

# Organic Leadership Style and Employee Engagement: The Mediating Effect of Social Relevance of Work in Context of Faculty Members in Higher Education

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## **Abstract**

*Leadership Style has been since long acknowledged by management scholars as being an important subject in relation to organizational executions and outcome. An effective leadership would not only be able to prevent job stress and burnout among group members, but would also be successful in enhancing the motivation and engagement of the employees. It has been widely accepted that operational excellence in an organization can only be maintained through engaged employees. In this study the researchers have strived to enhance the understanding of the complex relationship between the organic leadership style and the engagement level of the employees and to further comprehend the mediating role of social relevance of work in association of the two constructs i.e. leadership style and employee engagement, in context of faculty members in higher education sector.*

**Keywords:** Employee Engagement, Organic Leadership Style, Social Relevance of Work, Faculty Members, Mediator Analysis.

## **1.Introduction**

It has become imperative to understand what drives an organization to deliver and accomplish its goals. In today's competitive world, organizational excellence is the key word for the organizational sustainability and its success. Job satisfaction, job involvement, organizational commitment, organizational citizen behavior are the new buzz words that research proves have a profound effect on the productivity and the success of any organization, especially in our knowledge-based economy. Various variables play an active role in augmenting and retaining employee energy, motivation and commitment. Some of the factors will be intrinsic to the employee and are beyond the control of the organization, but yet can be looked into by better recruitment policies and training. Job satisfaction can be from extrinsic factors like salary, job security, leadership style, supportive colleagues, working conditions and rewards etc.

In today's competitive environment which relies mostly on knowledge workers, it is time to go beyond just involvement and commitment of employees and towards employee engagement. That involves having an emotional and intellectual connect with the organization and putting the organization before self.

Organic leadership obscures the distinction between the leader and the followers. Rather than depending on one leader, organic leadership style has multiple leaders. These multiple leaders help in managing the diverse and dynamic organizational environment, wherein it gets complicated for a few leaders to cope (Avery and Bergsteiner, 2010). Employees with different skills and knowledge yet with the common vision, values, and supportive culture tend to be accepted as leaders. Researchers substantiate that those organizations that follow the organic leadership concept, drive and support growth and sustainability (Manz et al., 2009).

Organizations that engage in discharging their social responsibilities contribute to a higher quality of work life for its employees (Timossi, 2008). Non-adherence to social obligations would create wariness among employees. Providing poor services, causing pollution, inappropriate employment practices may be all equated to low-quality of work life.

Looking into the significant impact the leadership style has on the employees, the organization and also on the services provided by it, there continues to be a need among scholars and academicians alike for analyzing variables that would induce higher engagement levels. The study sets out to examine organic leadership style and social relevance of work as antecedents of work engagement.

## 2. Theory and Hypotheses

### 2.1. Organic Leadership

The 21<sup>st</sup> century witnessed the prominence of new prototypes and concepts in leadership study. Jing et al. (2008) point out that there is not one lone leadership style rather a leadership paradigm that portrays the social and historical origin.

The idea of a distributed leadership dates back to 1950s where it was proposed to have many individuals as leaders rather than a single strong leader. The leaders of this particular style of leadership tend to change according to the most appropriate member at a particular time and according to the requirement, rather than someone permanently employed (Zhang, 2010). Organic leadership though having been recently introduced by Darth(2001), it was named as such by Avery (2004). It is emerging as a popular style. There existed other proposed theories that laid the foundation for it, but have been referred by researchers with names such as distributed leadership, collective leadership, team leadership and even as empowering leadership (Mehra et al., 2006; Pearce and Conger, 2003; Day et al., 2006).

In literature, these terms have been used generally interchangeably since they have a similar interface to a certain extent (Suriyankietkaew, 2013). They all focus on moving away from the single leader concept to lesser command and control from top to bottom. Leaders emerge instead of being appointed. Emphasis is laid on collective work of the diverse members of the organization to accomplish the shared goals (Suriyankietkaew, 2013).

### 2.2. Employee Engagement

Engagement creates an optimal relationship between both the employees and the organization. An engaged employee would strongly identify with his work, will possess good mental health, have positive emotions, perform well(Rich et al.,2010), would experience inherent motivation and work towards accumulating self-efficacy (Bakker et al., 2007; Gupta et al., 2015).They are energetically and effectively more connected to their work and all of these individual outcomes would benefit the organization as a whole in a way that the organization may be able to retain its talented and valued employees and would have a positive image in the society (Schaufeli and Salanova, 2007).

Engaged employees work with greater intensity for longer periods of time, are more focused towards their responsibilities, have greater emotional connect with their task and hence show enhanced performance. Engaged employees not only work with dedication but contribute indirectly to the success of the organization by creating an environment of organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) by being helpful , collaborative and innovative (Rich, et al.,2010).

Engaged employees would have a wider perspective of their functions in the organization and would increase the scope of activities in their job. This infers that engagement has a positive influence on the way the employees would perform their duties (Gupta et al., 2015).

*Hypothesis 1:* Organic leadership style has a positive association with employee engagement.

### 2.3. Social Relevance of Work

When employees perceive that their organization's values are in congruence with their personal value system they would find their work to be more meaningful (Kahn, 1990; Rich, et al., 2010). The reckoning on the part of the employees that their work in the organization is making a positive contribution to the society as a whole would also add meaningfulness to their work. Meaningfulness creates the feeling of being worthy, valued, and being worthwhile and a process of making a greater investment of self at work and for the organizational goals (Kahn, 1990). This, in turn, may help an individual to be fully engaged at work.

Tabassum et al. (2012) on the empirical research on faculty members of private universities in Bangladesh have deduced a high significant positive correlation between the social relevance of the work and job satisfaction. This job satisfaction they assert is higher than what they experience with work conditions, work-life balance, and also from opportunity for growth and development. The employees get a sense of consummation in performing their work responsibilities since employee engagement is basically a motivational concept.

Research on published literature by Skakon et al. (2010) provides evidence that the perception of support, trust, integrity and feedback of the leader are related to well-being and low stress levels of the employees.

*Hypothesis 2:* Organic leadership style is positively related with social relevance of work.

The quality of work life has a significant impact on the satisfaction and dissatisfaction in various domains. A high quality of work life positively impacts satisfaction in the job and also spills over as satisfaction in other spheres of life including

spiritual, social and overall life of an employee (Loscoco and Roschelle, 1991). An important parameter of quality of work life is the social relevance of work (Walton, 1974; Timossi, 2008).

Quality of work life impacts the personal identification that an employee experiences with the organization. An employee who identifies with the organization is characterized by loyalty, displays congruence with the organizational goals and considers self as an organizational member (Efarty and Sirgy, 1990).

Levine, et al. (1984) have reiterated that the extent of contribution to the society that the work done makes, will define the quality of work life of an individual besides other aspects like salary, relation with the superior, self-esteem etc.

Most of the research in the recent past has focused on improving the engagement level of the employees through providing them job security, better remuneration, conducive work conditions, job satisfaction etc. In this study, we propose that if the employees perceive that the job they do has a higher social relevance, it would, in turn, engage them more.

*Hypothesis 3:* Perception of the social relevance of work is positively associated with employee engagement.

Employees' who perceive their leaders to be higher in integrity experience increased job and life satisfaction, they enjoy better health and low-stress level, they have lesser absence from work and they perceive fairness in distribution of rewards (Prottas, 2008).

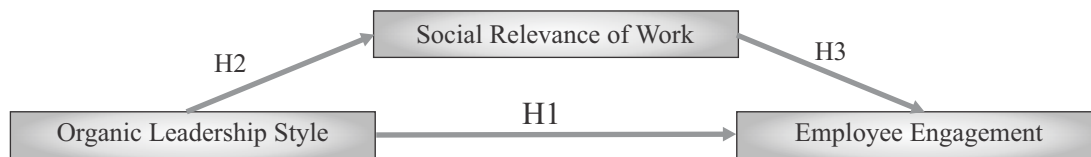
Skakon et al. (2010) have asserted that positive leadership style that takes into consideration support to the employees would have a positive relationship with well-being and diminished stress levels among employees, it would just be the opposite with negative leadership style.

Rich, et al. (2010) asserts that engaged employees not only perceive being congruent with the organizational values and having a good supervisory support but also receive in return a higher rating from their supervisors in the task they perform and in the organizational citizen behavior,

hinting at a reciprocal relationship between engagement and supervisory support.

*Hypothesis 4:* Social relevance will mediate the direct relationship between organic leadership and employee engagement.

Figure 1: Path Model Linking the Latent Variables



### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Sample and Study Procedure

The higher education sector of India has been chosen, since it has a huge potential for growth, and is also playing an important role in operant conditioning the youth who are responsible for the progress of the nation. The faculty in the higher education sector shoulders the responsibility of mentoring India's youth and making them ready as professionals and citizens of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Uttarakhand has recently emerged as an educational hub with numerous schools, colleges and universities offering a high quality of education. Statistical population of this research includes Professors, Associate Professors and Assistant Professors employed at various private universities of repute in Uttarakhand. The sample was chosen by availability (convenience) sampling method, a non-probability technique that basically consisted of volunteers who were self-selected. Social science researchers these days have started depending on availability samples (Zhang, 2010; Rich et al., 2010).

Face-to-face questionnaire survey was selected as the procedure for data collection for this study. Although the method requires a greater amount of resources and time per survey than the other

methods like mail and an online survey, but it provides a higher response rate and is better suited for sensitive and complex questions (Zhang, 2010). A pilot study consisting of 72 respondents was conducted through quantitative and qualitative methods. Discussions along with a structured questionnaire were used. Factor analysis was run on the data; the reliability of the scale was established and questions with ambiguous language were corrected.

Primary data for the study was collected by visiting the various universities, interacting with the faculty members and obtaining responses through the questionnaire. The researcher's own presence for administering the survey further motivated the respondents to participate and to retain the interest in the questionnaire. Doubts, if any, were clarified and assurance for secrecy was reinforced.

#### 3.2. Measures

*Employee Engagement:* Employee Engagement was measured by the 17 item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale, as used by Bakker, et al. (2007) and Kanten & Sadullah, (2012). The scale comprises of vigor, dedication and absorption as the three latent variables. Validity, reliability of the scale is well established, and the three-factor structure has been found to be superior to any other alternative factor structure, the internal consistency

of the three subscales has been adequately high in each of the studies (Bakker, et al. 2007). Factor analysis done on the pilot study identified four factors, using the retention criterion of Eigen value. Keeping in mind that the scale is well researched and has been used in a number of researches we retained the original three factors.

*Organic Leadership:* The construct organic leadership was measured using 5 items scale as developed by Avery(2004) but modified to suit the study. It included statements such as 'my HoD and I make decisions together', 'multiple perspective and talents are used in solving problems in our university'. Respondents were asked to rate their immediate supervisor/ HoD on each of the explicit aspects.

*Social Relevance of Work:* Social relevance of work was measured by three items adapted from the one proposed by Walton (1974) and as revised by Timossi (2008). Sample items included, "I am satisfied with the quality of education that my organization imparts" and "I am satisfied by the contribution that my organization makes to the society".

In order to identify the employee's perception on various constructs Likert's five point rating scale has been chosen. To make comprehension easier and to standardize the answers it has been taken in words ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

### 3.3. Common Method Bias

Self-reporting being a method of data collection and also the fact that the respondents for all the variables measured were the same, there was a potential risk of common method bias(Podsakoff et al. 2003).Harman's single factor test was conducted to rule it out. An un-rotated factor analysis was conducted on all the variables of the three constructs keeping the criteria of total variance being explained by one single factor. Since our data explained 39.025% variance, we

can safely conclude that common method bias was absent in our study.

## 4. Data Analysis and Findings

### 4.1. Respondents Demographics

Of the approximately 340 questionnaires distributed, 318 were completed and returned, response rate being 93.5%. The sample included 203 (63.8%) male and 115 (36.2%) female academicians. In terms of age 274 (86.1%) were below the age of 40 and 51 (13.9%) were above 40 years of age. There were 135 (42.5%) qualified PhDs and 183 (57.5%) postgraduates in various disciplines. The various departments represented were Science & Technology (31.7%), Management (20.4%), Computer Science (10%), Law (9%), Mass communication (5.7%), Humanities (5.7%), Hospitality (4.7%), Commerce (4.7%), Architecture (2.8%), Education (1.8%), Agriculture (1.6%), and Mathematics (1.6%). Job titles included 22 (6.9%) Professors, 34 (10.7%) Associate Professors and the rest 262 (82.4%) were Assistant Professors. Among the sample respondents 164 (51.6%) had been serving with a current university for the past 1 to 5 years and 154 (48.4%) had worked for more than 5 years.

### 4.2. Results

Means, standard deviations, correlations between the variables and Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of reliability of the scales are reported in Table 1. All scales show high coefficient alphas varying from 0.741 to 0.826. Confirming high internal reliabilities and therefore being adequate for conducting structural equation modeling with latent variable (Bollen 1989). The correlation matrix displays result accordant to the hypothesized association. That is organic leadership has a positive relationship with employee engagement and also with the hypothesized potential mediator 'social relevance of work'. Additionally, 'social relevance of work' also has a positive significant relation with employee engagement

**Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations, Alpha Reliabilities and Correlations Matrix**

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3
Employee Engagement	3.962	0.746	(0.741)		
Organic Leadership	3.520	0.751	0.388	(0.792)	
Social Relevance of Work	3.924	0.467	0.373	0.428	(0.826)

Note: N = 318. Alpha reliabilities (Cronbach's Alpha) are on the diagonal \*\* P < 0.01.

### *Relationships of Organic Leadership and Social Relevance of Work with Employee Engagement*

AMOS (version 23) was used to compute the degree to which the three constructs were related and to examine whether the social relevance of work mediated the relationship between organic leadership style and employee engagement. Regression analysis approach (Baron & Kenny, 1986) was first adopted. There are four explicit conditions proposed for assessing mediation. (a) The independent variable (organic leadership) should have a significant association with the dependent variable (employee engagement). (b) The independent variable (organic leadership) must have a significant association with the mediator (social relevance). (c) The mediator must have significant relation with the dependent variable (employee engagement) when refraining the independent variable. (d) Finally, after including the mediator if the association of the independent and the dependent variable is not significant it indicates full mediation. However, if it is still significant but reduced then it implies partial mediation. All the conditions specified for mediation were being met in our analysis.

Table 2 displays the regression estimates of our constructs confirming the association. Critical ratio (CR) values greater than 2.58, signifies 99% level of significance (Biswas & Bhatnagar, 2013). Accordingly, we may state organic leadership regresses significantly and positively with both employee engagement (standardized  $\beta=0.235$ , CR=5.355) and social relevance of work ( $\beta=0.475$ , CR=6.832). The values are accordant to Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2. Further, social relevance and employee engagement also indicate a positive association (standardized  $\beta=0.135$ , CR=3.284). Consequently, Hypothesis 3 being accepted.

Analysis indicates that the direct effect of organic leadership on employee engagement ( $\beta=0.302$ , CR=7.000) is higher when we control the effect of social relevance as a mediator. R<sup>2</sup> change is 0.077 which indicates that organic leadership explained 7.7% additional change in employee engagement when the effect of social relevance has been controlled. Hence, we may conclude that H4 is partially supported and there exists a partial mediation effect of the social relevance of work between organic leadership and employee engagement.

**Table 2: Regression Estimates**

Model	$\beta$	CR	Standard Error	Remarks
Organic leadership–Employee Engagement	0.235	5.352	0.044	H1 accepted
Organic leadership–Social Relevance	0.472	6.834	0.069	H2 accepted
Social Relevance- Employee Engagement	0.135	3.283	0.041	H3 accepted

Note: N=318; The CR (Critical Ratio) is recommended for testing the statistical significance of SEM, CR values beyond  $\pm 2.58$  establish significance at  $p < 0.01$  level

To further test the mediation and Hypothesis 4 we used maximum likelihood estimation (MLE) procedure of structural equation modeling that stipulates considerably better results than the traditional method of multiple regression analysis, especially when the model has latent variable with multiple indicators (Wood et al., 2008). We proposed two competing models that is Model 1, the direct model while constraining the potential mediator i.e. 'social relevance of work'. Model 2 included the possible mediator and the indirect effect of the two constructs was then observed. The Chi-square test is the primary test that evaluates the model's fit. The smaller value significances a better model fit. The ratio between Chi-square and the number of degrees of freedom with a value 2.0

or less is considered to be a good fit.

Various fit indices namely, goodness-fit-index(GFI), comparative-fit-index (CFI), normed-fit-index (NFI), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), relative-fit-index (RFI)were also examined. The model with proportionately higher values(more than 0.90) is generally considered a better fit. Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) was also taken into consideration; a lower value (less than 0.06) is recommended.

Based on SEM analysis and from the results presented in Table 3 we conclude that Model 2, the indirect model is a better fit and hypothesis 4 is accepted.

**Table 3: Fit Indices**

	X2	df	X2/df	GFI	CFI	NFI	TLI	RFI	RMSEA
<b>Model 1</b>	129.250	43	3.006	0.937	0.927	0.895	0.906	0.866	0.080
<b>Model 2</b>	56.204	41	1.371	0.969	0.987	0.954	0.983	0.939	0.034

Although the analysis through SEM provided the results for mediation we additionally applied the Sobel's test, the Aroian's test, and the Goodman's test. The results of which are displayed in Table 4.

An absolute value greater than 1.96 and the two tailed probability lesser than 0.05 confidence level indicates the social relevance of work as a mediator, and further confirms Hypothesis 4.

**Table 4: Analysis of Social Relevance as a Mediator**

	Test Statistics	Standard Error	p-value
Sobel's Test	2.962	0.022	0.003
Aroian's Test	2.937	0.022	0.003
Goodman's Test	2.989	0.021	0.002

## 5. Discussion

It has been understood through various research studies that employees who are high on engagement and commitment at work would experience greater satisfaction and would likely to be more industrious workforce.

The results of the study provide enough support to the postulated model. The first hypothesis had suggested a positive relationship between organic leadership style and employee engagement. The analysis supports the same and suggests that when leadership is distributed and the members have the capacity to self-lead and take decisions, it would be good for the organization since it would lead to higher work engagement.

The second hypothesis postulated an association of organic leadership and social relevance. The analysis strengthens the suggestion. Organic organizations would not have a formal leader, instead would share a common vision and values that would be embedded in the organizational culture. The members of the organization would support the mutual decision and leaders would emerge instead of being appointed (Avery, 2004). The acceptance of the two hypothesis corroborates previous research that provides evidence of a significant positive association of organic leadership with organizational performance (Jing and Avery, 2008), organizational effectiveness (Manz et al., 2009; Mehra et al., 2006), employee performance and satisfaction (Arnold et al., 2000) and an effective response to change in the environment that builds an enhanced sustainable performance (Suriyankietkaew, 2013).

The third hypothesis proposed perception of the social relevance of work to be related to employee engagement, the same was confirmed in the analysis. The results are consistent to prior research (Ebrahim et al. 2010) that suggests social relevance of work has a positive direct relationship with job performance. Wolfram et al. (2009)

reaffirm that if the supervisors and their followers have a common perception of meaningfulness at work and self-efficacy there would be greater job satisfaction.

The results of the study indicate that organic leadership, if followed in the organizations would influence the engagement levels of the employees through creating a perception of the social relevance of work. Thus, the fourth hypothesis was accepted partially. Since only a partial mediation was deciphered through the analysis.

### 5.1. Implications for Management

It is recommended that organic leadership style should be adopted in organizations that employ professional and knowledge workers in dynamic situations, wherein, the focus would be on attracting and engaging knowledgeable and trained employees who would exhibit self-motivating abilities. By examining the role of social relevance in enhancing work engagement, the study considerably expands knowledge for the management to meticulously plan and implement policies to foster higher engagement levels among the faculty.

For the reason, that employee engagement is regarded an important organizational responsibility in today's competitive scenario, the findings of this study emphasize on organic leadership style and employee's perception of the social relevance of work to be motivating higher engagement levels. An increasing number of higher education institutes having started in India. The understanding of what drives them to provide better services and subsequently to success is an important contribution of this study.

### 5.2. Limitations and Future Research

There happens to be an odious side to organic leadership wherein researchers advocate loss of control and enhanced uncertainty in organizations that follow organic leadership due to greater



freedom of discretion and autonomy. The organization has to completely rely on the ability of members of the organization for solving problems and taking decisions collectively. This could be upsetting for those employees who believe only in management's control during ambiguity. Communication and sharing information take up a significant amount of time (Kanter, 1989; Jing and Avery, 2008; Zhang, 2010).

Secondly, the data comes from cross-sectional analyses. The suggestions of association among the variables may not predicate a causal relationship, but the association does suggest a specific ordering that may be strengthened through a future longitudinal study.

Thirdly, the study is based on self-report questionnaire and the common- method bias may have limited the conclusion. However, this limitation would have reduced to a certain extent due to the authenticity of the data that was personally collected by interacting with the faculty members of various universities. Harman's single factor test also demonstrates the same.

Fourthly, the data is limited to the State of Uttarakhand (India) and hence generalizations would be difficult to make. Future research may cover broader areas and incorporate more colleges and universities pan India.

The study has focused only on organic leadership style; future research may take into consideration other popular leadership styles such as transformational, transactional or the situational leadership styles that have found prominence in literature.

A significant theoretical addition is in placing social relevance of work as the mechanism between the leadership style and engagement relationship. The mediating effect implies that social relevance of work is of utmost importance. If employees perceive their organizations to be

doing tasks that are beneficial to the society, it would lead to higher levels of work engagement.

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