

Reimagining Employee Engagement: Towards a Tri-Spiral Conceptual Framework Bridging Theory and Practice

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Abstract: Employee engagement continues to command global attention across disciplines of human resource development, organisational psychology, and management practice. Yet despite over three decades of study, the concept remains fragmented, frequently reduced to fashionable corporate rhetoric rather than sustained developmental strategy. This conceptual paper re-examines engagement as a multi-level phenomenon that integrates psychological, behavioural, and contextual dimensions. Drawing from seminal works by Kahn, Maslach, Schaufeli, Saks, Bakker, and subsequent contributions, it critically analyses the theoretical evolution of engagement and highlights the persistence of definitional and methodological ambiguities.

The paper proposes the *Tri-Spiral Engagement Framework (TSEF)*, a dynamic model linking inner psychological conditions, behavioural expressions, and outer contextual enablers through reciprocal feedback loops. This framework positions engagement as a cyclical process of energy investment, performance reinforcement, and meaning reconstruction within organisational life. By situating engagement in the Human Resource Development (HRD) paradigm, the paper argues that sustainable engagement arises not from transient initiatives but from systemic changes in leadership, work design, and learning culture.

The contribution is threefold: first, to clarify conceptual boundaries among overlapping constructs such as job satisfaction, commitment, and organisational citizenship behaviour; second, to integrate competing perspectives within a unified process model; and third, to derive empirically testable propositions for future research. The discussion concludes with implications for HRD

practitioners seeking to transform engagement from a survey metric into a lived organisational capability.

Keywords: Contextual enablers, Employee engagement, Human resource development, Organisational behaviour, Tri-spiral engagement framework, Work motivation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Employee engagement has evolved from a nascent psychological concept to one of the most influential ideas shaping organisational behaviour and HRD practice [1], [2], [3]. Managers, consultants, and scholars alike recognise engagement as essential to productivity, innovation, and retention [4], [5]. However, beneath its popularity lies a profound conceptual uncertainty. Researchers continue to debate what engagement truly represents, how it develops, and how organisations can authentically cultivate it [6], [7].

In the globalised and hybrid workplaces of the 2020s, engagement has become both more critical and more complex [8], [9]. The shift to digital work, the intensification of job demands, and the redefinition of organisational boundaries following the COVID-19 pandemic have altered how individuals connect emotionally and cognitively with their work [4], [10], [11]. The transactional approaches of the past, relying on extrinsic rewards or periodic recognition events, are increasingly insufficient [12], [13]. Instead, contemporary engagement must be viewed as an evolving psychological and relational process that enables employees to find meaning, safety, and energy in their work, even under volatile conditions [14], [13].

Foundational studies by [14] conceptualised engagement as the harnessing of the self to work roles through cognitive, emotional, and physical investment. Subsequent research

extended this to the notion of work engagement [15], defined as a positive, fulfilling state of vigour, dedication, and absorption. Meanwhile, Saks [16] situated engagement within social exchange theory, proposing that employees reciprocate organisational support with discretionary effort. The Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model further articulated how job and personal resources sustain engagement under pressure [17], [18], [4].

Despite these advances, the field remains divided by multiple, overlapping definitions and measurement approaches [19], [20]. Some scholars view engagement as a transient state of mind; others, as a behavioural outcome; still others, as a long-term organisational condition [3], [7]. Practitioners, influenced by consultancies such as Gallup or Aon Hewitt, often operationalise engagement through survey metrics and dashboards [21], [22], reducing it to a score rather than a developmental process. This conflation between theoretical richness and managerial simplification creates the very paradox that continues to impede progress: engagement is universally endorsed yet rarely understood in its full depth [2], [6].

The present paper responds to this paradox by revisiting the construct from both theoretical and applied lenses. It argues that engagement can be reimagined as a tri-spiral process, an interdependent movement between (1) psychological conditions that enable personal investment, (2) behavioural expressions through which engagement manifests, and (3) contextual enablers that sustain or erode the cycle. This model aligns with contemporary HRD thinking, which emphasises the continuous interplay between individual agency and organisational systems [23], [24].

By elaborating the *Tri-Spiral Engagement Framework (TSEF)*, this paper aims to contribute a theoretically integrative and practically actionable perspective. It situates engagement as a dynamic phenomenon, simultaneously psychological, social, and systemic, that requires alignment between employee experience, managerial practice, and organisational culture [3], [4].

A. Theoretical Foundations and Evolution

The study of employee engagement has traversed a complex intellectual terrain since its formal articulation by Kahn [14]. Initially emerging from role theory and the psychology of work motivation, engagement was conceived as the degree to which individuals bring their authentic selves to the performance of their roles [25], [26]. Kahn proposed that employees are fully engaged when they express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performance. This definition, deceptively simple, carried profound implications because it placed the self, not merely behaviour, at the centre of organisational productivity.

Kahn's work identified three psychological conditions essential for engagement: meaningfulness, safety, and availability. Meaningfulness arises when employees perceive that their

work is worthwhile and aligned with personal values. Safety is experienced when individuals can express themselves without fear of negative consequences to self-image or career. Availability refers to the physical, emotional, and psychological resources individuals can access in a given moment. Collectively, these conditions suggest that engagement cannot be imposed by management; it must be enabled through contextual design [14], [25], [12].

The significance of Kahn's conceptualisation lies in its humanistic orientation. In contrast to managerial frameworks that treat engagement as an instrument of control, Kahn viewed it as an existential connection between person and role [2], [24]. His approach laid the foundation for subsequent theories but also revealed the inherent tension between psychological authenticity and organisational instrumentalism, a tension that continues to shape engagement discourse [1], [20].

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, this psychological perspective intersected with the burgeoning field of positive organisational scholarship. [27] reframed engagement as the positive antithesis of burnout. In this view, engagement embodies energy, involvement, and efficacy, the opposite of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy. While the burnout and engagement continuum brought attention to well-being, it also generated conceptual ambiguity [28]. Treating engagement merely as the absence of burnout neglected the proactive and creative aspects that Kahn had highlighted. Nonetheless, the model was instrumental in legitimising engagement as a measurable construct within organisational research [17].

The next milestone arrived with the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) developed by [15]. This operationalised engagement through three dimensions: vigour, dedication, and absorption, and enabled large-scale empirical studies across cultures and sectors [28] [8]. The UWES popularised the notion of work engagement as a transient, state-like experience, responsive to environmental demands. However, critics argued that this measurement-driven orientation risked detaching engagement from its contextual and relational roots [19], [20].

In parallel, [16] advanced the social exchange perspective, positing that engagement arises when employees perceive fairness, support, and reciprocity in their relationships with the organisation. According to this model, employees invest themselves when they believe their contributions will be valued and reciprocated [3], [23]. Engagement, therefore, becomes a currency of exchange between the individual and the organisation. This view aligns closely with Human Resource Development principles, as it emphasises mutual growth, trust, and developmental reciprocity [12], [13].

Building upon these foundations, Bakker and Demerouti [17] formulated the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model, which has since become the dominant explanatory framework. The model proposes that engagement results from the balance between job demands, such as workload or emotional labour, and job resources, such as autonomy, feedback, and social support. Resources not only buffer the effects of demands

but also foster motivational processes that sustain vigour and dedication [4], [18]. Recent elaborations of the JD–R model [29] highlight personal resources such as resilience and optimism as amplifiers of engagement, particularly under high-demand contexts.

Although the JD–R model provides a robust structural explanation, it has been critiqued for under-specifying the micro-processes through which resources translate into engagement [19]. It describes what variables matter, but not always how individuals internalise these conditions to form meaningful connections with their work. This gap calls for integrative models that combine structural, psychological, and behavioural elements, a need that the Tri-Spiral Engagement Framework seeks to address.

Meanwhile, practitioner models proliferated in the corporate world, promoted by consultancies such as Gallup, Towers Perrin, and Aon Hewitt. These frameworks typically define engagement as enthusiasm for work and emotional commitment to organisational goals [21]. Gallup's widely used Q12 instrument assesses drivers such as clarity of expectations, opportunities for development, and recognition. While these tools have popularised engagement, they often privilege managerial convenience over conceptual rigour [2]. The simplicity that makes them commercially successful also strips engagement of its psychological and developmental complexity [24].

This divergence between academic theory and managerial practice represents one of the most enduring paradoxes in HRD research. Academics pursue theoretical precision, seeking to understand engagement's antecedents and mediators, while practitioners seek actionable metrics that can guide immediate interventions [1], [3]. As a result, engagement has come to signify both a deep psychological state and a shallow survey score, depending on who uses the term.

To navigate this duality, scholars such as Macey and Schneider [6] distinguished between trait, state, and behavioural engagement. Trait engagement reflects personality-based predispositions such as conscientiousness and optimism; state engagement refers to momentary psychological connection; behavioural engagement denotes observable acts of involvement. This tripartite distinction resonates strongly with the Tri-Spiral model, which similarly views engagement as multi-layered and cyclical [24], [2].

A synthesis of these perspectives suggests that engagement is neither solely an internal condition nor merely an external behaviour. It is a process of alignment between the self and the work context, continuously shaped by organisational structures, leadership, and culture [8], [9]. Engagement, therefore, exists within a system of mutual influence, where individuals both shape and are shaped by their environments [4].

This understanding aligns naturally with the Human Resource Development paradigm, which emphasises growth through learning, performance, and change [23], [7]. HRD theory posits

that sustainable performance depends on environments that enable competence development, autonomy, and psychological fulfilment. In this sense, engagement can be understood as the emergent property of effective HRD systems. It is both an outcome of developmental processes and a catalyst for further learning and innovation [3], [4].

B. Conceptual Challenges, Comparative Models and Measurement Issues

The discourse on employee engagement continues to be characterised by conceptual fragmentation and definitional inconsistency. Despite its widespread adoption in both scholarly and professional domains, there remains limited consensus regarding its conceptual boundaries, antecedents, and outcomes [2], [30]. One major source of confusion arises from the conflation of engagement with related constructs such as job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and organisational citizenship behaviour. Although these constructs share certain emotional and behavioural overlaps, they differ fundamentally in their scope, intent, and depth of psychological involvement.

Job satisfaction, for instance, represents an evaluative judgment about one's job conditions or experiences, whereas engagement captures the active, energetic, and self-invested connection with one's work role [28]. An individual may feel satisfied yet remain disengaged if the work lacks purpose or challenge. Organisational commitment, on the other hand, reflects a desire to maintain membership within an organisation and is primarily attitudinal, while engagement emphasises vigour, dedication, and absorption in work activities [6]. Similarly, organisational citizenship behaviour encompasses discretionary actions that support the organisation but may not always stem from an inner psychological state of involvement. Engagement can therefore be understood as the psychological engine that fuels citizenship behaviour, commitment, and satisfaction [31].

A further conceptual difficulty emerges from the divergence between academic and practitioner perspectives. Scholars typically conceptualise engagement as a multidimensional psychological state rooted in motivation, identity, and meaningfulness [14], [4], whereas practitioners, often guided by consultancy frameworks, frame it as a composite index of attitudes, loyalty, and discretionary effort [21]. Both perspectives hold value yet remain incomplete in isolation. Theoretical precision without practical relevance risks intellectual detachment, whereas managerial simplicity without theoretical grounding results in superficial engagement initiatives. The Tri-Spiral Engagement Framework (TSEF) proposed in this paper aims to reconcile these dualities by connecting psychological mechanisms to actionable organisational systems and leadership practices.

To appreciate the diversity of engagement perspectives, it is instructive to examine their underlying assumptions and contributions. Kahn's [14] model of psychological conditions remains foundational for its emphasis on meaningfulness,

safety, and availability. [27] reframed engagement as the positive antithesis of burnout, highlighting vitality and efficacy rather than exhaustion. Schaufeli *et al.* [15] operationalised engagement through the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), capturing vigour, dedication, and absorption, thereby enabling large-scale empirical validation. Saks [16] extended the discourse by introducing a social exchange perspective, proposing that engagement arises from reciprocity between employee and employer. Bakker and Demerouti [17] Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model remains the most influential framework, offering a structural explanation of how job and personal resources buffer demands and foster motivational states. More recent elaborations [4], [29] have expanded this model by incorporating personal resources such as resilience, optimism, and self-efficacy.

Practitioner frameworks such as those developed by Gallup, Aon Hewitt, and Towers Perrin further popularised engagement, defining it as enthusiasm for work and commitment to organisational goals. Instruments like Gallup's Q12 have become central to global corporate diagnostics, focusing on antecedents such as clarity, recognition, and development opportunities [21]. While these models offer accessibility and managerial traction, they often sacrifice conceptual depth for operational simplicity. As a result, engagement is sometimes reduced to a survey score rather than recognised as a developmental process [12].

The coexistence of multiple models reveals both the richness and diffusion of the engagement construct. Psychological models focus on individual experience, the social exchange model emphasises relational reciprocity, the JD-R model provides structural clarity, and practitioner models ensure managerial applicability. What remains underexplored is the dynamic process that connects these levels of analysis, how individual, relational, and systemic dimensions interact over time. The TSEF responds to this limitation by conceptualising engagement as a cyclical, self-reinforcing process linking psychological conditions, behavioural expressions, and contextual enablers.

Measurement issues further complicate the conceptual landscape. The proliferation of engagement surveys reflects the construct's managerial appeal, yet these instruments vary considerably in focus and validity. The UWES remains the most academically validated scale, but it primarily captures work-state engagement rather than the broader organisational experience [28]. The Gallup Q12, conversely, measures antecedents and correlates of engagement rather than the construct itself. This divergence underscores a need for integrative and multidimensional assessment strategies. Recent methodological advances advocate for mixed-method and longitudinal approaches that combine quantitative scales with qualitative data such as interviews, peer assessments, and digital behavioural analytics [8], [12].

However, the increased use of digital analytics also raises ethical and interpretive challenges. Monitoring engagement through digital traces, such as communication frequency, collaboration

data, or platform activity, can provide real-time insights but risks conflating activity with authenticity. From an HRD standpoint, the purpose of measurement should extend beyond diagnosis to development. Tools should help design interventions that enhance meaningfulness, psychological safety, and resource availability, rather than serve as surveillance mechanisms [32].

Cultural and contextual variation further complicates engagement measurement and interpretation. Constructs developed in Western individualistic settings may not fully capture engagement dynamics in collectivist cultures. In contexts such as India, relational harmony, respect, and collective efficacy often emerge as stronger predictors than individual autonomy [33], [34]. Therefore, contextual adaptation and localisation of measurement tools are essential to maintain validity across cultural boundaries.

Finally, the post-pandemic transformation of work arrangements demands a rethinking of engagement. The rise of hybrid and remote work has blurred the boundaries between work and life, requiring engagement to encompass digital presence, virtual collaboration, and self-driven motivation [4]. Psychological safety, once derived from physical proximity, now depends on communication quality, empathy, and leadership responsiveness in virtual settings [8]. Engagement theory must thus evolve beyond the traditional workplace and embrace the fluid, distributed nature of modern work.

In summary, conceptual ambiguities, measurement inconsistencies, and contextual diversity underscore the need for integrative frameworks that connect psychological depth with structural and relational realities. The Tri-Spiral Engagement Framework proposed in this paper offers a synthesis of sorts, bringing together the foundational insights of Kahn, the structural balance of the JD-R model, and the developmental ethos of HRD. In doing so, it repositions engagement as a continuous, reciprocal, and human-centred process, one that aligns personal fulfilment with organisational evolution.

II. THE TRI-SPIRAL ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK: AN INTEGRATIVE PERSPECTIVE

The Tri-Spiral Engagement Framework (TSEF) proposes a unifying model that synthesises fragmented theoretical traditions of employee engagement into a dynamic, cyclical, and systemic process. Rather than viewing engagement as a fixed psychological state or a linear cause-and-effect outcome, the TSEF conceptualises it as an evolving interaction among three interdependent domains: psychological conditions, behavioural expressions, and contextual enablers. Each domain forms a spiral of influence that continuously interacts with and reinforces the others, generating sustained engagement and organisational vitality over time.

The metaphor of the spiral is both symbolic and analytical. A spiral signifies continuous growth, reciprocity, and transformation. It expands outward while remaining anchored at its centre. Similarly, engagement is not an endpoint but a

renewing cycle of energy and connection, where psychological vitality manifests through behaviour and is replenished by contextual support. The TSEF, therefore, transcends the linear logic of models such as the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) framework by introducing a process-oriented lens that captures engagement as fluid, self-reinforcing, and adaptive [4], [8].

The first spiral, positioned at the centre, represents *psychological conditions*. Drawing on Kahn's [14] seminal framework, it encompasses meaningfulness, safety, and availability, the three inner forces that activate personal engagement. Meaningfulness arises when employees perceive their work as purposeful and aligned with their values, when contributions have visible impact, and when roles enable self-expression. Safety refers to an environment of trust and inclusion, where individuals feel free to engage without fear of judgment or retribution. Availability reflects the readiness and energy to invest oneself in work, influenced by physical, emotional, and psychological resources. Together, these three psychological conditions constitute the foundational energy source of engagement, determining the extent to which individuals bring their full selves to their work roles [3].

The second spiral signifies *behavioural expressions*, the outward enactment of engagement through effort, persistence, creativity, and collaboration. Engaged employees typically exhibit vigour, dedication, and absorption; they show initiative, proactive problem-solving, and constructive voice behaviour [7], [12]. Crucially, these behaviours are not merely consequences of engagement but mechanisms that reinforce it. Positive feedback, recognition, and relational affirmation generated through engaged actions strengthen employees' sense of meaning and belonging, thereby fuelling further engagement. Behaviour thus operates as both a manifestation and a multiplier of engagement, bridging inner experience with organisational outcomes.

The third spiral represents *contextual enablers*, encompassing the organisational systems, leadership styles, cultural norms, and HRD practices that shape and sustain engagement. These enablers include well-designed jobs, fair and transparent reward mechanisms, autonomy, feedback, developmental opportunities, and a psychologically safe culture. When these contextual factors are aligned, they replenish psychological resources and sustain behavioural energy, even under high-demand conditions [17], [34]. Conversely, unsupportive environments, toxic leadership, or misaligned reward systems constrict the spiral, depleting energy and weakening engagement.

The interaction among these three spirals generates a self-reinforcing cycle. Psychological conditions inspire behavioural engagement; behavioural engagement yields organisational outcomes such as performance and innovation; and when these outcomes are acknowledged and supported, they strengthen the contextual enablers that renew psychological energy. This cyclical process produces what may be described as a "spiral of sustainable engagement," where success breeds renewed motivation and developmental growth.

A key advantage of the TSEF lies in its dynamic resilience. Because the spirals are interdependent, disruption at one level, such as reduced psychological safety or weak leadership, can be counteracted by interventions at another. For instance, leadership coaching that enhances feedback quality (a contextual lever) can restore psychological safety and reinvigorate engagement behaviours. This systemic interactivity makes the TSEF particularly suitable for HRD applications, where interventions often target individual, team, and organisational levels simultaneously [32].

Analytically, the TSEF integrates and extends prior theories while addressing their limitations. From Kahn [14], it inherits the focus on authentic inner experience; from Saks [16], the reciprocity logic of social exchange; from Bakker and Demerouti [17], the structural understanding of resources and demands; and from recent HRD and positive organisational scholarship, the emphasis on learning, adaptability, and developmental ecosystems [29], [12]. This synthesis positions engagement as a process simultaneously psychological, behavioural, and systemic, a construct that evolves through feedback loops and adaptive learning.

In practical HRD terms, the framework urges organisations to move beyond episodic engagement initiatives toward multi-level and cyclical interventions. Programmes that enhance meaningfulness, such as job crafting, purpose-building workshops, or mentoring, should be complemented by leadership development initiatives that cultivate psychological safety and inclusivity. Measurement systems must also evolve to capture this cyclical nature, combining self-reports, behavioural analytics, and contextual assessments to provide a holistic engagement profile [8].

The TSEF is visually represented in Fig. 1 as three concentric spirals expanding outward from a shared centre. The innermost spiral symbolises psychological conditions; the middle spiral, behavioural expressions; and the outer spiral, contextual enablers. Bidirectional arrows represent reciprocal influence, while feedback loops illustrate how positive organisational outcomes reinforce preceding layers.

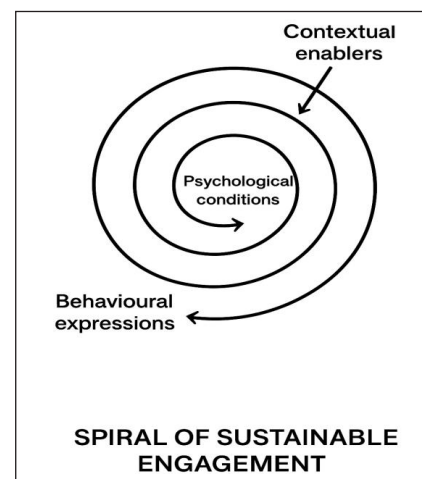


Fig. 1: The Tri-Spiral Engagement Framework

This conceptual model illustrates the dynamic interaction among psychological conditions, behavioural expressions, and contextual enablers that collectively generate and sustain employee engagement over time.

From the TSEF, several propositions emerge for empirical validation:

Proposition 1: Psychological conditions of meaningfulness, safety, and availability are positively related to employees' cognitive, emotional, and physical engagement.

Proposition 2: Behavioural engagement mediates the relationship between psychological conditions and organisational outcomes such as performance, retention, and innovation.

Proposition 3: Contextual enablers such as leadership support, role clarity, and learning opportunities moderate the relationship between psychological conditions and behavioural engagement.

Proposition 4: Engagement operates as a cyclical process in which positive organisational outcomes reinforce the psychological and contextual conditions that sustain future engagement.

Proposition 5: Multi-method measurement integrating self-reports, behavioural observation, and contextual analytics provides higher diagnostic validity than single-instrument surveys.

These propositions form the basis for a future research agenda. Longitudinal and mixed-method designs can capture the dynamic, multi-level nature of engagement, while cross-cultural studies can validate its contextual adaptability. Integrating qualitative narratives with quantitative measures will be especially valuable in revealing how engagement unfolds as a lived experience.

Beyond theory building, the TSEF holds profound implications for HRD practice. It calls upon HRD professionals to act as system architects, fostering alignment between individual experience, team dynamics, and organisational culture. Engagement thus becomes not a temporary programme but a sustained cultural capability, an emergent property of well-designed, humane, and learning-oriented systems.

III. IMPLICATIONS FOR HRD RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The reimagining of employee engagement through the Tri-Spiral Engagement Framework (TSEF) offers profound implications for Human Resource Development (HRD) scholarship and organisational practice. By embedding engagement within a developmental and systemic paradigm, the framework positions it not as a managerial initiative but as an ongoing process of human growth, relational reciprocity, and organisational learning [35], [36].

In contemporary organisations, HRD practitioners often confront the paradox of being held accountable for improving engagement without the authority to redesign work systems or leadership cultures that truly shape it [37]. This structural

misalignment frequently results in short-lived interventions such as motivational workshops, wellness campaigns, or engagement surveys that may raise morale temporarily but fail to address the root causes of disengagement [7]. The TSEF offers a corrective perspective by directing attention towards the conditions of work, particularly meaning, safety, and availability, rather than the transient emotions that accompany it.

At its core, the framework argues that sustainable engagement must be cultivated through an ecosystem aligning psychological conditions, behavioural norms, and contextual systems [31]. For HRD professionals, this calls for a systemic approach that connects individual experiences with organisational culture and strategy. HRD's distinct contribution lies in its integrative capacity to link learning, performance, and change, enabling it to operationalise the TSEF in authentic contexts [38].

A. Engagement as a Learning Process

From an HRD standpoint, engagement is both a driver and an outcome of learning. Engaged employees demonstrate curiosity, persistence, and reflective capacity, attributes essential for learning agility [39]. Developmental experiences such as mentoring, coaching, and action learning enhance employees' sense of purpose and efficacy, thereby fuelling engagement [40]. When learning is understood as identity expansion, rather than skill acquisition, it directly reinforces the psychological conditions in the TSEF. Programmes that link personal values with organisational purpose deepen meaningfulness [30]. Feedback-rich and psychologically safe environments enhance safety, while developmental routines integrated into work strengthen availability.

In practice, HRD departments can translate these insights into multi-tiered interventions. At the individual level, structured reflection and purpose alignment can enhance self-awareness. At the team level, collaborative learning cultures foster shared accountability. At the organisational level, leadership development and engagement diagnostics can be integrated to ensure coherence across the spirals.

B. Leadership and the Engagement Climate

Leadership constitutes a central contextual enabler within the TSEF. Numerous studies affirm that line managers significantly influence engagement through daily behaviours that promote inclusion, fairness, and developmental support [41], [42]. Engagement-supportive leadership involves not merely inspiring followers but creating conditions that enable autonomy and trust.

HRD interventions should prioritise developing leaders who coach, empower, and embody psychological safety [43]. This entails moving from compliance-driven management to dialogue-based developmental relationships. Leadership programmes that cultivate emotional intelligence, feedback

literacy, and empathetic communication can bridge the gap between engagement rhetoric and lived employee experience [44]. Integrating engagement indicators into leadership appraisal systems reinforces accountability for fostering an engaging climate.

C. Designing Work for Sustainable Engagement

The TSEF reinforces the principle that work design is a critical lever for engagement [45]. Autonomy, variety, and constructive feedback sustain meaningfulness and motivation. HRD practitioners play a pivotal role in helping organisations design roles that promote flexibility without isolation and structure without rigidity [8]. Job crafting initiatives allow employees to align work with their strengths and aspirations, enhancing both engagement and well-being [46].

Recognition systems should value collaboration, learning, and resilience rather than narrow performance metrics. Such an approach transforms performance management into developmental dialogue, encouraging behavioural engagement through positive reinforcement [4].

D. Embedding Engagement into Organisational Systems

A persistent weakness in many engagement programmes is their isolation from mainstream HRD systems. The TSEF provides a blueprint for embedding engagement into every stage of the employee lifecycle. Recruitment and onboarding can communicate organisational purpose and values [47]. Continuous development opportunities can reinforce psychological safety and self-efficacy. Performance systems can shift towards continuous coaching, while succession planning can prioritise leaders who naturally enable engagement [7].

Embedding engagement within HRD architecture institutionalises it as a cultural competence rather than a periodic initiative. This systemic alignment ensures continuity during leadership transitions and organisational change.

E. Engagement in the Digital and Post-Pandemic Era

The post-pandemic world of work has redefined engagement challenges and opportunities. Remote and hybrid work has expanded flexibility but increased risks of disconnection and fatigue [48]. HRD professionals can use digital platforms not only for training but also for sustaining community and shared purpose [49]. Online mentoring, peer dialogue, and reflective forums can replace some lost social exchanges.

However, HRD practitioners must exercise ethical vigilance. Surveillance-based engagement analytics can undermine psychological safety [50]. Data should be used participatively and transparently to enhance human understanding rather than control.

F. HRD as Steward of Organisational Culture

Ultimately, engagement cannot thrive in cultures dominated by control and compliance. The outer spiral of the TSEF underscores that contextual enablers such as culture and leadership form the foundation for sustainable engagement. HRD must act as a cultural steward, curating the narratives, rituals, and practices that foster meaning, belonging, and growth [51].

By positioning engagement as a shared cultural responsibility, HRD helps transform it from a metric to a movement. Storytelling initiatives, culture audits, and participatory dialogue can uncover and reshape assumptions that hinder engagement. The developmental nature of HRD makes it uniquely capable of sustaining this cultural transformation [13].

G. Implications for HRD Research

For scholars, the TSEF opens multiple pathways of inquiry. Empirical studies can examine mediating and moderating relationships across spirals using longitudinal and multi-source designs [4]. Cross-cultural research can explore how societal and institutional contexts influence engagement dynamics [52]. Qualitative studies can provide depth to understanding how employees construct experiences of meaningfulness, safety, and availability.

Emerging technologies such as sentiment analysis and digital ethnography can capture engagement as it unfolds in real time [7]. Yet these methods must remain grounded in ethical and interpretive integrity. Finally, conceptual work should revisit assumptions about human motivation and organisational purpose, reinforcing HRD's dual mandate for individual flourishing and organisational sustainability [35].

IV. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Every conceptual contribution must recognise its boundaries, and the Tri-Spiral Engagement Framework (TSEF) is no exception. While the framework provides an integrative lens that unites psychological, behavioural, and contextual dimensions of engagement, it remains, at this stage, a conceptual synthesis rather than an empirically tested model. It intends to offer theoretical clarity and direction for future inquiry rather than claim exhaustive explanatory power.

A. Limitations

The first limitation concerns the conceptual generality of the TSEF. Because it draws together multiple theoretical perspectives, such as psychological conditions [14], job demands and resources [17], and social exchange mechanisms [16], the framework may appear broad to those seeking operational precision. Yet, this breadth is both a strength and

a weakness. It offers a holistic view of engagement at the cost of immediate measurability. Future empirical studies must operationalise each spiral in ways that maintain conceptual fidelity while permitting statistical validation.

A second limitation relates to contextual diversity. Much of the engagement literature remains dominated by Western-centric perspectives, where models are built upon individualistic, high-resource organisational settings [8], [1]. The psychological conditions of meaningfulness, safety, and availability may manifest differently in cultures characterised by collectivism or hierarchical relationships. Studies in emerging economies, particularly India, show that relational warmth, respect, and collective efficacy play a stronger role in shaping engagement than individual autonomy [52], [54], [34]. This cultural contingency highlights the need for contextual adaptation of the TSEF to ensure its cross-cultural relevance.

A third limitation involves temporal dynamics. Engagement is not a static attribute but a fluctuating process influenced by daily experiences and evolving life stages [55]. However, most research remains cross-sectional, thereby failing to capture these dynamic fluctuations. Longitudinal and diary-based designs are vital to examine how the three spirals interact over time and to identify feedback mechanisms that sustain or deplete engagement. The cyclical logic of the TSEF is well suited to such dynamic modelling, including time-lagged or experience-sampling methodologies.

A fourth limitation pertains to measurement integration. Current engagement instruments, such as the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale [15] or Gallup's Q12 [21] capture specific components of engagement but may not align neatly with the tripartite logic of the TSEF. Developing new composite instruments that concurrently assess psychological conditions, behavioural expressions, and contextual enablers will be essential for empirical validation. Without such tools, the TSEF risks remaining a compelling but abstract proposition.

B. Future Research Directions

Building upon these limitations, several directions emerge for advancing the study of engagement.

First, multi-level research is essential. Engagement operates simultaneously at individual, team, and organisational levels [4]. The TSEF invites researchers to explore cross-level interactions, for example, how team leadership and climate influence individual engagement, and how individual engagement aggregates into collective energy or performance. Multi-level modelling could uncover how micro-level psychological processes translate into macro-level organisational outcomes.

Second, longitudinal and mixed-method approaches should be prioritised. Quantitative analyses can model cyclical relationships among psychological, behavioural, and contextual variables, while qualitative narratives can illuminate the lived experiences that animate these cycles [7], [56]. A mixed-

method approach would allow triangulation across datasets and timeframes, producing a richer understanding of engagement as a process rather than a static condition.

Third, cross-cultural comparative research holds substantial promise. Applying the TSEF across sectors and countries could reveal both universal and culture-specific mechanisms of engagement. Comparative studies between public and private sectors, or between collectivist and individualist societies, would deepen insight into how structural and cultural factors moderate engagement processes [57]. For instance, while Western contexts may emphasise individual meaning-making, collectivist environments might prioritise relational harmony and shared purpose.

Fourth, future inquiry should focus on digital and hybrid work environments. Post-pandemic realities have altered how employees connect emotionally and cognitively with their work [52]. Researchers could examine how virtual communication affects psychological safety, how algorithmic feedback systems influence meaningfulness, and how autonomy in remote settings interacts with feelings of availability and belonging. Integrating technology-mediated engagement into the TSEF will ensure its contemporary relevance.

Fifth, there is an opportunity to test HRD interventions grounded in the TSEF. Experimental and quasi-experimental designs could examine the effects of integrated interventions, for instance, leadership coaching, job redesign, and reflective learning programmes, on the three spirals of engagement [23]. Such studies would not only validate the framework but also offer actionable guidance for practitioners seeking to sustain engagement over time.

Finally, researchers must examine the ethical and sustainability dimensions of engagement. While engagement is often portrayed as inherently positive, excessive or compulsive engagement can lead to strain and workaholism [58]. Future research should therefore explore the balance between engagement and well-being, ensuring that organisational strategies promote sustainable human energy rather than perpetual intensity.

V. CONCLUSION

Employee engagement remains one of the most influential yet conceptually contested ideas in organisational life. More than three decades of research have generated rich but fragmented understandings of what engagement represents and how it operates. The Tri-Spiral Engagement Framework (TSEF) developed in this paper seeks to reimagine engagement as a dynamic, cyclical process that connects the inner world of psychological experience with the outer systems of organisational reality.

By conceptualising engagement through three interrelated spirals, psychological conditions, behavioural expressions, and contextual enablers, the framework provides a coherent structure that integrates the field's major theoretical traditions. It

addresses long-standing challenges of definition, measurement, and practical translation by illustrating how engagement evolves through reciprocal feedback loops rather than linear cause-and-effect pathways.

For scholars, the TSEF offers a structured research agenda that encourages multi-level, longitudinal, and context-sensitive inquiry into the evolving nature of engagement. For practitioners, it presents a developmental roadmap for embedding engagement within the design of work, leadership practices, and organisational culture.

Above all, the framework invites a shift in mindset, from viewing engagement as a managerial scorecard to understanding it as a shared human and organisational capability. In doing so, it aligns the study and practice of engagement with the broader purpose of Human Resource Development: to foster learning, growth, and meaning in pursuit of both individual fulfilment and organisational effectiveness. When seen through this developmental lens, engagement becomes not merely a route to performance but a living expression of human potential realised through meaningful work.

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