013). Quitting before Leaving: The Mediating Effects of Psychological Attachment and Detachment on Voice. *Academy of Management Journal*, *56*, 1053-1074.
- Carmeli, A., Brueller, D., & Dutton, J. E. (2009). Learning Behaviours in the Workplace: The Role of High-Quality Interpersonal Relationships and Psychological Safety. *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*, *26*, 81-98. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sres.932>
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The “What” and “Why” of Goal Pursuits: Human Needs and the Self-Determination of Behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, *11*, 227-268. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327965pli1104_01
- Deci, E. L., Olafsen, A. H., & Ryan, R. M. (2017). Self-Determination Theory in Work Organizations: The State of a Science. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology*, *4*, 19-43. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-032516-113108>
- Detert, J. R., & Burris, E. R. (2007). Leadership Behavior and Employee Voice: Is the Door Really Open? *Academy of Management Journal*, *50*, 869-884. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2007.26279183>
- Detert, J. R., & Burris, E. R. (2016). Can Your Employees Really Speak Freely? *Harvard Business Review*, *94*, 80-87. <https://hbr.org/2016/01/can-your-employees-really-speak-freely>
- Edmondson, A. C. (2018). *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace*. Wiley.
- Edmondson, A. C., & Lei, Z. (2014). Psychological Safety: The History, Renaissance, and Future of an Interpersonal Construct. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and*

- Organizational Behavior*, 1, 23-43.
<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-031413-091305>
- Gagné, M., & Deci, E. L. (2005). Self-Determination Theory and Work Motivation. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 26, 331-362. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.322>
- Goleman, D. (2006). *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships*. Bantam Books.
- Harter, J. K., Schmidt, F. L., & Hayes, T. L. (2002). Business-Unit Level Relationship between Employee Satisfaction, Employee Engagement, and Business Outcomes. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 87, 268-279. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.87.2.268>
- Hayes, A. F. (2018). *Introduction to Mediation, Moderation, and Conditional Process Analysis* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.
- Ickes, W. (2021). Empathic Accuracy: Its Links to Clinical, Cognitive, Developmental, Social, and Physiological Psychology. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 72, 693-718. <https://doi.org/10.5465/256287>
- Kahn, W. A. (1990). Psychological Conditions of Personal Engagement and Disengagement at Work. *Academy of Management Journal*, 33, 692-724.
- Kahn, W. A. (2010). The Essence of Engagement: Lessons from the Field. In S. L. Albrecht (Ed.), *Handbook of Employee Engagement: Perspectives, Issues, Research and Practice* (pp. 20-30). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Lartey, F. M., & Randall, P. M. (2022). Enhanced Engagement Nurtured by Determination, Efficacy, and Exchange Dimensions (EENDEED): A Nine-Item Instrument for Measuring Traditional Workplace and Remote Employee Engagement. *International Business Research*, 15, 1-23. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ibr.v15n2p1>
- Lartey, F. M., Randall, P. M., Saurage-Altenloh, S., & Tate, T. D. (2025). Measuring Empathy in Traditional and Remote Workplaces. *CORALS' Journal of Applied Research*, 3, 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.58593/cjar.v3i2.58>
- Lee, W. R., Choi, S. B., & Kang, S. (2021). How Leaders' Positive Feedback Influences Employees' Innovative Behavior: The Mediating Role of Voice Behavior and Job Autonomy. *Sustainability*, 13, Article 1901. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13041901>
- Liang, J., Farh, C. I. C., & Farh, J. (2012). Psychological Antecedents of Promotive and Prohibitive Voice: A Two-Wave Examination. *Academy of Management Journal*, 55, 71-92. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2010.0176>
- Macey, W. H., & Schneider, B. (2008). The Meaning of Employee Engagement. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 1, 3-30. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2007.0002.x>
- Mor Barak, M. E. (2015). Inclusion Is the Key to Diversity Management, but What Is Inclusion? *Human Service Organizations Management, Leadership & Governance*, 39, 83-88. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23303131.2015.1035599>
- Mora-Pelegrín, M., Montes-Berges, B., Aranda, M., Vázquez, M. A., & Armenteros-Martínez, E. (2021). The Empathic Capacity and the Ability to Regulate It: Construction and Validation of the Empathy Management Scale (EMS). *Healthcare*, 9, Article 587. <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare9050587>
- Nie, T., Tian, M., Cai, M., & Yan, Q. (2023). Job Autonomy and Work Meaning: Drivers of Employee Job-Crafting Behaviors in the VUCA Times. *Behavioral Sciences*, 13, Article 493. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs13060493>
- Pansini, M., Buonomo, I., & Benevene, P. (2024). Fostering Sustainable Workplace through Leaders' Compassionate Behaviors: Understanding the Role of Employee Well-Being and Work Engagement. *Sustainability*, 16, Article 10697. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su162310697>

- Ramachandran, S., Balasubramanian, S., James, W. F., & Al Masaeid, T. (2024). Whither Compassionate Leadership? A Systematic Review. *Management Review Quarterly*, 74, 1473-1557. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11301-023-00340-w>
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2018). *Self-Determination Theory: Basic Psychological Needs in Motivation, Development, and Wellness* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.
- Saks, A. M. (2022). Caring Human Resources Management and Employee Engagement. *Human Resource Management Review*, 32, Article 100835. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2021.100835>
- Schaufeli, W. B., Salanova, M., González-Romá, V., & Bakker, A. B. (2002). The Measurement of Engagement and Burnout: A Two Sample Confirmatory Factor Analytic Approach. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 3, 71-92. <https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1015630930326>
- Tagini, S., Ghiggia, A., Falco, S., Castelli, L., Mauro, A., & Scarpina, F. (2025). Sensory Attenuation and Agency in Cooperative and Individual Contexts: Exploring the Role of Empathy in Action Perception. *Brain Sciences*, 15, Article 688. <https://doi.org/10.3390/brainsci15070688>
- Van den Broeck, A., Ferris, D. L., Chang, C., & Rosen, C. C. (2016). A Review of Self-Determination Theory's Basic Psychological Needs at Work. *Journal of Management*, 42, 1195-1229. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206316632058>
- Vansteenkiste, M., Niemiec, C. P., & Soenens, B. (2010). The Development of the Five Mini-Theories of Self-Determination Theory: An Historical Overview, Emerging Trends, and Future Directions. In *The Decade Ahead: Theoretical Perspectives on Motivation and Achievement* (pp. 105-165). Emerald Publishing Limited.