Chapter 7

Nurturing Employee Vigor: Implications for Sustainable Performance

Abstract The theory of engagement posits that an engaged employee has a highly positive attitude that is characterized by an unparalleled zest for life, energy, the will to work, and to commit themselves fully. This allows the employee to achieve special performances. Those who are engaged, are open to new ideas, are both physically and mentally healthy, look for their authentic talents, and start every new (work)day with plenty of energy and a zest for life. This is not only pleasant for the individual themselves, but also inspiring for their immediate colleagues and beneficial to the organization.

Keywords Vigor · Work engagement · Theory · Performance indicators · Sustainable performance

7.1 Introduction

The labor market is rapidly changing and in the next thirty years, the potential professional population will decrease by three-quarters of a million, according to Dutch agency CBS (2015). While the number of elderly people increases, the number of working people decreases. This requires sustainable and wide employment of the total present amount of available energy, also at a macro-economic level. Consequently, employers and employees must take their responsibility and make sure that they utilize this energy optimally. I believe in the power of energy management as contributing towards sustainable employability and wide talent development. Vitality of body and mind, and care and attention to these factors are essential components of self-development and development of your talents. A strategic view on energy management, that is carried on both the highest and the lowest level in the organization, is a prerequisite. Sustainable talent development plays an essential role here. Employees are motivated, stimulated, and facilitated to work on their own fitness and vitality (Kodden 2014).

Involvement from all departments, the board, and possibly also the board of directors and support from a work's council are a determining factor for success (Kodden and Hupkes 2019; Kodden and Groenveld 2019). Everyone must contribute to energy management. A fitness program, set up specially and attuned individually, must not

be seen as an expenditure, but as an investment that will redeem itself in various fields. A program at Ernst and Young (2017) resulted in employees becoming 85% fitter, 75% had improved their stamina, and 63% of participants experienced a better energy balance. 51% indicated that they were able to work in a more focused way as a result.

Vital people perform better and enjoy things more. According to research conducted by Diehl and Stoffelsen (2007), vital employees do not only look happier, they also seem to do things with little or no effort, have practically no complaints, recover faster, and have plenty of energy left at the end of the day. Vitality and energy management sound much more positive to most people than the words health and working conditions. Who does not want to have more energy left at the end of the day? For instance to exercise.

The word “vigor” is becoming increasingly common. The term can be applied to much more than just sports and health. So what exactly is vigor? Does it have to do with:

- Being productive;
- Being sustainably employable;
- Being fit;
- Being young at heart;
- Being healthy;
- Showing resilience;
- Being happy;
- Being engaged or;
- Being willing to change?

Many of these concepts come close to the meaning of “vigor,” yet do not quite cover it. Instead, they are phenomena that are often a cause or result of that vigor. It could be claimed that, in addition to talent, you also need a good physical and mental fit in order to achieve sustainable performance. That is why my fourth hypothesis goes as follows:

Hypothesis 4

Having a good fit to the physical and mental job requirements to a greater or lesser degree positively or negatively influences the relationship between talent and performance (Fig. 7.1).

7.2 Energy and Motivation

Vigor is often about vitality. Many descriptions of vitality point to the Latin word *vita*, meaning “life,” as in life force, liveliness, lust for life, life energy, etc. Ryan and Frederick (1997) confirm this and describe subjective vitality as the conscious experience of one’s being alive: *aliveness* and positive energy. According to Bakker et al. (2009), vigor stands for energetic, resilient, fit, and working without getting

Fig. 7.1 Hypothesis 4

tired. Vigorous and dedicated people can make the difference, I concluded in *Become a HERO* (2014). Quality over quantity. Furthermore, a variety of studies show that the level of work engagement and being able to meet demanding job requirements are strongly linked.

Vigor is, therefore, more than the absence of illness. Vigor is more than being physically fit and therefore not the same as being healthy and/or the absence of an unhealthy lifestyle that might include smoking, not exercising, eating too much, or drinking too much. Vigor is a combination of energy and motivation and appears to ensure sustainable employability of employees. It also influences the extent to which they are able to meet the physical and mental requirements of a job, as well as how willing and able they are to keep doing their current and future jobs (Kodden and Hupkes 2019).

7.3 The Hedgehog Concept

In my earlier book, I explained having talents and being able to meet mental and physical job requirements. The main idea of my book *Become a HERO* (2014) is similar to Jim Collins' hedgehog concept (2001); the metaphor for the idea that once you discover what you can become best at, when you truly understand what you can make money doing, and really know what makes you passionate, you can overcome any obstacle. Collins uses the story of the hedgehog that was attacked by a smart, sly, and agile fox on a daily basis. By using its only weapon, its spines, the fox did not have a chance to harm the hedgehog. Despite the fact that the hedgehog was slow, small, and not very smart, the fox had no way to counter its spines.

Once you know what your strengths are and how you can develop them further, you will notice that you will become even more engaged. According to Collins, your lust for life, and even your life expectancy will increase. You will be happier going to work, will have more energy to give it your all and you will be better able to meet all your job requirements.

7.4 The Need for Vigor

It seems vigor is necessary in order to become engaged. A high level of energy is required to enable you to become active—and stay active—to achieve your goals (Ryan and Frederick 1997). This is why vigor is an important aspect of work engagement, in addition to dedication and absorption. A study by the University of South Carolina shows that running, rowing, and other sports that make you sweat are not just good for your body, but also for your brain. Running for half an hour three or four times a week is already enough to keep your brain in shape and even delay early Alzheimer's (Charvat 2009). Higher grades, fewer mistakes, improving your math, forgetting less; intense exercise keeps your body fit and your brain young (Van Vuuren 2011).

Exercise not only stimulates your mind but your brain as well. “Especially children, who are in an important stage of development, become smarter when they exercise and play outside. In particular, when their activities require concentration, communication and coordination,” according to Jaap Seidell, professor at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam (Seidell 2012).

“Basically, it is about the step from not exercising at all, to half an hour of moderate exercise every day. That provides the greatest benefit.”

Seidell (2012) acknowledges that few people feel like leaving the house to exercise after a hard day's work. “But if those people take their dog for a walk, they return happier than when they left. It is important to teach this behavior at an early age. If you have not done this all your life and you are overweight, suffer from bad knees or shortness of breath, starting to exercise can be very difficult. That is why it is so important to stay active, from early childhood to old age.”

7.5 Focus

Many people would agree that to become and stay vigorous, you indeed need to exercise regularly. But according to Tony Schwartz, founder and CEO of The Energy Project and regular contributor to the *Harvard Business Review*, the key is to not just exercise. In order to stay vigorous, you also need to add focus to your life. Not easy, considering the fact that our modern lives require us to multitask. Work, parenting, maintaining a social life; but do not forget to exercise. All preferably on the same day. Staying vigorous is all about applying focus. In his studies, Schwartz demonstrates that the productivity of individual employees decreases by about 25% when they perform multiple tasks at the same time. Several other studies have also shown that multitasking does not work and can even be counterproductive (Schwarz 2012).

The number of Dutch people who are overworked or suffering from burnout is increasing rapidly. Most people don't exactly remember the process that led to their current situation, but a lot of people who've suffered from burnout in the past remember exactly when things went wrong. Much has been published in recent

years on the symptoms of burnout; psychiatrists, doctors, therapists, researchers, consultants, and former patients have all provided insights on the issue.

According to the Dutch statistics bureau, 14% of employees in the Netherlands reported burnout symptoms in 2014. That is one in seven. At least several times a month, they felt empty after work, emotionally drained by their job or tired when they were confronted with work while waking up. Note that burnout symptoms are approximately equally common in all employees of all age groups between 25 and 65 years of age (CBS 2015). Other research by the Dutch statistics bureau shows that burnouts are more prevalent among higher-educated than less-educated employees. It also shows how burnouts are related to certain personality traits and the lack of certain work-related sources of energy. As my colleague, Professor Van Rhenen explains: “You can prevent a burnout through life and work engagement.” Only do things that suit you as a person and continue to exercise. Together, this will give you more energy and will make you stronger instead of weaker (van Rhenen 2008).

Luckily, science in the Netherlands is also increasingly recognizing the importance of vitality. In 2010, Tinka van Vuuren was even appointed as professor of vitality management at the Open University in Heerlen. Her speech was aptly titled *You don't have to be sick to get better* (2012). In it, she emphasized the importance of vitality management. “Employers who ignore the vitality of their employees will get in real trouble in the coming years,” she said.

7.6 Vigor and Self-efficacy

You also need self-efficacy to start exercising. In this case, it means that you consider yourself able to execute the desired behavior (exercising). Self-efficacy, therefore, comes from the combination of self-confidence—I will be able to sport for an hour in the gym—and actually carrying out the intended activity (making time to exercise). As I have described before, self-efficacy—having the necessary skills to perform a certain task and the confidence in one's ability to successfully complete it—differs from self-confidence in that self-confidence refers to believing in oneself, whereas self-efficacy concerns one's perceived ability to complete a certain task. Believing in one's own ability leads to positive intentions actually resulting in new behavior and sustainable performance.

Fourteen Reasons to Exercise

Exercise makes it easier for your body to draw oxygen from the air and transport it to your muscles. Every year, you lose about 1% of this capacity. This means a lot of heavy breathing once you pass thirty. Exercise can cut this loss in half.

1. Exercises lower blood pressure by keeping the vascular system healthy.
2. Regular exercise improves your body's ability to metabolize glucose. This decreases the risk of type 2 diabetes.
3. Exercise maintains your immune system and counteracts aging.

4. Exercise breaks down body fat. In addition, the muscles you build up through exercise increase your metabolic rate.
5. Exercise maintains bone strength. Bone density decreases by 1% every year. An hour of weight lifting a week is enough to strengthen your bones.
6. Exercise strengthens muscle.
7. Stretch exercises like those in yoga or tai chi prevent arthritis.
8. When we exercise, we sleep better. Active during the day, tired at night.
9. It makes us happy. Exercise releases endorphins and reduces the risk of depression.
10. Endorphins also reduce anxiety.
11. Regular exercise will keep you healthier and reduce the amount of sick days you need.
12. Exercise improves memory.
13. Exercise reduces the risk of dementia.
14. But above all, exercise gives you more energy. You will feel less tired and less stressed.

7.7 Results of the Study

As I described in Chap. 5, self-efficacy turns out to be the number one predictor for sustainable performance. Vigor also seems to be very important for sustainable performance by professionals and is number 7 on the list of performance predictors. My research also shows that both are strongly interconnected. Other studies also show that the combination of both is the key to sustainable performance. Self-efficacy and vigor start with focusing on yourself, on your personal development.

This study not only shows that vigor is important for sustainable performance as an element of work engagement, but also that it is important for the fit with the mental job requirements. After self-efficacy and adaptability, it is the third most important predictor of sustainable performance. The importance of vigor and the ability to handle the physical and especially mental job requirements can therefore not be stressed enough.

The Dutch CEOs, however, paid little attention to this important predictor of performance. The fit with the mental job requirements did not even make their top 15.

It seems therefore that it is high time for Dutch organizations to develop a new approach to talent and performance management. A perspective that attaches more value to the importance of vigor and employees' abilities to meet the physical and especially mental requirements of the job. Not only are our jobs and organizations changing increasingly fast, job requirements are also becoming more demanding. Organizations that ensure the physical and mental resilience of their workforce seem better equipped to meet today's requirements for sustainable performance.

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