

It takes two to tango!

by

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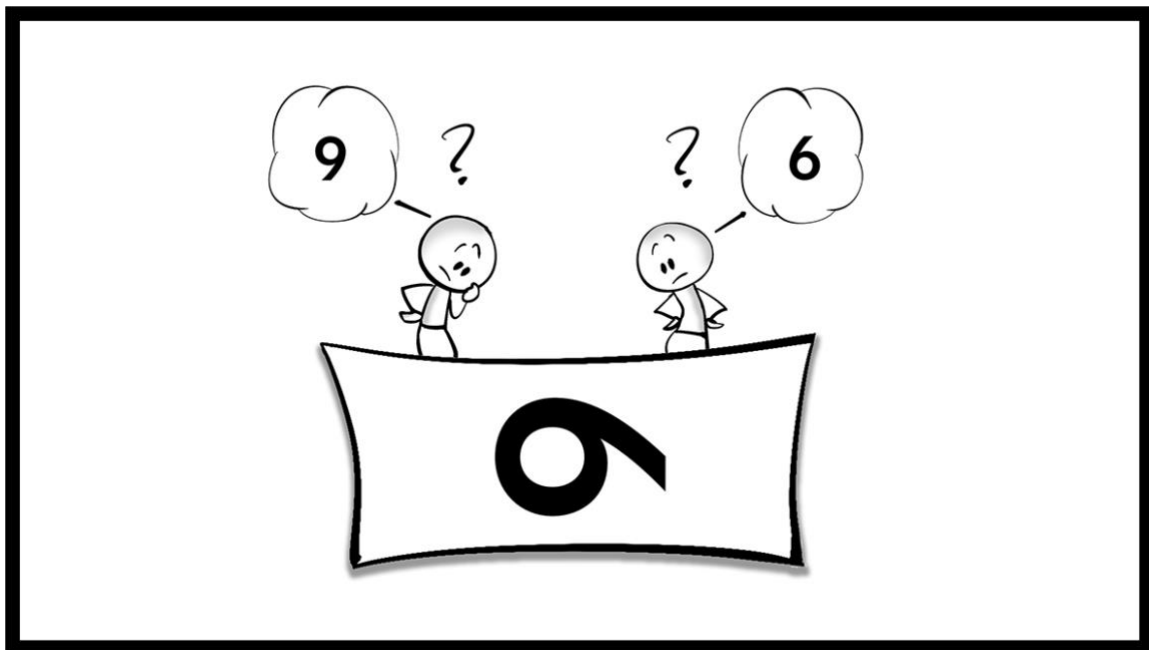


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Abstract

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Key words	Employee engagement, Employee engagement gap, Employee engagement rhetoric, Meaningful work, Psychological safety, Behavioral integrity, Two-way employee engagement, Context.
Purpose	The main purpose of our study is to explore the ‘say-do’ gap between management and employees and investigate whether there is a consensus or dissensus between what is being said and done. In addition, we aim to gain an in-depth understanding of both managers' and employees' perceptions of the employee engagement's supporting and hindering factors and the employee engagement initiatives.
Methodology	Our research follows interpretivism and symbolic interactionism traditions to understand the meanings and perceptions of managers and employees. Moreover, a qualitative approach and an abductive methodology have been used to generate the empirical data. Furthermore, our research involved an ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ study, allowing us to take different viewpoints.
Theoretical Perspective	This research suggests a perspective for understanding the managers’ and employees’ perceptions of the supporting and hindering factors of EE and the EE initiatives.
Conclusion	Based on our findings, we revealed two new concepts: <i>employee engagement gap</i> and <i>employee engagement rhetoric</i> . These signifies the dissensus between managers and employees in what is being said and done, but also the different meanings ascribed to employee engagement. We can conclude that employee engagement (EE) is very personal and needs to be understood from an individual level considering the local context. We also concluded that EE is a two-way process. Hence, the right organizational culture, needs to be created for this process to exist and to bridge the EE gap.

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We hope you enjoy reading this thesis and find it as thought-provoking as we did, as we gained many personal insights and "aha moments".

Warm regards,

Vianey Ramirez and Sanne Feitsma

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

“Employees do not quit organizations; they quit bosses” (Whittington & Galpin, 2010, p. 22).

The notorious entrance of the ‘work from anywhere’ Era (Christenson & Graham, 2021) has reshaped how, where, and why we work. In combination with the increased headhunting, the presence of knowledge workers, and expanded job options in a globalized world, human capital has become a competitive asset (Thompson, 2003). Therefore, companies are actively investing in initiatives and strategies to drive employee engagement to retain and attract talent, or at least that is what they think. However, do managers and employees actually know what makes them engaged? This thesis contributes to discussions on employee engagement perceptions and initiatives.

However, to better understand this phenomenon, it is necessary to trace where the concept of employee engagement came from and why companies and professionals worldwide started to pay attention to this term. Employee engagement (EE) arose from Kahn's (1990) social psychological work. He proposed that EE occurs when people bring themselves physically, intellectually, and emotionally into job role performance, which promotes connections with the job. Other authors such as Robinson, Perryman, and Hayday (2004) define it as a positive attitude towards the organization and its values. Moreover, EE is closely connected to other studies conducted by Harter et al. (2002) and Harter et al. (2009). They state that engaged employees lead to higher productivity, customer satisfaction, and company profits.

There is a vast literature on employee engagement; however, there is no single definition (Beardwell & Thompson, 2017). EE is such a broad concept that it is constantly challenged and discussed by academics and, therefore, also difficult for practitioners to grasp and make sense of (Meyer, 2013). Hence, a deep, local and comprehensive understanding of EE remains an under-researched phenomenon. It can be noted that there is a significant gap between how EE is perceived and how it is being applied into practice (Matthews, 2018).

1.2 The say-do gap

Plenty of research has proved the positive effects of engaged employees within organizations. An engaged workforce leads to lower turnover rates, and better performance can lead to greater profitability (Beardwell & Thompson, 2017). However, it is prevalent that EE levels seem to be higher in non-profit organizations (NPOs) due to their work context that often involves psychological safety, support, team-based culture, and higher responsibilities (Park et al., 2018). Nonetheless, an engaged workforce is very appealing due to intrinsic benefits such as job satisfaction, motivation, and commitment (Goulet & Frank, 2002; Park et al., 2018). Consequently, the concept of EE is increasing in awareness and is on the top list of employers nowadays (Matthews, 2018). Even though this concept has been frequently studied, a deep and comprehensive understanding of engagement is still a lacking phenomenon (McManus & Mosca, 2015). With more than 70 definitions of engagement, it continues to be an ill-defined concept in which managers are tangled in ambiguity and find it hard to know where to start (Brown & Reilly, 2013; Meyer, 2013). Whittington and Galpin (2010) stated that based on extensive research from Gallup, less than 30% of the total corporate workforce is fully engaged. Making an employee fully engaged requires connecting its hands, heads, and hearts with the company's vision and mission, which is, however, very challenging (Rao, 2017).

Furthermore, it has been criticized that employee engagement overlaps with other concepts such as job satisfaction, motivation, identification, or involvement, complicating the application when it is unclear what the intended driver is (Rigg, 2013). Rigg (2013, p.31) has even referred to this concept as "old wine in a new bottle." Therefore, future researchers are urged to explore further and clarify the added value of this concept. Hence, we state the importance of considering the context. As Jenkins and Delbridge (2013) mention, context matters and provides room for individual perceptions and experiences.

However, since EE has been studied chiefly from quantitative methodologies, this has led to overlooking the context, the individual and local implications, and the complexity of its application (Jenkins & Delbridge, 2013). As Einstein so famously put it, "Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted." (Gioia, 2012, p.16). Due to capital markets' increasing influence and constraints on HRM, companies are becoming more standardized. The main focus has shifted toward shareholder value, where cost-cutting and generating profits are often the end goal (Thompson, 2003). Managers' focus has been on

adopting simplistic universal models in which engagement is often measured in standardized surveys to compare and benchmark its employee engagement score. However, due to this obsession with EE surveys and metrics, only one in five managers have concrete action plans to increase and improve employee engagement (Brown & Reilly, 2013). Moreover, McManus and Mosca (2015) stated that managers still fail to execute concrete action of engagement into practice. The complexity of engagement practices is often overlooked and thus executed as a one-size-fits-all initiative, which is predetermined to fail (McManus & Mosca, 2015).

This features discrepancies in meaning and what it implies, discrepancies between what is said and what is done, and how managers and employees attribute meaning to engagement initiatives. Resulting in a 'say-do' gap in which managers say hopeful promises but act little upon them (Brown & Reilly, 2013). As a result, knowledge about employee engagement has not been applied well in practice leaving managers confused in their day-to-day operations and decision-making (Meyer, 2013). Thus, this implies a significant gap between how managers ascribe the importance of employee engagement and what is actually being done in practice (Matthews, 2018).

Employee engagement is a fluid and flexible concept (Truss et al., 2013). The key is to understand each individual's needs and wants; however, ongoing evaluation and feedback are required to identify the individual factors that promote or hinder employee engagement (McManus & Mosca, 2015). Rao (2017, p. 129) stated that "when dealing with people, remember you are not dealing with creatures of logic, but creatures of emotion." This quote implies that people have diverse needs, individual desires, emotions, and unique egos, which may change over time. Accordingly, to ensure employee engagement, it is essential to deal with and treat people differently (Rao, 2017). However, EE surveys and metrics lack these crucial differences between employees and groups of employees. Next to that, these surveys restrict thorough understanding and the opportunity to ask specific person-oriented questions. Therefore, there is a need to move away from the superficial universal employee engagement measurements to a more qualitative perception that considers the complexity and sensitivity of employee engagement. A qualitative perception would support building a more comprehensive view of employee engagement, bridging the gap between expectations and realities (Brown & Reilly, 2013; Rao, 2017).

Given that employees' perceptions of the EE initiatives implemented by managers are experienced differently at the individual level, alignment between what is perceived and what

is done in practice is crucial. This alignment between what the manager says and what the manager does can also be referred to as behavioral integrity (Davis & Rothstein, 2006). Behavioral integrity can be explained as the fit between the perception of the manager's behavior and actions and the employees' perception of the manager's behavior and actions. If the manager acts according to the perception and expectations of an employee, and if the manager's actions are in line with his/her values, we can speak of behavioral integrity. According to Davis and Rothstein (2006), behavioral integrity can also be referred to as acting in accordance with a psychological contract. A psychological contract can be explained as a common understanding between two parties on beliefs and perceptions of specific promises and agreements (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). If alignment is lacking, there is a risk that employees become aware of the 'say-do / expectation-reality' gap, which can lead to demotivation, loss of trust, and transparency (Matthews, 2018). Therefore, when there is misalignment between what the manager "says and does," we can speak of a psychological contract breach. This indicates that the greater the alignment (behavioral integrity), the greater an employee's trust in management.

Trust is a crucial component that makes up the psychological contract and is vital for the employer-employee relationship. Alfes et al. (2013) highlight the importance of the employer-employee relationship. They argue that employees who have a positive perception of EE practices (actions executed by their managers) are likely to show higher levels of engagement and thus are less likely to leave the company. However, gaining trust and shared understanding in the employer-employee relationship is challenging to establish yet easy to lose (Whittington & Galpin, 2010). Establishing trust requires different prerequisites, such as the manager being 'authentic.' Authentic managers act upon behavioral integrity. They are willing to align their intended and perceived actions with their employees. According to Whittington and Galpin (2010, p. 22), authentic managers are characterized as "hopeful, optimistic, resilient and transparent."

Nevertheless, many managers cannot bridge the gap between expectations and reality as they attempt to hold an image of themselves that does not reflect their true identity (Whittington & Galpin, 2010). This leads to a discrepancy between identity and image, contrasting realities, and pseudo-transformational leadership (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016; Whittington & Galpin, 2010). This gap between expectations and realities creates mistrust and disconnection with employees, resulting in employees becoming even more disengaged. Whittington and

Galpin (2010, p. 22) stated, “employees do not quit organizations; they quit bosses.” Thus, the managerial lack of internal alignment and self-reflection calls for a fundamental state of leadership (Quinn, 2004). Quinn (2004) argues that a fundamental state of leadership implies self-reflexivity, awareness, and openness to others’ emotions, perceptions, and behaviors. Behavioral integrity can be established in which the manager shifts his/her attention to the individual level of the employee level (Whittington & Galpin, 2010; Quinn, 2004).

1.3 Rationale and purpose of the study

Hence, employee engagement requires a two-way relationship between employer and employee where both parties need to have a level of awareness of the business context and self-reflection. Only then, within the organization, improvements in performance and behavior can be made to bridge the gap between expectations and reality of EE (Kular et al., 2008; Robinson & Hayday, 2007).

We focus our study on exploring the ‘say-do’ gap during our thesis project. We aim to gain an in-depth understanding of both managers' and employees' employee engagement perceptions and initiatives. Hence, capturing insights into how it is understood, practiced, and experienced. The increased focus on the concept of employee engagement, yet still very little insight on how to approach EE initiatives in practice, leads us to our two research questions, namely:

1. What are the perceptions of the supporting and hindering factors of employee engagement according to managers and employees?
2. How do managers perceive their employee engagement initiatives, and how do employees relate to these?

As our research aims to explore the gap between the perceptions of managers and employees on the supporting and hindering factors of EE and its EE initiatives, both research questions have different purposes. The first research question explores what the managers and employees “say.” The expectations and perceptions among EE's supporting and hindering factors will be investigated. At the same time, the second research question aims to explore what the managers “do” regarding EE initiatives and how the employees relate to these. This research question aims to delve into the reality of what is being done in practice regarding EE initiatives.

We refer to EE initiatives as a strategic set of activities and practices executed by management as supporting factors to drive employee engagement. These initiatives can range from salary models, benefits packages, feedback practices, one-on-one meetings, team-building activities, as well as training and development programs. Acknowledging that initiatives for engagement already exist, our interest is to explore further how EE initiatives are perceived, executed, and lived among managers and employees.

Thus, we aim to investigate whether there is a consensus or dissensus between what is being said and done. We refer to a consensus if there is an alignment between the perceptions of the supporting and hindering factors of EE according to managers and employees. Moreover, when referring to consensus, we speak of alignment if the manager's EE initiatives are in line with the employee's perceptions. On the contrary, with dissensus, we signify a misalignment if there is no common understanding of the meaning and perceptions of EE's supporting and hindering factors between managers and employees. Moreover, we refer to dissensus if we indicate a misalignment between expectations and realities concerning employee engagement initiatives. This misalignment indicates a gap between what the manager says and what the manager does in practice.

Our thesis research was conducted in the context of a scale-up located in Stockholm, Sweden. This scaleup, called Jozzby (pseudonym imposed on the company to maintain its anonymity), consists of 50-100 employees and has grown extensively over the past year. The employment of one of our thesis participants at Jozzby has allowed us to gain direct and qualitative access to all organization members. One of the main reasons we chose to conduct our research at Jozzby is due to the strong reputation and purpose of the company, the employees' strong connection to the brand, and the window of benefits and EE initiatives Jozzby has to offer. In addition, Jozzby is known for being bold, challenging current beauty stereotypes, and striving for diversity and inclusion. Thus, this company allowed us to understand EE in a bold and diverse context.

1.4 Main Findings

Imagine that, on the one hand, managers speak Chinese (referring to the beliefs and initiatives they hold that drive EE). Moreover, on the other hand, the employees speak Italian (referring to the reasons that increase their engagement). Consequently, employees do not understand the language managers are trying to communicate. As a result, initiatives meant to increase employee engagement are not understood or perceived as such. Based on the say-do gaps we encountered in our findings, we have emerged a new concept, namely the ‘*employee engagement gap*.’ This gap refers to misalignments between managers and employees in what is said and done. It also refers to the different meanings they ascribe to the factors supporting and hindering the EE and its initiatives. We have found that most employees and managers have the same understanding of employee engagement. However, there are variations in preferences and how it is expressed, embodied, and experienced on a personal level. Thus, employee engagement is very personal. Furthermore, to highlight the differences in how people perceive and communicate employee engagement, we would like to introduce the concept of ‘*employee engagement rhetoric*.’ This concept assists us in explaining the say-do gap, as well as in understanding what is behind the rhetoric differences and the different layers that lead to disconnection in the EE phenomenon.

1.5 Outline of the Thesis

Our thesis consists of 6 chapters. In the first chapter, the introduction and problematization provide the reader with background on employee engagement. This chapter also outlines our research's purpose, rationale, and relevance, next to presenting the two research questions. In the literature review (Chapter 2), we extend our argumentation of Chapter 1 and provide a critical conversation and debate among existing literature about the employee engagement phenomenon on which we build our research. Next, we delve into EE's supporting and hindering factors, next to touching upon EE initiatives. After providing the reader with background information and a critical debate on employee engagement, the method section (Chapter 3) presents the methodologies we have used to conduct our research. While trying to grasp the meaning of how people understand and experience employee engagement, we will use an interpretivism approach. An abductive methodology is used to observe, interpret, and analyze the empirical material. Using open and focused coding, we identified several themes presented in our main findings, Chapter 4. This analysis section presents new empirical

material that emerged from our fieldwork. We gave meaning to our findings through interpretations and clarifications. Chapter 5 critically discusses these empirical findings by referring to the literature presented in Chapter 2.

Moreover, based on our empirical findings, we introduced a new concept; the employee engagement gap. Finally, based on this critical discussion, we are reaching the end of our thesis, namely the conclusion (Chapter 6), including limitations, implications, and recommendations for future research. Based on our research, we can conclude that EE is very personal and needs to be understood from an interpretivism approach focused on the meanings expressed by individuals in their local context. Moreover, the conclusion presents the need for an organizational culture where EE can become a two-way process. A shared understanding of the employee engagement rhetoric between managers and employees can be gained. Only then managers and employees can make sense of and bridge the employee engagement gap between perceptions and reality.

2 Literature review

The following chapter provides a selective overview of the evolution of the employee engagement (EE) phenomenon. As we delve deeper into this concept, we explore the key players in making sense of this phenomenon. Hence, this chapter also aims to reinforce the argumentation set out in Chapter 1. We further clarify the say-do gap where managers ascribe the importance of EE but act little upon it. Moreover, we delve into the factors that affect perceptions, such as context, trust, and psychological safety. Subsequently, the importance of reflexivity is addressed since both managers and employees need to be actively engaged to make EE a two-way process. We end this section by touching upon the hindrances and the dark side of EE.

2.1 Employee engagement

Over time since the concept of EE was introduced in 1990, new definitions and attributes have been given. Traveling back in time, Kahn (1990) was the first person to define ‘personal engagement’ (Bailey et al. 2017), seeing it as the emotional, physical, and cognitive self-expression at work. Nevertheless, it was not long before the downside of this type of excessive attitude in the workplace began to be studied. Maslach and Leiter (1997) investigated the causes of stress at work and what can lead to burnout, finding that maintaining a high level of engagement for an extended period of time causes tremendous stress and can even lead to burnout. On the contrary, Schaufeli et al. (2002) identified two factors that characterize engagement, vigor, and dedication, referring to high identification. Therefore, defining engagement as “a persistent and positive affective-emotional state of fulfillment in employees characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” Salanova, González-romá, and Bakker (2002, p.74).

This EE phenomenon began to attract the attention of numerous practitioners after a study carried out by Harter et al. (2002), where he demonstrated how engaged employees lead to higher profitability in companies. Nevertheless, to this day, various organizations continue to invest in research, improvement, and measurement of the link between engagement and performance (CIPD, 2010; Gatenby et al., 2009). Other authors, such as Robinson, Perryman, and Hayday (2004), brought the company's values into play, defining that EE is not only a positive attitude towards the organization but also towards its values. Saks (2019) continues to

deepen this phenomenon by finding, on the one hand, how employees become absorbed in their work by using their talents, which leads to a sense of self-worth. On the other hand, finding that employees with low levels of engagement are a threat to the growth of companies and other organizations, as the motivation to share ideas and work optimally is compromised. However, to better seize how this phenomenon is understood and perceived, our intention is not to limit ourselves to a single attached meaning but to remain open to the multiple descriptions and contributions given to this concept of employee engagement. Therefore, extending the phenomenon with new insights may arise in this research.

The meaning of EE has evolved from being employee-focused to being considered the backbone of the working environment (Cleland et al., 2008). According to CIPD (2010) (The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development from the UK), employee engagement goes beyond satisfaction or motivation. Employee engagement includes the employee's willingness to help colleagues, learn, and share. It is something that cannot be demanded and has to be offered organically by the employee. Furthermore, it is also recognized that a high level of EE links to a high discretionary effort (give the extra of what is described in your job role) from the employee, which leads to more return on investment and profit (Piyachat, Chanongkorn & Panisa, 2014).

2.2 Hands-on employee engagement

As a result, efforts began to focus not only on what it means to be an engaged employee and its benefits but also on the elements that can predict and measure the EE phenomenon. Gallup (2010), in one of its consulting reports, with more than 12 million employees involved in the research, developed a macro-level indicator that allows managers to track the ratios of engaged and disengaged employees. However, these arbitrary statements overlook the timeliness of these types of surveys. The factors that make an employee engaged may vary depending on the personal stage/position/age the employee is in, so the answers are prone to misclassification. Hence, they fall short in incorporating individual ways of expressing and perceiving engagement. However, they claim they do not just want to measure results; they want to measure what drives those results (Gallup, 2010). These studies have focused more on employees' emotions and attitudes when they are engaged in their work. Hence, we sought to delve deeper into what it means for employees to be absorbed in their work and self-reflect on why they work hard and give the extra mile.

McManus and Mosca (2015) examine activities that organizations can undertake to improve employee engagement, restoring employees' trust and confidence. They point out that managers should focus on creating activities that address the following four key points. First, increase and maintain trust by leading by example and creating forums or promoting open and honest communication. Second, ensure equal treatment and fairness by clarifying criteria and how decisions are made. Third, recognize efforts by creating reward programs. Lastly, invest in employee training to help them reach their potential (McManus & Mosca, 2015). Finally, McManus and Mosca (2015) encourage organizations to be attuned to the needs of employees in their activities and maintain clear communication for these efforts to be successful. Other authors likewise stress that communication, recognition, and training initiatives enhance employee engagement (e.g., Beardwell & Thompson, 2017; BlessingWhite, 2006; Wellins, 2005; Millar, 2012).

2.3 Context matters

Furthermore, consultancy reports such as Gallup (2010) recognize the importance of considering each company's unique and local factors. For example, Gallup (2010) recommends adding questions that incorporate the company's unique culture and business elements that the company is going through. Brown and Reilly (2013) also address, that standardized surveys overlook the context needed to understand in-depth. According to Jenkins and Delbridge (2013, p.4), "employee engagement studies have been de-contextualized from its organizational setting."

The adoption of simplistic universal models on EE and the intense focus on EE benefits to the organization can be characterized as 'narrow engagement' (Robertson & Cooper, 2010, p.324; Macey & Schneider, 2008). Narrow engagement can be explained as a limited view of EE. The main focus remains on positive aspects, such as positive employee behavior that leads to direct benefits and is of interest to managers and organizations. However, understanding certain concepts that are very important to the employee, such as psychological well-being, is missing (Robertson & Cooper, 2010).

Therefore, Brown and Reilly (2013) state the importance of asking questions to gain context-specific information and insight into differences between employees and working groups. Instead of focusing on the outcomes of EE, such as productivity, there is a need for an interpretivism approach to understanding the context, local complexities, individual cognitive

elements, and the factors related to EE (Rigg, 2013). Jenkins and Delbridge (2013) highlight the importance of context, as this will allow insights into individual perceptions, social relations, organizational values, organizational support, employee voice, and behavioral integrity. Thus, understanding the context will allow managers to know what makes employees feel valued and supported, one of the critical drivers of employee engagement (Jenkins & Delbridge, 2013). Therefore, a broader and deeper understanding of the concept of EE is needed to prevent confusion and overlap with similar concepts (Rigg, 2013; Macey & Schneider, 2008, Robertson & Cooper, 2010).

2.4 A lot of talks and little action on engagement?

Due to the benefits engaged employees bring to companies, managers are mainly interested in the outcome of employee engagement, such as profit and performance. This explains why most managers are attracted to standardized surveys that measure and benchmark their employee engagement scores yet overlook this concept's individualized view and complexity. This has resulted in employee engagement becoming a 'hard' workplace approach mainly focused on improving organizational performance and productivity (Harter et al., 2002; Harter et al., 2009). There are two approaches to employee engagement that have gained traction, the 'hard' EE approach and the 'soft' EE approach. The 'hard' approach is the main objective of EE practices to gain a competitive advantage by increasing employee performance. In contrast to the 'soft' approach, the main objective is to increase employee satisfaction, with employee engagement being the primary goal (Jenkins & Delbridge, 2013). Jenkins and Delbridge (2013) argue that strategies for managing employee engagement can adopt either "soft" approaches, which focus on people and their well-being, or "hard" approaches, which focus on resources and productivity.

Following up on that, Shuck and Wollard (2009) identified two significant challenges related to EE, namely the lack of empirical research that has been done and the misconceptions and misunderstanding around this concept. Thus, these challenges have resulted in the "say-do" gap where managers ascribe the importance of EE but do not meet these expectations in reality. However, debates continue on how employee engagement should be measured and what benefits it can bring to the organization (Macey & Schneider, 2008; Saks, 2008; Shuck et al., 2013; Bakker et al., 2008). Nonetheless, the individualized view of employee engagement and its local context has received little attention (Shuck, 2011; Kahn, 1990). This has led to a

disconnect between theoretical knowledge about EE and its practical application. The adoption of simplistic universal models on EE and little action calls for a need to look at EE from a different perspective, looking beyond the workplace approach (Shuck, 2011; MacLeod & Clark, 2009). According to Shuck and Wollard (2009), EE needs to be looked at individually, as each person has unique feelings, emotions, wants, and needs. Therefore, the individual perspective should be understood first, so insight can be gained into what makes each employee feel engaged.

As the complexity of EE is often overlooked, most of the engagement literature at this time is primarily based on survey results generated by consulting companies rather than empirical research (Chalofsky & Krishna, 2009). Previous studies have focused their attention on the macro-level of employee engagement, namely the direct connection between EE and organizational performance outcomes (Guest, 2011; Truss et al., 2013). Practitioners tend to fall into the positive paradigm of EE by just looking at the positive state of mind and positive outcomes (Shuck & Wollard, 2009; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Truss et al., 2013). However, Shuck (2011) claims that EE is multidimensional and consists of more than just the positive state of mind, including cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. Instead of seeing EE as an outcome that can be constantly measured, it is more of a state of feeling and emotion. However, working more productively and efficiently might also bring other factors such as stress, work intensification, and burnout. What do the employees get in return? (George, 2011). A critical view of EE and its contextual implications are lacking and instead need to be addressed (Truss et al. 2013). Therefore, we need to move away from the macro and positive view of employee engagement and focus on the micro-level, emphasizing the meanings expressed by individuals in their local context.

As a result, Shuck and Wollard (2009) claim that these challenges, misconceptions, and practical implications are not a solid base for building EE strategies on. Therefore, Macey and Scheider (2008) state that before moving into the practical application of EE, a clear understanding, interpretation, and definition must be developed first. Then, a common language and understanding can be created, which is needed to bridge the gap between expectations and reality regarding EE initiatives.

2.5 Two-way employee engagement

Employees need to feel a sufficient level of psychological safety to engage (Khan, 1990). This implies that an employee's perception of fair treatment is critical to developing psychological safety (McManus & Mosca, 2015). Edmondson (1999, p.350) referred to psychological safety as "a shared belief held by team members that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking - and models the effects of team psychological safety and team efficacy together on learning performance." According to Kahn (1990), relationships based on trust and support are needed for an individual to feel more psychologically safe and self-confident. Therefore, trust is one of the critical factors for employee engagement and is crucial in the employer-employee relationship (Jenkins & Delbridge, 2013; Davis & Rothstein, 2006). Moreover, the psychological well-being of employees is positively affected if they feel a trustworthy relationship with their managers (Wang & Hsieh, 2013). Trust emerges when employees feel supported, recognized, encouraged, and valued (Jenkins & Delbridge, 2013). Jenkins and Delbridge (2013) stated that organizational integrity is vital for creating trust.

As mentioned earlier in the introduction, behavioral integrity refers to what the manager says and what the manager does. Davis and Rothstein (2006, p. 408) stated: "the better the alignment between words and deeds, the greater credibility a manager has and the greater trust an employee will have in the manager." This statement is supported by Wang and Hsieh (2013). They claim that the alignment between the words and deeds of a manager is positively related to trust and is a powerful enabler for employees to feel more engaged in their work. Mc Allister (1995) stated that cognition-based trust is based on the employee's perception of the reliability and dependability of the manager's behavioral integrity. Moreover, transparency and openness from the manager's side also demonstrate the degree of trust (Jenkins & Delbridge, 2013). Wang and Hsieh (2013) state the importance of authenticity and integrity in leadership, enabling a transparent workforce. A transparent workforce allows employees to feel trusted and supported, increasing their feeling of engagement. Moreover, Wang and Hsieh (2013) also argue that leaders who show authenticity and integrity in their work demonstrate effective communication, which is crucial for building trustful relationships.

However, several authors note that developing self-awareness and reflexivity is vital for a manager to demonstrate consistency between his/her words and actions (Wang & Hsieh, 2013; Clutterbuck & Hirst, 2002). Reflexivity is the manager's willingness to take a critical view of

oneself and be open to feedback and other options to create alignment between expectations and reality (Alvesson et al., 2017; Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). Alvesson et al. (2017, p. 14) explain reflexivity as “working with – reflecting upon and problematizing – assumptions and counter – assumptions.” In order to display consistency between words and deeds, a manager must be one with his/her role and have a strong sense of self-identification. Otherwise, as mentioned in the introduction, there will be a discrepancy between the image a manager wants to hold of him/herself and his/her true identity, leading to contrasting realities that create employee disengagement (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016; Whittington & Galpin, 2010).

Therefore, the manager’s identity and image must be aligned to be one with his/her role and share a common understanding. Only then can a manager have a solid moral positioning and act with honesty, integrity, and transparency (Alvesson et al., 2017; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016). Thus, a manager’s behavioral integrity fosters an environment of trust, open communication, shared norms and values, and psychological safety. As a result, employees feel safe voicing their opinions, ideas, wants, and needs (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016).

However, it is argued that EE requires a two-way relationship between employer and employee where both parties need to have a level of awareness of the business context and self-reflection (Kular et al., 2008; Robinson & Hayday, 2007). For EE initiatives to be successful, organizations also need to support their employees in increasing their self-awareness and accountability since, according to Millar (2012), people behave the way they feel. In addition, Millar's (2012) method invites to change the view where the employee is dependent on organizations to a view in which employees take part in their development and create an independent relationship. Then, two-way accountability can be generated from the organization to the employees and from employees to the organization. Only then improvements in performance and behavior can be made to bridge the gap between expectations and the reality of employee engagement (Kular et al., 2008; Robinson & Hayday, 2007).

Some authors argue that self-leadership plays a crucial role in facilitating an independent relationship and two-way accountability for employee engagement. Self-leadership can be explained as a self-influencing process in which the individual reaches desirable outcomes and performance through self-motivation and self-management (Manz, 1986; Yukyung et al., 2016). Manz (1986, p.589) described self-leadership as follows: “self-leadership is conceptualized as a comprehensive self-influence perspective that concerns leading oneself

toward the performance of naturally motivating tasks and managing oneself to do work that must be done but is not naturally motivating.” Self-leadership makes the individual reflect upon and is aware of his/her cognitive-emotional state and is empowered to take responsibility for this emotional state. Through self-control, self-direction, and motivation, the individual can enhance this emotional state, leading to improved work performance and effectiveness (Manz, 1986; Lovelace et al., 2007; Yukyung et al., 2016). Self-leadership increases one’s self-worth, autonomy, and independence and is a powerful motivation tool for individuals (Yukyung et al., 2016; Lovelace et al., 2007). Moreover, it is argued that self-leadership fosters an active and positive work environment which increases employee engagement (Yukyung et al., 2016; Lovelace et al., 2007; Tuckey et al., 2012). However, it needs to be noted that empowering leadership is key to facilitating a positive work environment where employees feel inspired and supported to take independent action and responsibility for their self-development (Tuckey et al., 2012).

2.6 Is employee engagement strategic?

Gallup (2010, p.3) stated, “Employee engagement is a strategic approach supported by tactics for driving improvement and organizational change.” On the other hand, some authors, such as Brooks and Saltzman (2012), argue that engagement is not a strategy. Moreover, Shuck and Wollard (2009) argue that organizations face challenges in addressing employee engagement because it lacks empirical research, leading to the development of strategies without a solid research base on which to build strategies on. Nonetheless, other authors, such as Matthews (2018), claim that creating an engagement strategy and value-added activities is vital for the progress and clarification of what companies are trying to achieve.

Porter (1997) discusses the difference between operational effectiveness and strategy. He argues that both have superior performance as their primary purpose. However, operational effectiveness mainly focuses on resource efficiency to generate cost advantage. In contrast, a strategy focuses on doing things differently from the competition or executing similar activities in different ways to gain a competitive advantage. With that in mind, we consider that EE can be strategic when its purpose is to increase the company's performance through EE initiatives that reinforce and support the organization’s business strategy (Beardwell & Thompson, 2017). As Shuck and Wollard (2009) point out, the lack of definitions and practical implications biases the basis for creating EE strategies. However, if these are better clarified, EE can move more

strategically. With our research questions, we intend to clarify which initiatives add a competitive advantage to companies, not only to managers but also to see how employees relate to EE initiatives and whether they perceive them as value-added activities. It can be strategic if tied to key business metrics (a 'hard' approach), just as it is not if it is related to more human-centered aspects (a 'soft' approach).

2.7 The dark side of employee engagement

Maslach and Leiter (1997) investigated that maintaining a high level of engagement for an extended period of time causes stress at work and can eventually lead to burnout. Harney and Dundon (2020) exhibit this burnout phenomenon at Amazon, a well-known company with a highly competitive culture, excellent creative practices, and high performance. Amazon proudly promotes "self-management" so that employees take ownership of their careers. However, employees at Amazon have raised their voices saying they experience constant pressure, an aggressive organizational culture, and a confrontational management style on the work floor. This has led to employees crying at their desks, making them even feel more disengaged. Consequently, this has raised the discussion of what is an ethical way to manage people? Therefore, this is an important question to consider for practitioners seeking to increase employee engagement. Hence, it is worth reflecting on the objective of pursuing EE, whether it is to increase corporate metrics (a 'hard' approach) or/and increase your employees' satisfaction and well-being (a 'soft' approach).

Furthermore, a predominant stream of research considers EE as a positive state of mind turned towards work tasks, thus viewing employee engagement as the opposite of burnout (Freney & Tiernan, 2006). However, as Xanthopoulou, Bakker, and Ilies (2012) mention, even workers who are happy at work can temporarily lose enthusiasm. Furthermore, as human beings, it is essential to acknowledge that EE, well-being, performance, and productivity are non-linear and fluctuate seasonally, depending on their internal changes (Xanthopoulou, Bakker & Ilies, 2012). Therefore, it is valuable to keep in mind that there is also a tipping point at which EE begins to stop adding value, which can become counterproductive if engagement is not managed with balance.

2.8 Chapter Summary

As our research is focused on exploring the perceptions of EE's supporting and hindering factors and EE initiatives, our theoretical review aimed to demonstrate a clear overview and understanding of these concepts. Firstly, we delved into how EE is perceived and understood. We learned that EE is a vast concept by demonstrating the different meanings attached to this phenomenon. However, the other side of EE has been addressed by researchers, such as the levels of stress and burnout it can cause. Furthermore, we continued our literature review by touching upon the hands-on EE perspective, in which we addressed the continuous focus on the macro-level view of EE initiatives. Quantitative measurements and predictions are increasingly dominant in demonstrating the level of EE. We identified that companies are attracted to standardized surveys and simplistic universal models yet overlook this concept's complexity and individualized view. We clarified that this could be characterized as 'narrow' engagement and 'hard' HRM, consisting of a limited view of EE. The main focus remains on the positive paradigm by only looking at positive outcomes such as performance. Hence, this results in a say-do gap where managers ascribe the importance of EE but act little upon it. Thus, we introduced the importance of understanding EE's context, local complexities, and individual perceptions. We clarified that an interpretivism approach would allow managers to focus on the micro-level by understanding individualized views and the local context.

Moreover, we introduced the supporting factors of EE, such as psychological safety and trust. Hence, we clarified that employee engagement is a two-way process in which managers and employees need to have self-awareness and reflection. Next to showing an alignment between his/her words and deeds, the manager must also give encouragement, empowerment, and psychological safety. On the other hand, employees have to raise their voices and take self-leadership. Finally, we end the literature review by arguing whether or not employee engagement is strategic and clarifying the dark side of EE, such as stress and burnout.

3. Methodology

The following chapter outlines the methodology of our thesis research. We attempt this chapter to guide our readers on how we have conducted this research and arrived at our findings. This chapter consists of three parts. The first section is the research approach. This part will clarify why we chose a qualitative study, along with the interpretive tradition and symbolic interactionism. The second part consists of the research design and process in which the context of our study will be elaborated, followed by the data analysis and data collection. Finally, we will close this chapter by addressing the limitations and credibility of our research.

3.1 Research approach

Qualitative research interprets people's meanings to images and words (e.g., employee engagement) and not numbers (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). Moreover, qualitative research is usually associated with an interpretative philosophy (Denzin, 2018). This study intends not to create standardized answers but to gain an in-depth understanding of the meanings that managers and employees ascribe to EE initiatives and their perceptions of factors that promote or hinder employee engagement. Furthermore, a qualitative study is most appropriate for this research. We seek to reduce the stigma attached to EE by empowering the interviewees to give their meaning, removing power imbalances in the phenomenon (Stutterheim & Ratcliffe, 2021). Furthermore, we use interpretive research traditions and an abductive methodology that will further be explained. According to Prasad's research traditions (2017), the tradition of interpretivism believes that our worlds are socially created through attaching meaning to objects, events, interactions, and more. Furthermore, as we aim to understand the perceptions of managers and employees, an interpretive standpoint is most applicable to understanding the social context and individual interpretation around the concept of EE.

Next to that, the interpretive tradition corresponds with symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism is the lens through which individuals seek understanding and meaning (Prasad, 2017). Blumer (1969) initiated this concept based on the ideas of Mead and Cooley. Mead (1934) refers to symbolic interactionism as a process of sensemaking and social meaning construction. According to Mead (1934), the individual makes sense of and interprets reality through one's self-image. Cooley (1918) refers to this process as "the looking-glass self" (Prasad, 2017, p. 20). An individual's self-image is how an individual views himself and is

constructed from social interactions with people and society from the past (Mead, 1977). Objects, events, and actions are symbolic interactions to which individuals ascribe different meanings based on their self-image. Therefore, how individuals make sense of and interpret reality is impacted by how they reflect upon and see their actions and personalities (Prasad, 2017). However, the meanings individuals hold towards objects, events, and actions are constantly evolving and are not predetermined. We believe the symbolic interactionism tradition applies to our study as we aim to understand the individual interpretations and meanings of employee engagement. By discovering the ‘hows’ instead of the ‘whats,’ we are interested in exploring the individual’s self-images, social realities, and sense-making regarding EE.

Our topic will be explored from a qualitative and abductive methodological approach, as we will constantly be moving between theory and empirical information (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013). The abductive methodology combines the inductive and deductive methodology, which means that we are not limiting ourselves to existing definitions, and theories, or deriving hypotheses from them but rather staying open to new interpretations and knowledge (Prasad, 2017). Rennstam and Wästerfors (2015, p.53) signify an abductive approach as “creating and solving a puzzle” where the field notes are written with “as much of an open mind as possible.” The abductive research method provided us with the flexibility and openness to change and add new ideas that emerged from the data and empirical findings.

3.2 Research design and process

3.2.1 Case context

In this section, clarity about the context in which this study has been developed will give the readers a background picture of the time and setting in which this research was conducted. We do not intend this research to be applied to every organization globally. Instead, it serves as a reference point that can create a dialogue around employee engagement in a small-scale growing company. In the following sections, we intend to explain how we collected data and made sense of it.

Our research is based on a single-case scaleup located in Stockholm. However, employees' experience of this phenomenon has been influenced by their experience working in various organizations, not just this one. By studying a single-case organization, we aim to analyze EE

more in-depth (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). A scaleup can be defined as a start-up that has been in the market for 2-3 years and has favorable conditions for continuous growth. Furthermore, this scale-up (Jozzby) benefits are significant, resulting in a high potential to become a fast-growth enterprise that generates revenue and provides high-paying jobs (Zajko, 2017). Jozzby was founded in 2019 and is located in the consumer goods industry. It has performed successfully and, to date, continues to grow and expand. Scaleups are characterized by a fast-paced work rhythm, where problems and solutions are constantly faced. Moreover, no large structures or hierarchies are present. In contrast, a more independent way of working and flexible roles are present, meaning that employees have more growth potential than initially stipulated in the employment contract.

Jozzby has the mission to build bold and inclusive brands. It currently offers its products in more than 14 countries in Europe, including its most representative markets: the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Sweden. The products are mainly sold online, although they can also be purchased in physical stores owned by their partnerships. Jozzby has 94 employees, including consultants, part-time, and full-time employees. Nevertheless, it currently has more than 15 jobs opening, to continue growing. By 2021, the team consisted of 10 nationalities, and more than 13 languages were spoken in the company's offices. Nevertheless, English is the corporate language.

3.2.2 Data collection

We followed Kvale's seven-step approach to collect our data, namely identifying themes, planning, interviews, transcribing, analyzing, verifying, and reporting (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). To collect data, we used qualitative interviews to understand the perceptions and interpretations of engagement from the management and employee perspective. For the collection of empirical data, 12 semi-structured interviews with three senior managers, three middle managers, and six employees were conducted (see Table 1). Jozzby positions senior managers as responsible for other managers and middle managers as directly responsible for employees in teams and projects.

The in-person interviews took place at the office based in Stockholm. The interviews were conducted in March 2022 within a time frame of one month. All the interviewees were carefully informed before the interviews about the time span of the interview and their anonymity. The duration of the interviews lasted between 30 to 45 minutes, depending on the role of the

interviewee. The interviews were audio-recorded with the software tool 'Otter,' and permissions to recording were given. Due to the software tool, transcriptions were made accurately, allowing us to actively participate in the interview itself. This enabled us to look the interviewee in the eye and pay attention to their gestures and body language instead of constantly taking notes. This made the interview process very natural and made the interviewees feel comfortable and safe, providing us with meaningful insights into the interviewees' feelings, beliefs, and interpretations (Kvale, 1983).

The online interviews were conducted with 'google meets,' the online meeting tool used at the company. Interviewees' preferences for in-person or online were taken into account, as we did not want to force anyone due to the coronavirus (COVID) present situation. We are aware that the online interviews restrained the interpersonal interaction and body language of the interviewee. However, the interviewees at Jozzby are so used to online meeting tools, making the online interview process very natural. Moreover, as we made active use of gestures and eye contact during the online interview, this disadvantage has impacted our research to a lesser extent.

The interviews were conducted in English, as this is the corporate language in the office. Even though most employees were non-native English speakers, including us, the researchers, this did not cause any problems. As English is the corporate language at Jozzby, all interviewees had a fluent level of English. Nevertheless, sometimes the interviewees could not find English words, so some Swedish words were used. As one of our authors has lived in Sweden for six years and has basic knowledge of Swedish, translations could be quickly done, and understanding could be guaranteed. Most of the interviewees were from Sweden, except for one participant from Russia and one from Indonesia. Furthermore, 9 of the 12 interviewees were women (since most of the current employees in this company are women), and three interviewees were men.

For the semi-structured interviews to run smoothly, we developed an interview guide with the main topics we wanted to discuss. As we interviewed people in different roles, the interview guide of the managers differed slightly from those of the employees. However, most of the questions were the same, as we aimed for trustworthiness and authenticity by asking about the same topics. Next to that, during the selection process of participants, the employed author took carefully into account participants whom she has developed a good relationship with, so the

quality of conversations and cooperation would be guaranteed (Saunders et al., 2019). Due to the author's good relationship with colleagues, we received a 99% response rate. This made our qualitative research more fruitful, which aligns with the interpretivism and symbolic interactionism tradition (Eberle et al., 2016, Prasad, 2017). As we conducted semi-structured interviews, we only developed ten questions for each interview, so we could stay open and have enough time to ask follow-up questions. In this way, the interviews seemed more like an actual conversation that allowed the interviewee to speak in the form of storytelling in which elaborated answers on experiences could be given. This enabled us to gain in-depth insights and understand their interpretation of events (Saunders et al., 2019).

The interview guide for managers consisted of topics about their meaning of engagement, their engagement activities, whether they have a strategy for EE, their ideal conditions for EE at the company, the signs of engaged/disengaged employees, and personally oriented questions regarding EE. The interview guide of employees slightly differed by framing questions differently, such as the EE activities that made them engaged and whether their managers understood their needs and wants. In general, most of the questions we asked were the same way. The interview guide was not sent to the interviewees prior to the interviews, as we did not want them to prepare anything in advance to remain unbiased and honest answers. We noticed during the interviews that some of the interviewees interpreted engagement as customer engagement; therefore, to avoid miscommunication, we clarified the topic prior to the interviews. However, we did not give them any explanation about employee engagement itself, as we did not want them to be biased or put in a particular direction.

After introducing ourselves, we also introduced the agenda and clarified our research topic when needed. As one researcher knows all the colleagues, the other researcher introduced herself, so a trustworthy and informal atmosphere could be created. Next to that, we emphasized their anonymity and explained that both the company name and the interviewee's name would be changed to maintain anonymity. This made the interviewee feel comfortable and enabled free and open responses. To create a trustworthy atmosphere, a meeting room was booked at the back of the office, so the chance of other colleagues walking by was limited.

Moreover, we tested if the booked room would be soundproof, so the interviewees did not have to worry if someone else heard them. We also informed them about this, so the interviewees knew and felt we took their anonymity seriously. Both of us were present during the interviews and agreed upon a role division. We agreed that the author employed at the

company took the role of taking notes, asking the most minor personal questions, and thereby acting more in the ‘background.’ On the contrary, the other researcher, who was unbiased and did not know the interviewees personally, took the role of leading the conversation and actively participating in the conversation and looking the interviewee in the eye. This researcher asked more personal questions so that the interviewee would feel more comfortable sharing. We also emphasized this role division before the interviews and informed the interviewees of our neutral position, so our neutral facial expressions or answers would not bias them. By addressing these points, the interviewees understood why we did certain things which comforted them. After the interviews, we asked the interviewees for their feedback. All the interviewees mentioned they felt very comfortable with how we interviewed them and did not give any constructive feedback.

Next to conducting interviews, we used the participant observation of one of the authors, as she has prior contextual knowledge gained from the experience of working there for more than a year and a half. Saunders et al. (2019, p.378) refer to participant observation as “discovering the meanings that people attach to their actions and social interactions.” However, it needs to be noted that the participant observation was not part of the research conducted but portrayed in the sense of bringing in contextual data to the study. Spradley (2016) developed six characteristics of the participant observation, including the ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ phenomenon. As one of the authors works within the company, she is referred to as the insider.

In contrast, the other author, who has a more distant view, is signified as the ‘outsider.’ However, it needs to be noted that the participant observer can experience both the insider/outsider perspective, as the author has not been that much involved within the company the past year due to the author's master's program. Resulting in the fact that the author is not fully aware of everything going on in the company, including all the onboardings of new employees. This had led to having the author as a more outsider perspective, but at the same time having the inside view (Spradley, 2016).

3.2.3 Data analysis

During the process of analyzing data, we use three sets of activities, namely sorting, reducing, and arguing. These activities can also be referred to as the distilling, categorizing, and interpreting approach (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

In line with Kvale and Brinkmann (2015), we have used dynamic questions in our interview guide to discover the more profound meaning and understanding of the interviewees' perception of engagement. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2015), 'what' and 'how' questions refer to dynamic aspects which shaped the data we utilized. By focusing on the 'whats' and the 'hows,' we could distill and interpret what has been said and how the interviewees have said it. Another way of categorizing our interviews was by sensitizing the engagement concept in the form of coding. According to Charmaz (2006, p. 46), "coding defines what is happening in the data and grapples with what it means." After every interview, we went through the transcription of our software tool, 'Otter,' by analyzing the transcripts through open coding to grasp the meaning of what is happening and understand the most interesting and surprising topics. The open codes consisted of the interviewees' words, quotes, and metaphors. This allowed us to be aware of frequently mentioned aspects and include interesting aspects in the interviews.

The transcription of the interviews was followed by a more focused coding approach to narrow down the amount of data being gathered. According to Gioia et al. (2012), this method could be called 1st- and 2nd-order labeling method. This process is a key component of demonstrating rigor in qualitative studies (Pratt, 2008; Tracy, 2010). We coded all of our interviews in a coding software called 'Atlas' and in an excel table. During the 1st labeling method, also called open coding, 102 codes emerged. After this process, we continued looking for similarities and differences, also called axial coding. Through this 2nd order labeling method, we were able to distill our codes and categories into main themes. We identified four main themes: meaningful work, culture & environment, psychological safety, and leadership style. After identifying the main themes, we distilled them further into 2nd-order aggregate dimensions (Gioia, 2012). We arrived at three aggregate dimensions: meaningful work, belongingness, and empowerment (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1: Data Structure according to method of Gioia et al. (2004)

1st Order Concepts	2nd Order themes	Aggregate Dimensions
Belongingness, be part of the big picture, being challenged, Company's values/mission, Discretionary effort, Emotional connection, Identity, responsibilities, Self-actualization, shared goals, Use of their capabilities, voice one's opinion, confidence, Work-life balance, feeling important, Relationships/colleagues, Purpose, Intrinsic motivation	Meaningful work	Meaningful work & Belongingness
Team spirit, Cross-functional collaboration, Good vibes, Hygiene Factors, Inclusion, Culture: Open Culture, Environment, Positive feedback, knowledge sharing, growing company, Silos, Social context, Role fit, processes, taking initiative, willingness, Relationships/colleagues, Trust, having fun/enjoying work, smaller company benefits, Benefits, EE initiatives, life standard, Salary, Career development, Metrics	Culture & Environment	
Psychological safety, Transparency, alignment, respect, feel valued, involvement, empowerment, willingness/taking initiative, Accountability, Commitment, Recognition	Psychological safety	Empowerment & Self-leadership trends
Ask/feel seen, power dynamics, Trust/freedom, Psychological safety, Recognition, respect, feedback, two-way, Self-leadership, encourage, decision-making	Leadership style	

Source: Own representation.

The next step in analyzing our data is arguing and interpreting the information we have gathered. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2015), interpretation consists of self-understanding, critical common sense, and theoretical understanding. We not only looked at the words they said but also the tone of the message and the interviewees' body language. These interpretation stages helped us perceive the interviewee's meaning, understand their sayings, look beyond concepts, and apply theoretical knowledge to make sense of the interviewees' statements. To do this, we apply Emerson's excerpt commentary units which allow us to 'show' the empirical findings by quotes and 'tell' the meaning of these statements by using theories and concepts from course literature (Emerson et al., 1995). Excerpt commentary units align with our abductive approach as we constantly move between theory

and empirical information without limiting ourselves to certain theories or interpretations (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Prasad, 2017).

3.3 Credibility and reflexivity

When assessing the quality of a research study, the terms used are usually validity and reliability. However, these terms have been criticized as valid for assessing the accuracy of qualitative studies (Bell et al., 2019; Kirk & Miller, 1986; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982; Manson, 1996). Nonetheless, they propose other ways of still having reliability in a research study; for example, there is more than one observer in the study who agrees with what is observed (in this case, the two authors of this research give reliability in this manner).

Moreover, an alternative criterion for evaluating qualitative studies has also been suggested. For example, Guba and Lincoln (1994) propose two main criteria: trustworthiness and authenticity (umbrella terms, like these, encompass other criteria), which can evaluate a qualitative study. They focus on assessing the trustworthiness through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of studies and the authenticity of giving a fair representation of different points of view. In this thesis, we intend to accomplish authenticity by interviewing senior managers and middle managers, and employees of different nationalities. However, we are aware that the majority of our interviewees are Swedish women. Nevertheless, this did not happen by self-selection but rather because most of the employees in this company are Swedish women.

During our research and collection of empirical data, we carefully considered and reflected upon our integrity, fairness, and open-mindedness as researchers. Next, we showed respect for the participants by showing our gratitude for their participation and openness (Saunders et al., 2019). Furthermore, we carefully considered the ethicality of the interviewees' privacy, anonymity, confidentiality, and avoidance of harm (Saunders et al., 2019). As the participant observation author has been falling into a more 'outsider' role lately due to her master's program, she is not aware of the specific division of the teams. Therefore, she is also unaware of which managers are assigned to which employees. This knowledge also comforted the interviewees. Moreover, the participant observation author is part of the people team within the company, making her position already the trustworthy person in the company where employees can come to for personal and private issues. Therefore, by considering all these aspects, we

created a trustful atmosphere in which the employees felt comfortable sharing authentic, honest, and trustful answers, which is also reflected in our results.

Moreover, the author's knowledge and familiarity with the context were very beneficial during the semi-structured interviews. This provided background understanding and interpretation of local events and practices, allowing us to ask relevant follow-up questions (Prasad, 2017; Saunders et al., 2019). This combination of us authors having the 'insider' and 'outsider' perspectives shaped our data collection technique in a more advanced way. On the one hand, insider knowledge provides us with explanations, background information, and awareness of certain events and clues. While on the other hand, the outsider perspective provided us with a more distant, neutral, and unbiased view of the interviewees facilitating a more critical perspective.

Chapter 4 - Findings

We approached our fieldwork guided by our two primary research purposes, namely the supporting and hindering factors of EE and how managers and employees relate to the saying/doing gap. In the following section, we analyze the themes from the interviews. We will first delve into the EE initiatives at Jozzby. Furthermore, we will analyze EE's supporting and hindering factors according to the perspectives of managers and employees. By analyzing these two concepts, we considered the four main themes that have emerged from the interviews: meaningful work, culture & environment, psychological safety, and leadership style. An overview of the similarities and differences on these themes between managers and employees can be found in the appendix, in Figure 2. Moreover, similarities and differences on the ideal process of EE between managers and employees have also been added to Figure 2.

4.1 Employee engagement initiatives

When we asked the managers to tell us about their engagement initiatives, it became clear that effective communication where knowledge is shared across the organization was frequently seen as a significant facilitator of employee engagement. It appeared that from the management perspective, these factors seemed to be a crucial part in the creation of EE, but also in the attempt to involve their employees

“Well, one part is how we communicate (...) I think from a people perspective, to also have a clear framework of what we do and how we do things in different processes, is also a way of building engagement. When it is open to everyone, that is an engagement tool that we have which is at least a base where we are now”. (Robin)

From this statement, we can observe that the participant finds open communication and clear frameworks to build engagement. She refers to this as an engagement tool. It is interesting to note that her first answer about the company's EE initiatives is communication. In other interviews, we also recognized that the management's first answer about EE initiatives is communication and transparency.

“We are really trying to be as transparent as possible (...) So the level of transparency tries to be really high, but I know also people don't think so. Of course, it has not been the same as before, so some people may think it is not as good, but when it comes to the size where we are right now, we are really doing our best there and have some really good initiatives.” (Victoria)

From the interviews, we observed that transparency and communication are fundamental elements for EE, according to the management. However, it appears that the level of transparency is not as high within the company as it was before.

“Being in a growing company in general, everything is a lot focused on the smaller groups. (...) But then there's also the context of the entire company, and that's the challenge of Jozzby and also my previous company. (...) We can definitely do more when it comes to just sharing and opening up. I think you create the best culture and workplace if everyone knows and get to see whatever is going on in different parts of the company.” (Raul)

However, it is also interesting to note that one senior manager pointed out that still not all information is being shared. This quote has been supported by another middle manager who states that due to the growing pace of the company, it has been challenging to involve and share information with everyone within the organization.

“Compared to now, somebody might feel that they're becoming a smaller piece of the machine even though they're not a small piece, but of course, it's getting a bit more narrow (...) So that is an important factor when it comes to growing pain that people don't feel as important, I would say and also when it comes to communication and being part of the big decisions. We cannot have 70 people weigh in on every decision that we make. It's impossible, especially when we move at the pace that we do. So that is a tricky situation as well.” (Victoria)

This quote illustrates the growing pain of the company and the challenges they have faced over the past several years. All the above statements emphasize the importance of transparent communication and the sharing of information with everyone. Yet, it is also apparent that from the management side, it is very hard to accomplish this in reality, especially with the growing pace of the company.

“We tried to be as transparent as possible which I mentioned in the beginning. I think that's really a key part of this growing problem (...) But it has been quite rocky.” (Victoria)

From these statements, we can illustrate that all managers agree with the fact that transparency and open communication have been challenging factors within Jozzby. The managers explained that as the company is growing, it becomes hard to be transparent about everything, share information with everyone, and to openly communicate. Raul also noted that people are more focused on smaller groups and thereby overlook the context of the company. Moreover, we also noticed that, according to managers, hands-on activities are not as important as open communication and transparency regarding EE initiatives. Only when we asked follow-up questions the management started telling us about hands-on activities. Moreover, Raul also stated that activities are nice, but open communication and transparency are even better.

However, when we asked the employees what kind of EE initiatives make them engaged, the majority answered initiatives such as team-building, after-works, social activities, and so on. This is interesting to note, as the managers find open communication and transparency the main driver of EE.

“I think that's always the part that people like the most at events and like company parties, it is the time you get to just hang around with people and also people you don't know so well. That's what I really enjoy.” (Leona)

“The trip here's a perfect example. I felt I got to know so many people, that's really good if we do something that's not related to work. That's the key to building stuff because then you can talk about other things. Building nice memories together, do stuff outside of work, but also do stuff on work time that is not related to work.” (Cecil)

From the interviews, we can illustrate that when it comes to EE initiatives, employees find it very important to get to know each other, spend time with each other and do fun activities together. The statements emphasize the importance of having a good relationship with each other during work but also outside of work. We also observed that the majority of employees find it important to understand what other employees are doing in other departments and to be involved in that process.

“In one of my previous roles each team member I was encouraged to have one day where you spend it with another team. So the idea is not to build silos, but that the different teams will be able to understand what exactly is happening (...) When you understand that you feel more in the loop with the company, that's why you're more engaged with the activities that are happening in other teams.” (Joe)

From the interviews, we observed that the employees used the word silo quite often. We observed that silo can be understood as only focusing on your area of work. We recognized that employees appreciate cross-functional settings in which they share knowledge with each other and understand other colleagues both on a professional and personal level.

When we asked managers follow-up questions regarding EE initiatives, they started telling us about hands-on activities.

“We have received feedback that they want to spend more time together and build a relationship outside work. So we tried different things to make that happen, however, we feel that we don't reach the goal. Where we are now is that we try to be more enablers for the people's organization to do stuff instead of us organizing everything.” (Robin)

This quote shows that the management also facilitates hands-on EE activities. However, the senior manager pointed out they have the feeling they are not reaching the goal. The managers

explained that still, not many employees show up when they facilitate more hands-on activities. When we asked the question 'how do you make sure to involve everyone in these hands-on activities', one middle manager answered the following:

“We've noticed that it's really hard. A lot of people ask for these kinds of activities. But when we actually invite people to different events and activities, they say that they will be there, but often only a third is showing up at these events. So we really have been struggling with that I would say (...) So that's why now we try to put it more out in organization. People can come up with fun activities they want to do (...), and with these activities the company stands with all the costs to enable these activities outside of work. So we try to put the responsibilities more on the employees, so it is more like a push and pull.” (Victoria)

From the interviews with the employees, it became clear that when the EE initiatives are too much organized and pushed by the management, it has its opposite effect.

“Sometimes it's like we are back in kindergarten again. Everything has to be with rules and this is what we're doing now. We are adults, we can decide for ourselves. I often feel like the one organizing is trying almost too much to make it work. It would be great to have some more freedom.” (Leona)

From the interviews with employees, we observed that there needs to be a balance of taking the initiative in order for the EE initiatives to feel natural and organic and not just as imposed activities that generate discomfort and disengagement.

“I think it's very clear when that's done for administrative purposes. It's visible when it's pushed onto people. For me at least, that drives me away from a company. (...) That there's an official afterwork that you need to show up becomes a burden. And if it's too much of this, I would just feel like 'again'.” (Alex)

From these statements, it is shown that if the initiatives are perceived as either mandatory and/or as part of meeting the targets of a single department, employees experience the engagement initiatives as a nuisance and are unwilling to participate. From the interviews, we can understand that employees don't like to be pushed onto certain EE initiatives. From the previous quotes of the management, it appears that management is trying to implement a different approach in the hope that more employees will show up during the EE activities. We recognized that the managers are taking on an approach in which they are more enablers instead of them organizing everything. They have learnt that EE cannot be forced top-down but can be enabled in a light-touch way (soft HRM).

However, when we asked the question 'What would be your ideal process of engagement' different answers emerged. From the employee's perspective, we observed the importance of clear communication and knowledge sharing to feel involved. We also observed that employees value the smaller scale of the company as this enables them to share knowledge with others easier and encourages them to express their voice.

“It has to feel inspiring and challenging and something that I can really feel that I developed something (...) Maybe having some team activity on Sunday evening, work out together or there's some after work or something. And also, when I have a one on one with my manager that I feel that she really sees me and that what I do is noticed and appreciated.” (Djoeke)

“Also expressing my voice is definitely easier in a smaller company. Because also the speed of decision is also a lot better and quicker in smaller companies. So you actually have more openings to voice your opinion within the company. I mean you can just walk by someone here at the office and share it.” (Claes)

From these quotes, we can infer that employees hold value to an inspiring environment, inspiring colleagues, different activities, and different working tasks. Next to that one employee mentioned she wants to feel seen and know that the work she does is being noticed and appreciated. We recognized that employees want to create an impact, add value, do different things, and develop themselves. This can also be referred to as meaningful work. We observed that employees want to be part of, feel seen, appreciated, and involved and that their work is noticed. Moreover, from the interviews, we could also illustrate that self-development, cross-functional teams, knowledge sharing, and learning from each other are also considered very important in the ideal process of EE.

“I think companies that encourage different departments to learn from each other as a structural process. I think engagement is a very soft value, but you still need the structural processes to be in place in order for things to run. (...) But once that ball is rolling, then hopefully, everyone would sort of pass that engagement on to all new team members. And then the same feeling and mindset of having an engaged team cross-functionally can be created.” (Joe).

Nevertheless, the fact that the company is growing bigger has an impact on the communication style within the organization. As the managers already pointed out, it becomes more tricky to involve everyone in the decision-making process and to share all the information with all employees as things become more narrow.

Overall, it can be observed that the managers, middle managers, and employees agree on the same thing: communication is key. Especially the importance of knowledge sharing and involving everyone in the communication process. According to the managers and employees, this enhances and creates a feeling of engagement. However, we can observe that engagement is very personal. For everyone, it means something different, and each person has different wants and needs regarding EE initiatives. From the statements of the employees, we recognized the importance of feeling involved, being part of the team, being able to express your voice,

and taking part in the decision-making process. Thus the company's environment plays a significant role. An environment in which the colleagues share knowledge, get inspired, challenged, developed, and feel that they are part of the team and feel seen.

Nonetheless, the quotes from the managers also infer the challenges the company is facing now. The communication process is changing due to the growing pace of the company. Even though the managers stated the importance of knowledge sharing and involving everyone in the company, they admitted that it is yet very difficult to implement this in practice.

4.2 Supporting and hindering factors for employee engagement

4.2.1 Meaningful work

During the interviews, the search for meaning through meaningful work was repeatedly mentioned. As Alvesson, Gabriel & Paulsen (2017) have rightly argued, meaning is an act of reflecting on one's experience consciously at a certain time. Most of our interviewees underlined that they feel engaged when they feel they are adding value to themselves, their colleagues, the company, or society (e.g., customers). This is explained by Alvesson, Gabriel & Paulsen (2017) as the overlapping spheres of meaningfulness. In addition, when employees and managers at both levels feel their work gives them a sense of self, they feel the most engaged. By exploring what makes employees engaged in their work and what it means to them to feel engaged, meaningful work appears in a number of ways which will be unfolded below.

One of the senior managers shared with us that she feels engaged when she feels challenged because she feels considered for important things in the company.

"I think, to some extent, also that someone put some pressure on me, that someone is demanding things from me. Because that also shows that I am important" (...) I would feel I'm in. I'm getting into the bigger things, that would make me feel really engaged." (Robin)

Similarly, another senior manager expressed the importance of aligning your work with your personal goals and development in order to have that extra motivation, as she calls it.

"It's about aligning expectations from your personal side with also the business side to finally have a clear direction, what goals the company is working towards and how that is linked to your personal goals both in the role but also, personally. Being able to basically work for yourself but also for the company and the team, then development is happening and you can also give extra motivation." (Kyle)

Both statements emphasize the importance of self-actualization and feeling important in order to feel engaged. The middle management also emphasized the feeling of being important and the alignment of personal values with company values.

“I feel engaged, when I'm an important piece in the machinery. When what I do really makes an impact and I think it's the same for everybody.” (Victoria)

“I've noticed where people feel they can have an impact on other departments as well. That's been very helpful, and created engagement (...). People are generally very proud of working for Jozzby in particular, feeling that you're working with something that goes very much hand in hand with your own values. That drives me and makes me also want the company to do well.” (Karen)

From this quote, we can illustrate that Karen emphasizes the feeling of connectedness to the company's values and mission, as this motivates her to contribute to the company's success. However, Karen also gives an example of how she would not feel engaged if she worked in a company where she did not connect with the mission.

“I would not be as engaged if I worked for a company selling car paint or something, because I'm not really interested in that. So just relating to the brand can make a big difference in feeling engaged.” (Karen)

On the other hand, the most recurring hindrances that came up in our interviews were mainly the barriers of not feeling a part of the company, i.e., the participants called it "falling into silos" when the company is growing. Accordingly, this correlates with the previously shared sense of feeling part of the "big picture" and contributing to the company's mission and vision, which makes both managers and employees feel engaged. One of the senior managers stated the importance of emotional connection and being part of the team.

“In pre-pandemic, we usually managed to meet like 98% of the goals. But what we saw was a drop-off in completion rates. So we actually started becoming less efficient in completing tasks since we had everything digitized, it was easy to measure. And what we realized was that it was the lack of emotional connection, as you didn't get it because you were working from home all the time. By sitting down at your kitchen table, you didn't see what everyone else was doing.” (Raul)

From this quote, we can observe that the efficiency in the team dropped due to the lack of feeling part of the bigger picture and not being able to grasp what others are doing. Therefore, we can understand that for employees, the feeling of being part of the team, and being able to contribute and make an impact are essential factors to feel engaged. Moreover, one of the

employees shared an example of how he feels engaged when he can see how his work fits into the company as a whole and the benefits it brings to his team and others.

Engagement when you have the cross functional dynamic (...) Because otherwise, it's really easy to just keep on going with things with an individualistic mindset. But if you start connecting the dots, sort of say, internally, then you can come up with solutions that suit everyone (...) But, if you're not really thinking about the consequences for the other teams, it's like working in silos.” (Claes)

As Claes shared, the opposite of working in ‘cross-functional’ teams is working in ‘silos’, which can become an individualistic mindset that does not consider the interests and goals of the other teams, which according to him, causes disengagement. One of the middle managers shared the sentiment that if people do not feel like they are part of the big decisions, it becomes a problem, or as she calls it, a ‘growing pain’:

“It is an important factor when it comes to growing pain that people don't feel as important, and also when it comes to communication and being part of the big decisions”(…)At first, we were 20 people and we had that sense of ownership Everybody could be part of every big decision that the company took. Everybody really felt a part of the strategy and the way that the whole company was moving forward. And now the roles are getting more narrow (...). We need more structures, principles and policies to really make everything function in a structured way. So I would say maybe it's less free in a lot of ways, which leads to disengagement.”(Victoria)

From this statement, we can illustrate that the company is facing growing pain which deteriorates employees to feel part of the bigger picture and big decisions. Moreover, one employee pointed out that a prerequisite to feeling important and feeling part of the bigger decisions is the connectedness of her work to the company’s OKRs. OKRs is the company language for objectives and key results.

“I can give a very concrete example. In quarter one of OKRs, I saw that none of the company OKRs kind of waterfalls down into what I do. So it basically feels like where the company is going right now, is completely detached from what my work is. That makes me feel very excluded because OKRs is the ultimate company goal and if my work is not benefiting to that goal, why am I even here? Like what am I supposed to do?(…)Which is again, just a mismanaging issue. I know that I’ve been adding benefits to the company that are just not recognized.”(Alex)

From these statements, it is possible to see that managers and employees share that when they do not feel they are contributing to the company's overall objectives or are not part of important decisions, and lack the feeling of belonging, they feel disconnected, which leads to

disengagement. Thus, we could understand that meaningful work is considered very important to the feeling of engagement.

Conversations turned deeper and more reflective with some of the employees when asked why they work hard at their job? This led them to see the critical parts of being so involved and engaged in their work. For example, a very engaged employee commented that she bases her sense of self on her job performance. Alternatively, as Alvesson, Gabriel & Paulsen (2017) call as ‘meaningful to the ego’ as her work makes her feel that her life is worth living:

“I feel motivated by my performance, which also is very dangerous in a way, because every time I might not be, in my opinion, on my top performance, it makes me question myself as a person.” (Djoeke)

However, Djoeke reflects that basing her self-identity on performance can become dangerous because her sense of self can be threatened if it is strongly linked to her performance.

4.2.2 Culture & Environment

When we asked what makes our respondents feel engaged and work hard, culture and environment were two factors that came up prominently in our interviews. Thus, as researchers, we looked deeper into the role that context plays in the perception and experience of EE.

When we asked Claes what a good work environment means to him, he expressed the following:

“It is also connected to having a good boss as I mentioned earlier. But to me, a good work environment is where you don't feel someone is looking for faults or mistakes. It is an environment where it is okay to make mistakes, as long as you learn from them and find a solution. If you only focus on the bad things it becomes a kind of a downward spiral, then the mood at the company becomes dark.” (Claes)

This statement illustrates how the work environment influences the mood of the company. It also shows that a good work environment consists of support, positivity, and the freedom to make mistakes. Furthermore, we observed that part of being engaged is the willingness to be engaged and participate in the company's various activities, as Djoeke and Claes expressed below:

“You want to be engaged. Not because you have to do your work, but because you really have that extra passion for your job.. (...) We're all here for a reason. We have our title, position

and our purpose within the organization. Just like we have a responsibility to fulfill our goals like practical work-related goals. I think we have the responsibility to raise the flag when for some reason we are not able to meet our objectives. (...)I think we have the responsibility to also make a good culture, like every person in an organization participates and contributes to the culture of the company.” (Djoeke)

“I am usually quite open with my manager about what I want to do and how it would work and so on. If I'm feeling like something's wrong, I usually say it. (...) As I think that makes it easier for them to understand me, and easier for me to get my voice heard as well.” (Claes)

Moreover, it is worth noting that the employees mentioned that it is their responsibility to express what they need to feel engaged in their work. Nevertheless, another employee also expressed that guidelines, procedures, and structures established by the company are necessary to create an encouraging culture in which they can express themselves and participate:

“Companies that encourage different departments to learn from each other, but there is a mandatory structure. (...) So you encourage different teams to get to know each other (...) but you still need the structural processes to be in place in order for things to run. (...) without a structure or encouragement from the company level, it's difficult to sort of just open the question like you guys need to learn from each other full stop.” (Joe)

However, a middle manager makes it clear that, in her perception, it is everyone's responsibility to create engagement:

“I'm not responsible for the engagement, I think that's something that we all do as colleagues, as a company together (...) we all are responsible for it together.” (Victoria)

Nevertheless, on the other hand, some of the senior managers agree that it is everyone's responsibility to create a culture together. However, one of them mentioned the importance of showing, as a leader, the culture you want to create.

“‘Show the environment you want’ culture grows from the roots to up! No top-bottom. For employees to feel empowered to create the culture. And everyone in the company has the responsibility of making it that place.” (Raul)

These statements underline the fact that culture is created two-way, from the bottom up and from the top down. Management gives guidelines that allow (as one senior manager mentioned) the space for employees to participate, and the much-talked-about open culture is achieved. Accordingly, Joe mentioned that in this dynamic of having employees who want to be engaged, it is vital to have good hiring practices so that the mindset of wanting to be engaged continues to be cultivated.

“If I flipped the perspective then on the other side rather than the big company aspect, but, from the bottom up, it's again to have people that are willing to be engaged because it's not a one-person drive, it needs to be a feeling that is held by the community. Having a good hiring practice, I think would then really support the company to have this engagement mindset so that it doesn't lose the speed of the growth and also lose the hearts of the company as you are growing.” (Joe)

Likewise, one of the senior managers shared with us the importance she sees in having the right candidate in the right job as a strategy to promote engagement.

“I think that we really spend time on finding the right candidate for the right role at the right time. That is super important for engagement, because it looks so different for different people. And that's also important with engagement, so important to find people that actually like what they do, because that's the best motivator to have the right person at the right time.” (Kyle)

These two statements show the importance of having a recruitment strategy as a driver to improve engagement. As seen above, it is recognized that culture is created in a two-way process, from the willingness of employees to engage, as well as from managers who function as enablers through the establishment of guidelines, strategies, and values that help create the culture in the desired direction.

4.2.3 Psychological safety

When we asked the employees what engagement means to them, the majority answered an open culture and an environment where everyone is able to voice their opinion. However, we observed that a prerequisite for employees to communicate openly and express their opinion is the feeling of being safe.

“When you are talking about engagement, in particular, there is positive engagement. And there's also negative engagement, isn't it? But in order for a company to achieve a good employee engagement, it is important to feel safe, to feel happy, to be able to voice my opinion, or even just be able to communicate openly with all of the team members.” (Joe)

This quote illustrates that it is important for Joe to feel safe to feel engaged. In addition, this quote suggests that it is in the hands of the company to create a safe environment for employees to express their voices and communicate openly. However, another participant expressed that it is also in the hands of the employees to communicate their wants and needs to the organization.

“I think it's really important for me to really communicate what I need from her and from the organization in general (...) That's also why I think it's very, very important that you have a close relationship with your manager and that you feel trusted and seen. Because that's also needed for that safe zone to continue (...) Because otherwise, it is very hard to dare to express your needs.” (Djoeke)

From this quote, we can illustrate that communication is two-way. It is both in the hands of the organization but also in the hands of the employees. From the interviews, the employees stated the importance of being able to express what you think, what you need, and what you want. On the other hand, the employees stated that to take initiative to express their voice, they need to feel safe, trusted, and seen. From the interviews, we observed that the employees find the environment and their relationship with their manager very important in their perception of engagement.

“I would say if you are in a good work environment and if you have a good boss, you should feel comfortable sharing whatever you have on your mind.” (Claes)

From these quotes, we can understand that expressing their voice and opinion is not always easy to do from the employee's perspective. From the interviews, we observed that employees do not always dare to express their voice and find it difficult. In addition, we observed that employees need certain elements to express their voice, such as feeling comfortable and safe. Next to that, open culture and a good work environment were recurring elements to feel safe as well.

When we asked the senior and middle managers what the ideal process of engagement would be, some mentioned the factor of psychological safety. It is interesting to note that the managers mentioned this concept by themselves without us interfering with it or giving clues. Hence, the use of her vocabulary can be explained by the influence of one thesis author since they work in the same company, and she has been working on this project along with some managers.

“We are a company who always believes that things can be done better and you can always improve [...] But we can really work a lot on psychological safety. Also, self-leadership, as I mentioned, for sure. Also, trying to develop our managers and leaders even more.” (Victoria)

This response indicates that Victoria highlights the importance of improving psychological safety, which in her eyes, the company should emphasize more on. For Victoria, creating psychological safety reinforces EE. Next to that, Robin, a senior manager, also agrees with this statement.

“It would look like where employee engagement is driven from the employees. It would be the best recipe where we create psychological safety for the employees and that we are enablers (...) So when you feel like people are driving the engagement.” (Robin)

From these statements, we can illustrate that according to the management, psychological safety leads to self-leadership in which employees feel confident enough to drive EE themselves. We observed that the ideal process of EE, according to managers, would be a two-way process in which the company facilitates psychological safety and where the employees express their voice and take the initiative. In response to the question ‘how can you see whether an employee is engaged,’ Victoria responded in the following way:

“People are still a bit hesitant and uncertain if they are doing the right thing and not taking full ownership and self-leadership in that sense. So I would say, it's a feeling where you can see that everybody feels comfortable and has self-control. When you're confident in your role, and also with your position and with your teammates, I think a lot of things will follow naturally.” (Victoria)

From this quote, it could be illustrated that, according to Victoria, psychological safety means a feeling of confidence, self-control, certainty, and being comfortable. However, it should be critically noted that self-leadership, taking initiative, and ownership - the ideal process of engagement for Victoria - can encourage employees to step outside of their comfort zone, which could create feelings of uncertainty, not knowing what to expect, and not feeling comfortable. Thus, it is interesting to note that the ideal process in which employees take initiative and leadership could perhaps decrease the feeling of psychological safety, which is, according to Victoria, the main driver of EE.

4.2.4 Leadership style

Our respondents consistently mentioned the importance of having a manager who makes them feel heard, seen, and safe to engage during the interviews. In addition, having effective communication and gaining trust from their managers seemed non-negotiable indicators of feeling engaged. Therefore, this section will explore the power dynamics behind the perception of engagement in more depth: how managers try to involve employees to make them feel engaged and how employees perceive these initiatives.

Following up on an employee's statement about the importance of a good boss, we asked the participant how he would cope with having a boss who does not make him feel included, heard, and seen. The respondent's response was as follows:

"It will definitely be harder. I would try to talk to them of course, to make them understand my perspective. But if it doesn't work, then I don't have to talk to someone else. I will try to look for another job where I feel like I belong. So it's definitely important to have good managers otherwise you'll lose a lot of employees". (Claes)

This statement shows that regardless of the management EE initiatives, a good relationship with a boss/manager seemed of significant importance and non-negotiable to the participant. Nevertheless, the relevance of having good leaders was clearly acknowledged by the management as well.

"I think the dangerous part when we talk about engagement is that engagement is perceived only by the fun activities we do in the office. Those are great and we need them because we need to have fun. But that will never create the engagement. No like a good culture, leadership and so on." (Robin)

Furthermore, one of the senior managers clearly stated that for them to invite employees to participate in initiatives, the management must set the tone and show the environment they want to create by giving clear examples.

"I think if you're in a manager or leader position, you need to show the environment that you want. So if, let's say I'm the CEO and I want people to stay late, hang out and do things with each other during off-work hours. I need to be doing that myself. I need to be showing that this is acceptable and a good thing. If you don't, then you will never have that culture." (Raul)

From this quote, we can illustrate that management must encourage employees that what they are doing is perceived as good by showing them by example. In this way, employees feel confident and empowered to participate in EE initiatives. Furthermore, one employee acknowledged and expressed her need for someone else to set an example and ask questions so that she can feel involved and willing to engage in work.

"I think it's both a direct factor but also an indirect factor. So the direct factor would be for example, support from your manager or support from your team members.(...)It's like working in Asia, where the work environment is a lot more hierarchical compared to working in Europe, where you're sort of being valued and asked more as an individual. Then you kind of see different levels and different types of company engagement and employee engagement. What I've experienced is the lower ranking employees are less likely to engage in discussions with

the higher ranks because of fear of, you know, being seen as, you know, overstepping the boundaries.” (Joe)

This statement shows the importance that power dynamics, ‘hierarchical structure’ play for some employees in their perception and experience of EE. If the participant feels not invited into the conversation by the management and feels that there are several levels of hierarchy, it is difficult for her to become involved and engaged. Thus, it can be noted from this statement that a prerequisite for engagement is fewer hierarchical levels. This brings us to the importance of having a more empowered workforce through making the employees feel seen, asking them questions and making them feel heard and part of the important decisions. These topics were very present in the interviews with our respondents. This perception is shared among managers at all levels and employees, as discussed below:

“When we started working from home with the pandemic, we realized that we still needed to have our daily meetings and our calls in the morning, but we also introduced an afternoon speaker, where at three o'clock, we just hopped on another call. Sometimes we play a game together for 30 minutes. (...) So everyone knew that there was a time where they were going to be a little bit put on the spot, but then also in a caring way. So we could have a conversation. We still struggle. I don't think we came back to full efficiency. But it did become better.” (Raul)

As mentioned earlier, the engagement and performance decreased due to working from home. The manager realized the core reason was the feeling of being seen, knowing what others on the team were working on, feeling heard and sharing moments with other people, so he implemented this online routine that could substitute a little bit of the experience that increased employee engagement in his perception.

Claes likewise describes that a good boss would make him feel more engaged, so we asked him what a good boss would mean to him, and he answered the following:

“What I feel is a really good boss, instead of a boss saying what I need to do, it's more like a leader than like a boss. When you can have a good relationship and talk about not just work related stuff, but the more relaxed feeling. And also a boss that tries to help you, that's really important.” (Claes)

Claes's response mirrors the leadership that the senior manager Raul expresses. Building relationships with employees and supporting them and not just making them feel that managers are watching what they do, but rather that they feel they are there to support them. Furthermore, other employees shared that sentiment with Claes on how managers must ask questions and play a supportive role to make employees feel and stay engaged.

“My manager gathered us in a room where we just took two hours to just go through questions like: how do we like working, which time would like to have meetings, how would like us to have meetings and how we would like to work together on projects. I think that was a time where I felt that she really saw everyone, and tried to make us really get to know each other from a work perspective, which I think made everyone engaged in our team (...) And we discovered how we can best collaborate together. I think that was something that made me stay engaged.”(Djoeke)

In this statement Djoeke shared how the fact that her boss made her feel seen and took the initiative to get to know each other better in order to work together created a sense of engagement for her and her colleagues. She expressed this again when asked about the ideal processes for her to be engaged.

“Maybe, I have one-on-ones with my manager where I see that she really sees me and what I do is notice, it's appreciated what I did. Either like any type of feedback, I appreciate it because I also want to know what I can do better.”(Djoeke)

Likewise, Leona shared the value of having a good relationship, trust, and communication with her manager, in her vision of the ideal process to feel engaged.

“I just say we have a very good relationship. (...) We're very open with the way we communicate. I will just tell her things. Like: this is how I feel, this is what I expected, this is how I want it to be. (...)So I feel freedom, and she wants me to do whatever I want, as long as I'm happy. And as long as I reach the goal and I do what's expected of me. She gives me that, because she knows that's when I do my best and when I work the best. I am very lucky.”(Leona)

In this case, Leona highlights the value of having a boss who trusts her, mentors her, trains her, and understands her so that she can give her best at work and feel engaged. However, employees continue to emphasize that in order for this relationship to be created and for them to be able to express themselves, it is a two-way street. For example, this was expressed as follows:

“I also believe that companies should be ready to give it, because it's not a one sided direction. It's another way of saying to obtain your own voice. It's not about only being vocal about what you say but also, that your surroundings are ready to listen. Because if you talk, you can talk, but the people need to be ready to listen to your value (...) that's what I think is a two-way direction. You should be ready to take or to have your own voice, to let go, but they need to be ready to give you that state, to give you that power or to listen to your voice.” (Alex)

This statement encapsulates that for employees to feel seen and invited to speak, there must be power dynamics that allow for this, managers who actively ask their teams for ideas, their ways of working, and how they can support them. Employees will express their voice, if their

managers are ready to listen. As we have seen previously, when employees feel empowered to participate, that is when a culture of collaboration and engagement is enhanced. Hence, as managers mention, one of the most important strategies to promote engagement is to train leaders. Moreover, another prerequisite for employees to express their voice and feelings is that alignment between managers in what they say and what they do is very important. One participant answered the following:

“You can obviously give your opinion, but if you don’t see action on it or you are not trusted to run something, that will not facilitate engagement. Then it will just be this wishy-washy where people say they invite an open conversation, but conversation per se doesn’t change anything.” (Alex)

From this statement, we can recognize the importance of saying and doing. We can illustrate from this statement that an open conversation is essential as long as action is guaranteed. The respondent refers to the concept ‘wishy-washy’, which we could understand as a phenomenon in which people say a lot, but act little upon it. The respondent addresses that having a conversation is nice, but action is more important because that will facilitate change. From her statement, we can suggest that it is very important for an employee to align what the manager says and what the manager does. As explained in the literature review, we can also refer to this as behavioral integrity. Otherwise, as the participant stated, there will be no trust nor EE.

Moreover, we also observed that some managers share this view as well. For example, one senior manager pointed out the importance of ‘great leaders’, as this creates, to her, psychological safety.

“What I talked about in the beginning, the feeling of being part of the journey, you feel important, you feel you are in and you feel like people count on you. I think that comes from having great leaders, and that is really important and people would really go back to basics. What we are going to do with our leaders is how can we make them feel more safe? How can we increase their self-awareness?.”(Robin)

From this statement, we can illustrate that leaders can create accountability to make the employees feel more important, trusted, and seen. However, she also mentions the importance of great leaders. She reflects that for leaders to be great, they need to have self-awareness and psychological safety. Another senior manager also stated the importance of accountability.

“Another important part is feeling accountable for the work that I do. Don't get me wrong but I feel much more accountable toward the people that I work with than to the customers. So my group of people, I want them to feel like they can trust me, I want them to see I am putting in my best efforts to make whatever commitment we have to each other reachable.” (Raul)

This quote illustrates that the senior manager feels and wants to be accountable for his work and the people he works with. He states the importance of being trusted and making commitments happen. Supposing that the manager told us the truth, we can observe from this quote that there is an alignment between the manager's true identity and the image they hold towards their employees. Additionally, Victoria spoke about her company's organizational culture and how it embraces a trial-and-error work environment.

“I think that's a thing within our company in general, like trial and error. Nobody has the perfect answer. Nobody knows. We can only try to listen to our employees and try it out. And if it doesn't work, you need to try something else.”(Victoria)

This statement indicates that the managers promote a learning culture in which people learn from mistakes by trial and error and where employees can feel safe to make such mistakes. From this statement, it can be understood that the managers promote a learning culture where employees are encouraged to develop themselves. Therefore, it can be noted that a learning culture where employees feel safe to make such mistakes can reinforce and encourage employees to take initiative and leadership which, according to Victoria, leads to the ideal process of engagement.

However, it should be critically noted that promoting a learning culture where people are encouraged to develop themselves also needs to involve feedback. Without feedback, people do not know what to improve and how to develop. For example, when we asked the same participant whether they have a feedback method, she answered the following:

“No, we don't have a structured way of asking for feedback after a certain event. Well, I think it's more our sense during the event. Of course, I can see during the event that it's only 10 people there instead of 30. So I can make my own conclusion in that way. More than that I wouldn't say we investigate any further.” (Victoria)

From this statement, we can illustrate that no in-depth feedback is gathered from employees. This contradicts the statement in which she mentions that the managers try to listen to employees to improve and find out what works best. However, the quote above suggests that managers make their own conclusions and do not ask in-depth questions after certain events. Thus, the statement 'we can only listen to our employees' contradicts the statement 'I can make my own conclusions, and we do not investigate any further, resulting in a misalignment in what the managers say and do.

4.3 Chapter Summary

We found the following in our findings guided by our research questions, namely the supporting and hindering factors of EE and how managers and employees relate to the saying/doing gap. First, we found that on the one hand managers ascribe importance to EE initiatives as a set of principles such as open communication, clear frameworks, and transparency. Nevertheless, it needs to be acknowledged that the management also organizes activities such as Monday meetings, after-works, and team-building activities. On the other hand, employees ascribed meaning to EE initiatives as practices such as team-building, after-works, and social activities. Since it is important for the employees to establish a good relationship with their peers and get to know each other. Nevertheless, managers, middle managers, and employees agree that communication and trust are vital to enhance EE. Conversely, they are a major hindrance to engagement when they do not flow.

Furthermore, our respondents expressed that maintaining a cross-functional collaboration where information is openly shared and is easy to understand enables engagement. Finally, concerning EE initiatives, we found that there must be a balance between the management team's involvement in the organization and the empowerment given to employees to create these activities. Otherwise, the EE initiatives may generate discomfort and disengagement.

Among the factors that support and hinder the EE and the EE initiatives were: meaningful work, open culture, and leadership with behavioral integrity, which creates a safe environment for communication and collaboration. Meaningful work appears to be one of the great motivators of engagement; when employees feel that they contribute and are part of the big picture in the company and its decisions, they express a strong sense of engagement. However, if employees do not feel connected to the company's purpose, they do not have a sense of fulfillment and development or a sense of belonging. As a result, the employees will feel disengaged. Furthermore, culture and environment are vital enablers for creating meaning and belonging in the workplace. According to our respondents, a good work environment consists of support, positivity, and the freedom to make mistakes. Nonetheless, it is recognized that the responsibility for creating this culture is a two-way process. There needs to be a willingness from employees to participate and managers who function as enablers through encouragement, behavioral integrity, and the establishment of guidelines, strategies, and values that help create a safe culture in which to participate.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

In the following chapter, we will discuss our empirical research findings. We aim to get a deeper meaning behind the perceptions of the EE initiatives and the supporting and hindering factors of employee engagement according to managers and employees at Jozzby (pseudonym company name). We aim to explore the gap between the perceptions of managers and employees and whether there is a consensus or dissensus in order to address our two main research questions. As a way of discussing our findings, we refer back to our literature review, reflecting on how the findings relate to existing theory and how the findings extend and contradict existing literature. By doing so, a new concept emerged, which we will discuss in the following section.

5.1 Meaningful work

This first part of the discussion is dedicated to answering our first research question, namely *‘What are the perceptions of the supporting and hindering factors of employee engagement according to managers and employees?’*. Our literature review used several well-known authors' definitions of what employee engagement (EE) means. This section will discuss our findings on the rhetoric of engagement that we have encountered in our research. In addition, pointing out the differences or similarities between employees and managers in the meaning given to this phenomenon.

Kahn (1990) and Schaufeli et al. (2002) define employee engagement as the emotional, physical, and cognitive self-expression at work, along with a continuous and positive affective-emotional state of fulfillment in employees mirrored in vigor, dedication, and absorption at one's work. However, these definitions do not discuss what is behind this connection and effort at work. In our empirical findings, when asked what engagement means to our respondents, these previous definitions came to light, with words such as: being passionate about their work, using their skills and knowledge, voicing their opinions, getting involved, going the extra mile, and emotional connection. When we asked employees their perception of supporting factors of EE, responses were mainly context-based (e.g., culture, leadership, communication), accountability, camaraderie, company's purpose, and self-actualization. We noticed that

employees increasingly choose jobs with purpose, value, and a mission they connect with. Overall, the rhetoric of engagement is focused on meaningful work, as explained below.

As we have mentioned previously, meaningful work derives from the feeling that the work done by oneself adds value either to the realization of oneself, a team, a company, or society. However, Alvesson, Gabriel, and Paulsen (2017) mention that not all meaningful work results in a meaningful product, “sensemaking is not the same as doing something meaningful” (Alvesson, Gabriel & Paulsen, 2017, p.12). This can be evidenced in the perspectives and experiences of the EE initiatives that are created to foster employee engagement. Jenkins and Delbridge (2013) argue that EE has failed to consider the context of the organizational environment. We observed that the context and environment mainly drive the increase in EE; activities alone are not what triggers it.

According to the existing theory, we discussed how adopting simplistic universal models to generate employee engagement is limited since essential concepts such as psychological well-being can be overlooked (Robertson & Cooper, 2010; Macey & Schneider, 2008). In our findings, therefore, we have seen how psychological safety and trust generated through an open culture, good vibes, team collaboration, peer relationships, a sense of belonging and inclusion, as well as the social context, are crucial elements of the experience, perception, and meaning given to employee engagement by both managers and employees. Therefore, as mentioned by Gallup in their consulting reports and Brown and Reilly (2013), it is essential to ask questions that shed light on the context and unique factors regarding the generation of employee engagement.

On the other hand, ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ values were present as differences in perception of the EE between managers and employees. Jenkins and Delbridge (2013) argue that strategies for managing employee engagement can take both approaches. According to our interviews, managers lean toward ‘hard’ values, although they have both approaches in mind when asked what employee engagement means. For managers, EE is highly correlated with ‘hard’ values, e.g., performance, outcome, and discretionary effort. For employees, on the other hand, it is more about developing themselves, having purpose and meaning at work, along with an environment that makes them feel safe and invites them to do their best. Therefore, we can see a dissensus between managers and employees since, in their responses, the employees' meaning of EE lean toward a ‘soft’ approach.

Understanding these encounters where managers strongly lean toward the ‘hard’ approach enlightens why EE is strongly related to productivity and performance. However, as mentioned in the literature review, this insight leads to a search for simple models that can be quantified, thereby overlooking the context and case-by-case approach that the soft EE approach considers. Our findings do not intend to argue which approach is better, as both sides have proven strengths and weaknesses (Jenkins & Delbridge, 2013). However, our findings provide a consensus that both employees and managers ascribe importance to an organizational culture that fosters the factors of EE. Maslow (1971) argued that if employees do not perceive their work as meaningful and purposeful, they will not deliver to the best of their ability. Furthermore, in this search for meaning, we see the concept named by Britt et al. (2005) as ‘self-engagement’ growing, as employees are also focusing on their sense of responsibility, commitment, and realization through their performance, as the employee Djoeke and manager Raul make clear in their interviews.

5.2 Tip of the iceberg

The second part of the discussion is dedicated to answering our second research question: "*How do managers perceive their engagement initiatives, and how do employees relate to these?*". Again, our findings provided insights into how managers ascribe meaning to their engagement initiatives and how employees relate to these. This research question aims to explore whether there is a consensus or dissensus between what is perceived by employees and what is done in practice by management. A more detailed explanation of the meaning of consensus and dissensus is described in the introduction part.

Our empirical findings show that management perceives their EE initiatives rather as principles than practices. It became clear that clear frameworks, open communication, and transparency were seen as a tool to build EE. Moreover, the managers agreed that EE activities such as after-works and team-building are nice. However, they emphasize building a transparent and open culture where knowledge is shared across departments. According to Jenkins and Delbridge (2013), transparency and openness also demonstrate a degree of trust.

Furthermore, the managers have experienced a low response rate with their EE practices and have the feeling that they are not reaching the goal. As a result, they have taken another approach in which they act more as enablers and try to put more responsibility on the employees

in the hope that the employees will take more initiative regarding EE activities. From the interviews, we understood that an EE initiative cannot be forced top-down but can be enabled through dialogue and consensus. According to the managers, this new approach is also in line with the ideal process of engagement, as they wish the employees would take more self-leadership and drive the engagement themselves. However, the managers realize that they must create psychological safety to make this happen.

Thus, the managers refer to their employee engagement initiatives as open communication, transparency, and clear frameworks. However, their ideal process for EE would be an environment where employees feel the psychological safety to take self-leadership and ownership so that employee engagement will be enabled by the organization and driven by the employees.

On the other hand, when the same question regarding EE initiatives was asked to the employees, a different answer was given. Most employees referred to EE initiatives as social activities such as team-building activities and after-works. We noticed that what employees like most about the employee engagement initiatives is the opportunity to get to know each other, connect and spend time together. It is interesting to note that the employees perceive EE initiatives differently than the management. Moreover, another interesting finding has been acknowledged as well. When we asked the employees, "what would be your ideal process to feel more engaged?" it was interesting to note that they mentioned other factors than the question regarding the EE initiatives. Most of the employees mentioned factors such as having an inspiring environment, inspiring colleagues, feeling appreciated, feeling seen, feeling involved, having the opportunity to develop, sharing knowledge, and most importantly, making an impact. These factors touch upon different aspects than the social activities such as team-building and after-work the employees mentioned before. From these findings, we can understand that an organizational culture that facilitates the abovementioned factors is considered EE's ideal process.

Moreover, we learned that employees did not mention the factors named by management for an ideal engagement process. Thus, it became apparent that, according to the employees taking self-leadership and ownership are not the primary drivers to feeling engaged. However, from our empirical findings, we could notice that employees agree that employee engagement has to be two-way. Some employees also mentioned that EE would drive itself naturally if the right

mindset and organizational culture were created. Hence, the employees addressed the importance of receiving encouragement from their managers and being able to express their voices. We learned that psychological safety is a prerequisite for employees to take the initiative and express their voices.

Thus, the empirical findings regarding EE initiatives led us to understand that there is a dissensus between how managers perceive their employee engagement initiatives and how employees relate to them. Hence, we could find that both managers and employees ascribe the importance of having an open culture with transparent communication where everyone feels safe and confident to raise their voice, take initiative and share knowledge with each other.

The above elaborations led us to understand that EE activities are not the ones that form the most engagement. However, these EE activities occur naturally if employees feel engaged and supported by the company. We observed that an organizational culture that involves transparent communication, knowledge sharing, empowerment, personal development, and psychological safety is key. Jenkins and Delbridge (2013) point out that feeling supported, recognized, and encouraged are crucial elements of trust. They stated that trust is a vital element for an employee to feel engaged. Thus, we found that the context and the environment matter to creating employee engagement. From the interviews, we learned that such an organizational culture creates a feeling of being appreciated, being part of the team, and feeling seen and involved, which is the ideal process for employees to feel engaged. Therefore, from our empirical findings, we found that the EE activities such as team-building and after-works are just the tip of the iceberg. These social activities will drive naturally if the proper foundation is built. We ascribe to the right foundation as an organizational culture that involves all the factors of the ideal process of employee engagement. This is in line with Tuckey et al. (2012), who state that a positive work environment where employees feel inspired and supported empowers employees to take independent action and responsibility. As a result, employee engagement will be driven by both the managers and employees, representing a two-way process where all organization members take initiative and self-leadership.

5.3 The say-do gap

Another interesting finding emerged from our empirical data, namely the concept of behavioral integrity. In the literature review, we referred to behavioral integrity as the alignment between

what the manager says and does. The greater the alignment between the manager's words and deeds, the greater trust an employee will have in his/her manager (Davis & Rothstein, 2006). From our empirical findings, we found that employees ascribe the importance of behavioral integrity from the management side. The employees pointed out that if the manager's words are not reflected in action, trust will be diminished. However, we observed that the management also shares this insight as they addressed the importance of reflective leaders who create accountability in what they say and do. To the managers, creating trust and psychological safety is key. Thus, we can remark that the management is aware of and states the importance of an alignment between "identity & image" and "saying & doing".

Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that this alignment was not consistently recognized in our empirical findings. Hence, we acknowledged some misalignments in what the managers say and what the managers do. For example, when we asked the managers what their employee engagement initiatives are, the majority responded with open communication, transparency, and clear frameworks to involve everyone. On the other hand, the management also recognized that due to the company's growth pace of the company it is not possible to involve everyone anymore. The managers pointed out that not all information can be shared across all organization members; thus, involving everyone has become very difficult. From the empirical findings, we can note that managers ascribe importance to involvement, transparency, and open communication, yet they find it very hard to implement this into practice.

Moreover, the managers also have the feeling that they are not reaching the goal with their other EE initiatives, such as social activities. They face a low response rate, which means they want to take on a different approach. The employees take more initiative and self-leadership, so employee engagement will be driven by the employees. However, the employees stated that to take initiative to express their voice, they need to feel safe, trusted, and seen. These factors correspond with the elements of soft HRM. Therefore, it should be critically noted that this new approach in which employees have to take self-leadership and initiative can decrease the feeling of psychological safety as they need to step out of their comfort zone. Thus, we can also find a misalignment in understanding each other's wants and needs and how EE can be created in the best way.

Furthermore, we also found a misalignment in what the management says and does regarding the organizational feedback culture. As stated in the analysis, the managers ascribe importance to an open learning culture consisting of trial and error. The managers noted that they could only listen to their employees in order to know what to improve. However, when explored further, we found that the management does not have a certain method to gather in-depth feedback from employees next to the company's online feedback tool. As Brown and Reilly (2013) pointed out, asking questions to gain context-specific information and insight is crucial to understanding the drivers of employee engagement. Hence, we acknowledge that management facilitates one-on-one meetings with employees, but a structured way of asking for feedback to gain in-depth insight does not occur.

Thus, we can conclude that there is an alignment between managers and employees in what they perceive as necessary, namely open communication and involvement. However, we can also conclude there is a misalignment in what the managers say they find important and what they do or can do in practice. Thus, we found a say-do gap in how the managers perceive their employee engagement initiatives and what they do in practice.

Based on the say-do gaps we encountered in our findings, we have emerged a new concept, namely the *employee engagement gap*. This gap refers to the misalignments between managers and employees in what is being said and done and the different meanings they ascribe to EE's supporting and hindering factors and EE initiatives. We have found that most employees and managers have the same understanding of what EE should be. However, on a personal level, variations in preferences and how it is expressed, embodied, and experienced are present. Thus, EE is very personal. The employee engagement gap relates to the 'say-do' gap. Hence, this new concept aims to touch upon deeper misalignments that we have identified instead of just the gap between 'saying' and 'doing.' This employee engagement gap can be explained based on the phenomenon of *employee engagement rhetoric* as a means of highlighting the differences in how people perceive and communicate employee engagement. A good analogy to explain this phenomenon is to imagine, on the one hand, that managers speak Chinese (referring to the beliefs and initiatives they hold that drive EE). On the other hand, the employees speak Italian (referring to the reasons that increase their engagement), so they do not understand the language managers are trying to communicate. Hence the initiatives intended as acts to increase their engagement are not understood and perceived as such.

5.4 Who should drive engagement?

As shown in the previous section, for employees to participate, they must be given a seat at the table and assured that participating is okay even if mistakes are made. However, there must be an environment in which they feel safe and supported. Khan (1990) mentions that employees must feel psychologically safe enough to engage. We have observed that trust and psychological safety were part of the foundation of the employee engagement rhetoric. Most of our interviewees are willing to participate and collaborate if the right environment is created.

Truss et al. (2014) mention that many scholars are beginning to see engagement as a management practice, focusing on ‘doing engagement,’ not ‘being engaged.’ This resonates with our findings and with what managers have expressed. The management mentions that they perceive their roles as facilitators to create this environment of engagement, which could be seen as ‘doing engagement.’ However, within this approach, employees have also mentioned that it is perceived as a burden for employees to give more than is described in their job description, which often makes them feel pressured. Furthermore, one of the middle managers mentioned that they want empowered employees and self-leaders, so it could be said that managers then expect employees to be ‘doing the engagement’ as well, and not just ‘being engaged.’

As stated earlier in the literature review, EE involves a two-way relationship between the employer and the employee. Both parties need sufficient knowledge of the business context and self-reflection (Kular et al., 2008; Robinson & Hayday, 2007). In other words, both need to cooperate to ‘do’ and ‘be’ engaged. Organizations ought to maintain the vibes and the environment so employees feel encouraged to participate, express their voices, connect, and give their best expression at work. As Millar (2012) mentioned, we must stop seeing employees as dependent on the organizations and start seeing them as autonomous. Nevertheless, they can also take part in their development and engagement. Both employees and managers acknowledged this, as employees reflected on their responsibility to communicate their needs to feel engaged obstacles that make them feel disengaged. However, managers need to ask questions and talk to employees to understand what is happening and how they can support them.

Under the lens that EE is a two-way process and contemplating that employees are no longer seen as dependent on the organization, self-leadership plays a crucial role in making this

happen. In this way, the employee reflects and takes responsibility for his or her emotional state. We learned from the interviews that it is essential for employees to reflect on what makes them feel engaged in their work and why they work hard. Likewise, it is vital that managers also have self-reflection to relate to employees. Moreover, they also ask their teams, creating an environment of reflection and open communication, where both know each other better and know their drivers for engagement. Therefore, both parties promote a culture of trust, self-leadership, and empowerment.

In addressing one of our research questions, namely *“How do managers perceive their engagement initiatives and how do employees relate to these?”* we use the definition of initiatives as a set of strategic activities, which is necessary for us to question whether these initiatives are strategic. On the one hand, we consider that EE activities themselves are not the ones that produce engagement. Thus these activities are not seen as a strategy. However, on the other hand, an organizational culture that fosters clear communication is the primary facilitator of EE. Therefore, a strategy is needed to build such an organizational culture that generates EE. Furthermore, Gallup Consulting Report (2010) claims that employee engagement is a strategic approach supported by tactics for driving EE.

As we have said before, we believe that EE can be both strategic and operational depending on the initiatives and metrics with which this phenomenon is addressed. It can be strategic if it is linked to key business metrics (‘hard’ values), just as it is not if it is related to more feeling and naturalness in the organic creation of the culture (‘soft’ values) and is a combination of both approaches. However, in this section, we see that EE is a two-way phenomenon. Both the management and the employees must be co-participants to create the activities and strategies that generate a sustainable feeling of EE.

Chapter 6 - Conclusion

6.1 Theoretical contributions

As outlined in the introduction of our thesis, employee engagement is still an ill-defined concept. Although the awareness of this concept is increasing, Whittington and Galpin (2010) stated that less than 30% of the total corporate workforce is fully engaged. Human capital has become a competitive asset with the increasing influence and constraints of capital markets on HR practices (Thompson, 2003). Companies are becoming more standardized and have shifted their focus to shareholder value, leading companies to privilege a 'hard' approach (Thompson, 2003). As a result, EE has often been adopted as a one-size-fits-all initiative and is measured in standardized surveys, overlooking the complexity of this concept and the need for a person-oriented approach (McManus & Mosca, 2015; Thompson, 2003). This has led to the 'say-do' gap featuring discrepancies in managers making hopeful promises but acting little upon them (Brown, & Reilly, 2013). As in depth-understanding of EE and understanding of individual factors that promote or hinder EE are lacking, we were urged to explore further the qualitative perceptions around the complexity and sensitivity of EE (Brown & Reilly, 2013; McManus & Mosca, 2015). We aimed to bridge the gap between expectations and realities, next to building a more comprehensive view of EE according to the perspective of managers and employees.

Our first research question aimed to explore what managers and employees 'say' regarding EE's supporting and hindering factors. We identified that psychological safety and trust generated through an open culture, team collaboration, peer relationships, a sense of belonging and inclusion, and the social context are crucial elements for employees to feel engaged. Thus, the concept of meaningful work was seen as a significant facilitator of EE. However, the lack of the above factors is perceived as hindering EE, which leads employees to feel disengaged. Furthermore, according to managers, EE is highly correlated with 'hard' values such as performance, outcome, and discretionary effort. Whereas, according to employees, EE is more about a feeling and an environment that invites them to give their best, leaning towards a 'soft' approach. Thereby, we can see a dissensus between how managers and employees ascribe meaning to the perceptions of supporting and hindering factors of EE. However, overall, it can be observed that the managers, middle managers, and employees agree on the same thing: communication and meaningful work is vital, especially the importance of knowledge sharing

and involvement. According to the managers and employees, this enhances and creates a feeling of engagement. However, we can observe that engagement is very personal. Therefore, understanding the context and asking person-oriented questions is key to understanding EE's supporting and hindering factors.

Our second research question aimed to investigate what the managers 'do' regarding the EE initiatives and how employees relate to these. We revealed that management perceives their EE initiatives rather as principles than practices. It became evident that clear frameworks, open communication, and transparency were seen as significant facilitators for EE. However, we identified that the employees relate to management EE initiatives as practices in the form of team-building and social activities (e.g., after works). This is an interesting finding as the employees perceive the EE initiatives differently from the management, revealing a significant gap.

Moreover, misalignments in what the management 'says' and 'does' were also identified. On the one hand, the managers ascribe the importance to open communication and transparency. However, on the other hand, they acknowledge that due to the company's growth pace it is not possible to involve everyone anymore and share all the information across the organization. Thus, what they say is not reflected in what is being done in practice. The employees also stated the importance of alignment between what the management 'says' and 'does.' For example, the employees clarified that having a conversation is pleasant. However, if no action is guaranteed, then this will diminish trust.

Based on these say-do gaps, we introduced a new concept, namely the *employee engagement gap*. This new concept has been explained with the second emerging concept of *employee engagement rhetoric* which highlights the differences in how people perceive and communicate employee engagement. For example, if the managers and employees do not speak the same 'language,' this generates disconnection between them. This results in the employee engagement gap that can generate frustration on both sides. Therefore, to bridge this employee engagement gap, we can conclude that the right organizational culture must be created, fostering employees feeling appreciated, involved, safe, trusted, and seen. As a result, the employees will feel more encouraged, supported, and confident enough to express their voice, take initiative and have ownership. This is in line with Tuckey et al. (2012), who state that a

positive work environment where employees feel inspired and supported empowers employees to take independent action and responsibility.

Thus, EE can become a two-way process when such an organizational culture is created as employees feel more encouraged to take initiative and practice self-leadership. This two-way process can generate a common understanding of the *employee engagement rhetoric* between managers and employees. As a result of this dynamic, the ideal EE process for management can be created. EE activities are not the drivers per se, but these activities will flow naturally and will be driven by both the employees and managers if the right organizational culture is created. Hence, in such an organizational culture, managers need to show behavioral integrity, facilitate psychological safety, and encourage the employees to take more initiative. As Alvesson et al. (2017) and Sveningsson and Alvesson (2017) mentioned, only if a manager acts with honesty, integrity, and transparency can a manager foster behavioral integrity and portray a strong moral positioning in which trust is created. Only then, when the right organizational culture is built, context-specific questions are asked, and management shows behavioral integrity, is it possible to bridge the employee engagement gap.

6.2 Limitations and implications

In this section, we will elaborate on the limitations and implications of our study. Most of these limitations have been addressed already in the methodology section in Chapter 3. As one of our thesis authors is employed at Jozzby, we were involved in an ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ study (Spradley, 2016). However, it is essential to point out that this can raise trustworthiness frictions as interviewees are not fully anonymous. As Schaefer and Alvesson (2020) point out, most of the studies lack reflective positioning, do not consider credibility requirements, and ignore trustworthiness implications. Most studies do not take a critical view of their own nor communicate complex issues.

Therefore, we aim to discuss our critical practices and reflect upon issues of concern. The researcher who is employed at the company, referred to as the ‘insider,’ can have caused a potential conflict of interest. Since this researcher is aware of, has inside knowledge, and knows the employees of the company, professional objectivity may be compromised. This may have caused biased questions by the ‘insider’ researcher due to her professional occupation. Moreover, this also implies possible credibility and source-critical issues, not knowing whether

the interviewees are telling us the whole story and remain authentic (Schaefer & Alvesson, 2020). This can raise concerns about the quality of our empirical data. However, we discussed this concern thoroughly before starting our interviews. Hence, we declared this conflict of interest by taking a critical standpoint. We aimed to be very critical, reflect on our assumptions, and remain subjective. By dividing the tasks accordingly, the ‘insider’ researcher could take a distant view during empirical data collection to remain subjective. Hence, the ‘outsider’ researcher took the stance of asking context-specific and person-oriented questions to maintain a trustworthy atmosphere and considering the ethical principles of our research approach.

Another limitation is that most of our interview participants were female. As most of the employees at the company are female, we did our ultimate best to realize mixed-gender respondents. Hence, the female respondents might have caused a gender bias in our research. Next to that, most respondents have a certain consensus on their personal views on society. The participants’ employment at a feministically oriented company might have caused biased views or answers. Therefore, during the interviews, we asked the respondents to think of their employee engagement experiences in general, not only at the company they are currently employed at. Moreover, most of the participants are of Swedish origin, impacting our research with a population-specific and strong regional focus. Hence, the company presents a multicultural atmosphere where the corporate language is English, representing the respondents being aware of and exposed to different ethnicities. Finally, the limited time constraints of our study and the sample size may have limited the extent to which this research was carried out.

Although our findings illustrate the complexity of the different *employee engagement rhetoric* and the *employee engagement gap* in what is said and done accordingly, trying to understand these, and closing the gap has its implications. First, our results show that simply asking employees what makes them engaged and then acting on it does not necessarily increase employee engagement, as EE is a two-way process. Secondly, not all employees are in the habit of questioning what makes them engaged, and their EE rhetoric fluctuates depending on various factors such as their position, interests, and needs. Therefore, it is necessary to maintain clear and effective communication to align the EE rhetoric and bridge the EE gap. Finally, it requires empowering both leaders and employees to develop more self-awareness of their strengths and limitations and create a safe space where they can discover, express, and use them to increase engagement. While behavioral integrity is a crucial value to achieve this, leaders need to be aware of the impact that their behavior and actions have on the *employee engagement rhetoric*.

6.3 Further research

Our study has indicated that the adoption of simplistic universal models on EE overlooks key individual and contextual enablers for employee engagement. Accordingly, since there are companies with large numbers of employees, considering individual and local cases may seem impossible and not scalable. Therefore future research could focus on how to take into account individuals and the context in large-scale companies. We have also seen that EE is a concept that overlaps with others, so trying to clarify the value and meaning of this concept contributes to its better understanding and application, thus helping to close the say-do gap. Further qualitative research on the EE phenomenon is also needed to enable a more local and contextual understanding. This will pursue more clarity on the meaning of EE and the activities that generate EE. The root and reason behind this concept will create a more solid foundation for employee engagement. This will allow practitioners to move away from superficial universal quantitative measures to a more qualitative perception that considers the complexity and sensitivity of employee engagement.

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Appendix

Table 1: Anonymized List of Interviewees at Jozzby (pseudonym)

#	Names (pseudonyms)	Position
1	Raul	Senior manager
2	Kyle	Senior Manager
3	Robin	Senior Manager
4	Paul	Middle Manager
5	Karen	Middle Manager
6	Victoria	Middle Manager
7	Claes	Employee
8	Djoeke	Employee
9	Joe	Employee
10	Alex	Employee
11	Cecil	Employee
12	Leona	Employee

Source: Own representation.

Figure2: Similarities and differences on themes between managers and employees

Main themes	Managers	Employees
EE initiatives	<p><u>Guidelines:</u> Effective communication Transparency Open culture</p>	<p><u>Practices:</u> Social activities Team-building After-works Spending time with each other Knowledge sharing</p>
Meaningful work	<p>Feeling challenged Feeling important Aligning personal values with company values Self-actualization Connectedness to the company</p>	<p>Search for meaning Adding value to themselves, colleagues and company Being part of the big picture Contributing to the company Making an impact Cross-functional teams Being part of important decisions Belonging Find meaning and purpose</p>
Culture & Environment	<p>Everyone’s responsibility to create a culture Showing the culture you want to create Right fit for right job Recruitment strategy</p>	<p>Being a good fit Open culture Having a good boss Good work environment that is positive, supportive Freedom to make mistakes Encouragement</p>
Psychological safety	<p>Confidence Self-control Certainty Being comfortable Open learning culture Feeling safe to make mistakes</p> <p>Facilitate psychological safety → leads to self-leadership and employee driven engagement</p>	<p>Feeling safe Being able to voice opinion Communicate openly Feeling trusted and seen Open culture Good work environment</p>
Leadership style	<p>Show the environment you want Giving clear examples Encouragement Let the others feel seen and heard Sharing</p>	<p>Importance of having a good boss Good relationship with boss/manager Having clear examples Support, encouragement & empowerment Being involved and asked Power dynamics</p>

	<p>Create accountability Have self-awareness Give psychological safety</p>	<p>Listening managers Alignment in what they say and do</p>
<p>The ideal process of engagement</p>	<p>EE driven by employees Employees feel empowered Self-leadership Self-ownership EE enabled in light-touch way (soft HRM) Psychological safety</p>	<p>Clear communication Trust Feeling involved Knowledge sharing Cross-functional teams Express voice Feeling part of Being appreciated Psychological safety Feeling heard/seen</p>

Source: Own representation