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## Immediate effect of leaders' training on their engagement levels

*Efecto inmediato de la capacitación de líderes sobre sus niveles de compromiso*

*Efeito imediato da capacitação de líderes sobre seus níveis de comprometimento*

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### Abstract

The objective of this study was to analyze the immediate influence of soft skills training on the level of engagement among organizational leaders in Argentina. To achieve this, an adapted version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale was used to assess leaders before and after participating in soft skills training programs. The results indicate a positive and significant relationship between the training and the increase in organizational engagement. Leaders showed a 2% improvement in their engagement. This finding suggests that investing in the development of soft skills, in addition to strengthening leadership, can be an effective strategy for increasing leader engagement. This is particularly relevant given the influence leaders have on generating engagement within their teams.

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**Key words:** engagement; leaders; training; soft skills

### **Resumen**

El objetivo de este estudio fue analizar la influencia inmediata de la capacitación en habilidades blandas en el nivel de compromiso de líderes de organizaciones en Argentina. Para ello se implementó un cuestionario de compromiso adaptado del Utrecht Work Engagement Scale. Se evaluó a líderes antes y después de participar en programas de capacitación en habilidades blandas. Los resultados indican una relación positiva y significativa entre la capacitación y el aumento del compromiso organizacional. Los líderes mostraron una mejora en su compromiso del 2%. Este hallazgo sugiere que la inversión en el desarrollo de habilidades blandas, además de fortalecer el liderazgo puede ser una estrategia eficaz para aumentar el compromiso de los líderes. Esto es especialmente relevante dada la influencia que tienen los líderes en la generación de compromiso en sus equipos.

**Palabras claves:** compromiso; líderes; capacitación; habilidades blandas

### **Resumo**

O objetivo deste estudo foi analisar a influência imediata do treinamento em habilidades sociais no nível de comprometimento dos líderes de organizações na Argentina. Para isso, foi implementado um questionário de comprometimento adaptado da Escala de Comprometimento no Trabalho de Utrecht. Os líderes foram avaliados antes e depois de participarem de programas de treinamento em habilidades sociais. Os resultados indicam uma relação positiva e significativa entre o treinamento e o aumento do comprometimento organizacional. Os líderes mostraram uma melhora de 2% em seu comprometimento. Essa descoberta sugere que o investimento no desenvolvimento de habilidades interpessoais, além de fortalecer a liderança, pode ser uma estratégia eficaz para aumentar o comprometimento dos líderes. Isso é especialmente relevante, dada a influência que os líderes têm na geração de comprometimento em suas equipes.

**Palavras-chave:** comprometimento; líderes; treinamento; habilidades interpessoais

## 1. Introduction

Employee engagement has become a widely used and popular term (Robinson et al., 2004). However, most of what has been written about employee engagement can be found in professional journals where it has its basis in practice rather than theory and empirical research.

A number of definitions have been provided in the academic literature. Kahn (1990) defines personal engagement as the leverage of organizational members for their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performance. This leverage arises from the physical, cognitive, emotional, and mental expression a worker experiences during role performance. Personal disengagement refers to the disengagement of people from work roles; in disengagement, people withdraw and defend themselves physically, cognitively, or emotionally during role performances. Thus, according to Kahn (1990, 1992), engagement means being psychologically present when occupying and performing an organizational role.

Rothbard (2001) also defines engagement as psychological presence, but goes further by stating that it involves two critical components: attention and absorption. Attention refers to cognitive availability and the amount of time one spends thinking about a role, while absorption means being absorbed in a role and refers to the intensity of one's focus on a role.

Burnout researchers define engagement as the opposite or positive antithesis of burnout (Maslach et al., 2001). From this perspective, engagement is characterized by energy, participation, and efficacy, the opposite of the three dimensions of burnout: exhaustion, cynicism, and ineffectiveness. Research on burnout and engagement has found that the core dimensions of burnout (exhaustion and cynicism) and engagement (vigor and dedication) are opposites of each other (González-Roma et al., 2006).

Schaufeli et al. (2002) define engagement as a positive, satisfying, work-related mental state characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. Rather than a specific, momentary state, engagement refers to a more persistent and influential affective-cognitive state that is not focused on a particular object, event, individual, or

behavior. Vigor (mood) is characterized by a strong willingness to devote effort to work and persistence in the face of difficulties. Dedication refers to being strongly involved in work and experiencing a sense of enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, challenge, and meaning. Absorption is characterized by being totally focused and happily immersed in work, such that time passes quickly and displeasure is experienced at having to leave work.

The engagement model as opposed to burnout comes from the exhaustion literature, which describes work engagement as the positive antithesis of burnout and notes that exhaustion involves the erosion of engagement to one's work (Maslach et al., 2001). Six areas of work life lead to burnout and engagement: workload, control, rewards and recognition, community and social support, perceived fairness, and values. They argue that work engagement is associated with a sustainable workload, feelings of choice and control, appropriate recognition and reward, a supportive work community, fairness and justice, and meaningful and valued work. Like burnout, engagement is expected to mediate the link between these six work-life factors and various work outcomes. Russell and Carroll (1999) proposed a model of engagement in which vigor and dedication are considered the opposite poles of exhaustion and cynicism (components of burnout). Therefore, this model implies a high rate of energy and engagement to the company.

On the other hand, the job demands and resources theory posits the existence of two types of work conditions: demands and resources. Demands and resources involve physical, psychological, organizational, and social aspects of work that do or do not require additional effort, which could predict burnout or engagement, respectively (Bakker and Demerouti, 2008). Essentially, the demands-resources model assumes that work engagement results from the inherent motivational character of resources, in which two types of resources are distinguished; job resources, which are defined as those aspects of work that are functional in achieving work goals, reducing job demands, or stimulating personal growth and development (e.g., performance feedback, job control, and social support from colleagues); personal resources, which are defined as aspects of the self that are associated with resilience and that refer to the capacity to successfully control and impact the environment (e.g., self-efficacy, optimism, and emotional stability).

Role theory considers multiple factors that can determine how people generate or do not generate engagement in their work role. Factors that are considered influential are: the group, the organization, interpersonal and intergroup relationships (Kahn 1990). In his qualitative study on the psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work, Kahn (1990) interviewed summer camp counselors and organizational members of an architectural firm about their moments of engagement and disengagement at work. Kahn (1990) found that there were three psychological conditions associated with engagement or disengagement at work: meaning, security, and availability. In other words, workers were more engaged in work in situations that offered them more psychological meaning, psychological security, and when they were more psychologically available.

Psychological meaning refers to the belief about how meaningful it is to carry out a role. It is associated with incentives to participate and the perception that one is receiving a return on investment from one's "self in the role." Psychological meaning is achieved when people feel valued and important. The three factors that Kahn (1990) found influenced meaning were task characteristics, role characteristics, and work interactions.

Psychological safety involves one's perception of how safe it is to bring oneself to the performance of a role without fear of damaging one's self-image, status, or career. It is associated with trustworthy and predictable social environments that have clear boundaries of acceptable behavior in which people feel safe to risk expressing themselves. Kahn (1990) found that the four factors that impact psychological safety are interpersonal relationships, group and intergroup dynamics, management style, and norms.

Psychological availability refers to one's perception of how available one is to take on a role. It is associated with the physical, emotional, and psychological resources that people can bring to the performance of their roles. Kahn (1990) suggested that four distractions affect psychological availability: physical energy depletion, emotional energy depletion, insecurity, and external life.

Conservation of resources theory states that individuals are motivated to acquire and protect resources, which can be categorized as objects, conditions, or personal characteristics; these are acquired

and transformed to generate new additional resources that allow generating a state of engagement with their work (Hobfoll, 2001).

The social exchange model is based on social exchange theory (SET). It maintains that obligations are generated through interactions between parties that are reciprocally in a state of interdependence. A basic principle of SET is that relationships evolve over time into mutual, loyal, and trusting engagements, as long as the parties comply with certain “rules” of exchange (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). The rules of exchange generally imply rules of reciprocity, which mean that the actions of one party, for example the employer, are rewarded by the workers and vice versa.

This is consistent with Robinson’s (2004) description of engagement as a two-way relationship between employer and employee. One way that individuals pay back their organization is through their level of engagement. That is, employees will choose to commit to varying degrees and in response to the resources they receive from their organization. Becoming more fully involved in one’s work roles and devoting greater amounts of cognitive, emotional, and physical resources is a very profound way for individuals to respond to the actions of an organization. Social exchange theory might explain why when employees receive these resources from their organization, they feel obligated to reciprocate for what the organization has done for them with higher levels of engagement, becoming deeply involved in the performance of their roles as payment for the resources they receive from their organization.

The circumplex model of emotions suggests that optimal performance is more likely when high-activation and high-pleasure emotions are present. They conclude that engagement, along with job happiness, are the strongest predictors of job performance (Bakker and Oerlemans, 2011). Engagement is a positive motivational construct linked to work and life, and is closely related to the presence of positive emotions (Bakker et al., 2011). The engaged worker presents positive emotions in relation to his work, which is perceived as entertaining, enriching and challenging. This state leads workers to reach high levels of motivation, interest in learning, desire to take on new challenges, greater proactivity and productivity (Giraldo and Pico, 2012). On the contrary, the disengaged worker presents negative emotions related to his work, appearing apathetic, easily irritable, with low tolerance to frustration and recurrent thoughts

of incompetence; this could generate a higher level of absenteeism, exhaustion and lower productivity (Montoya Zuluaga and Moreno Moreno, 2012). The model of the impact of personal resources on engagement indicates a reciprocal relationship between positive emotions, personal resources and engagement. People who experience positive emotions are more likely to feel optimistic and self-effective. Likewise, personal resources have a significant effect on engagement over time (Ouweneel, Le Blanc and Schaufeli, 2012).

Some research shows that personal, organizational and contextual factors predict work engagement (Schaufeli and Bakker 2004; Suharti and Suliyanto 2012). Individual and personal factors refer to the characteristics, skills, attitudes and competencies of each person, which facilitate engagement and role fulfillment; generating the inner strength to continue their work despite difficulties. Khan (1990) had as a first premise of one of his investigations, that the psychological experience of work drives people's behaviors and attitudes and secondly that individual, interpersonal, group, inter-group and organizational factors simultaneously influence these experiences.

Kobasa's model (1982) emerges as a theoretical approach to the social psychology of stress and health, applying a salutogenic approach aimed at determining the subject and context indicators that favor health processes. The concept of resilient personality is defined by three dimensions: engagement, control and challenge. According to the author, engagement is characterized by the tendency to get involved in all life activities and identify with the meaning of one's own work. This quality assumes that the individual achieves personal recognition of his or her own goals and develops personal skills to make decisions and maintain his or her values. Control is the willingness to think and act with the conviction that one can intervene in the course of events. Individuals with these characteristics can perceive predictable positive consequences in many stressful events because they consider that they can manage the stimuli to their own benefit. The challenge allows individuals to perceive change as an opportunity to increase their own skills, and not as a threatening situation. This provides subjects with a certain cognitive flexibility and tolerance for ambiguity that leads them to consider change as a normal characteristic of history and life. Those people who have the characteristics of a resilient personality seem to induce adaptive coping strategies and come to perceive potentially stressful stimuli as

opportunities for personal growth and development that lead them to improve their skills. They favor the search for social support and develop the willingness to lead healthier lifestyles that reduce the probability of developing diseases.

Organizational factors refer to the tools and resources that the organization offers to the worker to fulfill their tasks, the work environment, the established norms and the guidance they receive from the organization. Organizational and work variables are shown to be important sources of stress that can act as preceding factors in the development of stress and burnout processes. The final effects of stress can only be understood as the result of the interaction between these variables and the resilient personality variables. According to Lee and Ashforth (1996), the organizational variables that are most closely related to the development of burnout were work overload, role stress (role conflict and ambiguity), the demands of the job (including the number of hours worked per week, direct contact with users or clients, and the severity of the issues to be resolved), lack of support from the supervisor and colleagues, little feedback about the performance of the job, poor participation in decision-making, and lack of worker autonomy.

Contextual factors refer to the interaction of the two previous factors, where the result will depend on the situation in which the person and the organization find themselves. In this way, these factors refer to the contextual elements that can influence the level of engagement of a person in their work. The elements include the physical and social environment in which the person works, as well as the organizational culture and the policies and practices of the company.

There are studies that claim that employee engagement is in decline and that there is an increasingly deep disconnection between employees today (Bates, 2004; Richman, 2006). Hence, it is relevant to analyze the different factors that affect engagement, including training, as a practice of companies to develop their human capital. In a highly competitive and constantly changing business environment, the role of leaders is central to the success and survival of any organization. Although technical skills and specific knowledge are important, the need for leaders to develop soft skills, such as communication, negotiation, emotional intelligence and people management, is increasingly recognized. For all the above, it was decided to study the immediate influence of soft skills training on the level



of engagement of leaders of organizations in Argentina, taking into account the special impact that leaders have on the climate and engagement of their teams.

## 2. Method

To measure the level of engagement before and after participation in the training, a questionnaire adapted from the UWES (Utrecht Work Engagement Scale) version was implemented. The original questionnaire includes three factors (vigor, dedication and absorption) and 17 items, with a scale from 0 to 6. Vigor (VI) includes 6 items. Dedication (DE) includes 5 items. Absorption (AB) includes 6 items (See appendix A: UWES questionnaire). The validation processes showed that the UWES is a unidimensional and three-dimensional instrument, which means that the three factors evaluated, even when they are highly correlated, can be psychometrically differentiated for application purposes and interpretation of results, even when they are highly correlated (Shaufeli and Bakker, 2003). In the adapted questionnaire implemented in the study, the 17 original statements and 3 additional items were included in reference to the leaders' adherence to the company's mission, vision, and values, as contextual factors to be able to specifically identify the influence of training on the leaders' engagement to the culture of their organizations (see table 1).

Leaders of organizations in Argentina at the levels of directors, managers, and chiefs were surveyed before and after receiving a soft skills training program, to identify the immediate variation in their level of engagement to the organization. A non-probabilistic sample was created, with the criterion of availability or accessibility by the researcher, and a total of 255 responses were obtained.

Additionally, 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted with human resources leaders from the companies participating in the training, to obtain their perceptions on the level of influence on engagement and the observed behaviors that underlie it. The interviews consisted of two initial questions related to the perceived level of influence, taking into account the factors of vigor, dedication and absorption, with a four-level scale. To do so, the factors of engagement were first mentioned and explained to the interviewees. In addition, two other questions were asked related to the observed behaviors and situations that show the influence of training on the

engagement of participants. Based on these questions, other additional questions were formulated at the time to delve deeper into the answers or reinforce and clarify the inquiries in some cases (See appendix B: Human Resources interview guide).

3. Results and discussion

The results of the questionnaire administered to the leaders show that the general average of the 20 statements in the questionnaire before receiving the training was 4.8; while the general average after receiving the training was 4.9, which implies a positive variation of 2% taking into account the results of all the statements. It is noteworthy to observe that in 17 statements there are positive variations, given that in only 3 of the statements the score decreased and with very low averages, below 1%. Table 1 presents the results of each of the statements in the questionnaire used, before and after the training.

Table 1. Results by statement

Statement	Before Training	After Training	%Variation
At my work, I feel bursting with energy (VI1)	4,70	4,72	0,43
I find the work that I do full of meaning and purpose (DE1)	4,83	4,91	1,66
Time flies when I'm working (AB1)	5,10	5,09	-0,20
At my job, I feel strong and vigorous (VI2)	4,89	4,93	0,82
I am enthusiastic about my job (DE2)	4,96	5,01	1,01
When I am working, I forget everything else around me (AB2)	4,02	4,32	7,46
My job inspires me (DE3)	4,76	4,86	2,10
When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work (VI3)	4,44	4,61	3,83

Statement	Before Training	After Training	%Variation
I feel happy when I am working intensely (AB3)	4,76	4,87	2,31
I am proud on the work that I do (DE4)	5,21	5,35	2,69
I am immersed in my work (AB4)	4,79	4,88	1,88
I can continue working for very long periods at a time (VI4)	4,71	4,88	3,61
To me, my job is challenging (DE5)	4,88	4,94	1,23
I get carried away when I'm working (AB5)	4,22	4,34	2,84
At my job, I am very resilient, mentally (VI5)	5,12	5,08	-0,78
It is difficult to detach myself from my job (AB6)	4,02	4,07	1,24
At my work I always persevere, even when things do not go well (VI6)	4,91	4,88	-0,61
I adhere to the Company Vision	5,15	5,32	3,30
I adhere to the Company Mission	5,12	5,32	3,91
I adhere to the Company Values	5,19	5,47	5,39
Average	4,79	4,89	2,16

Table 2 shows the specific results of the vigor factor. Four statements showed positive variations, and two negative variations, although of very low value. Vigor obtained an average positive variation of 1.15%, which reflects an immediate increase in the willingness to devote effort to work and persistence in the face of difficulties, after training. The statements referring to the desire to go to work and the possibility of working for long periods of time obtained the greatest positive variations, with 3.83% and 3.61%, respectively.

Table 2. Results of the vigor factor

Vigor (VI) Statements	Before Training	After Training	%Variation
At my work, I feel bursting with energy (VI1)	4,70	4,72	0,43
At my job, I feel strong and vigorous (VI2)	4,89	4,93	0,82
When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work (VI3)	4,44	4,61	3,83
I can continue working for very long periods at a time (VI4)	4,71	4,88	3,61
At my job, I am very resilient, mentally (VI5)	5,12	5,08	-0,78
At my work I always persevere, even when things do not go well (VI6)	4,91	4,88	-0,61
Average	4,80	4,85	1,15

Dedication had an overall average increase of 1.75%, with positive variations in all statements referring to being strongly involved in work and experiencing a sense of enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, challenge and meaning. Feelings of pride and inspiration were the aspects with the greatest positive variation, with 2.69% and 2.10% respectively (see table 3).

Table 3. Results of the dedication factor

Dedication (DE) Statements	Before Training	After Training	%Variation
I find the work that I do full of meaning and purpose (DE1)	4,83	4,91	1,66
I am enthusiastic about my job (DE2)	4,96	5,01	1,01
My job inspires me (DE3)	4,76	4,86	2,10
I am proud on the work that I do (DE4)	5,21	5,35	2,69

Dedication (DE) Statements	Before Training	After Training	%Variation
To me, my job is challenging (DE5)	4,88	4,94	1,23
Average	4,93	5,01	1,75

Table 4 shows a total average positive variation of the absorption factor of 2.45%, with the engagement factor of the original questionnaire having the highest positive variation. Only one of the statements had a negative variation, but of a very low value. This reflects an increase in concentration on work after the training, with a special emphasis on the statement referring to forgetting about everything that happens around you when you are working, with a positive variation of 7.46%.

**Table 4. Absorption factor results**

Absorption (AB) Statements	Before Training	After Training	%Variation
Time flies when I'm working (AB1)	5,10	5,09	-0,20
When I am working, I forget everything else around me (AB2)	4,02	4,32	7,46
I feel happy when I am working intensely (AB3)	4,76	4,87	2,31
I am immersed in my work (AB4)	4,79	4,88	1,88
I get carried away when I'm working (AB5)	4,22	4,34	2,84
It is difficult to detach myself from my job (AB6)	4,02	4,07	1,24
Average	4,49	4,60	2,45

Finally, the cultural factor also registered a positive average variation of 4.20%. This aspect is especially relevant given the influence that leaders have in the creation and transmission of the organizational culture, together with the possibility of transforming it when necessary to achieve the business strategy. Adherence to the company's values is the statement with the greatest positive variation,

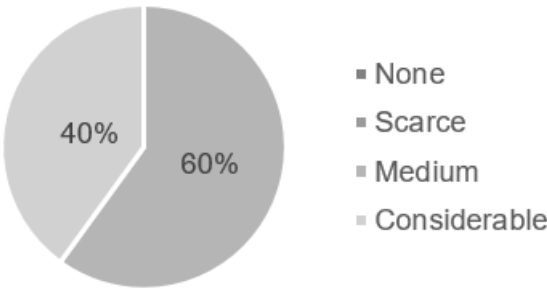
with 5.39%. This influence of training in values is of vital importance due to the constitutive nature that they have in the culture (see table 5).

Table 5. Results of the culture factor

Culture Statements	Before Training	After Training	%Variation
I adhere to the Company Vision	5,15	5,32	3,30
I adhere to the Company Mission	5,12	5,32	3,91
I adhere to the Company Values	5,19	5,47	5,39
Average	5,15	5,37	4,20

The positive influence of training on engagement is also reflected in the results of the interviews conducted with HR representatives from companies whose leaders were trained in soft skills. All of the interviewees perceived a positive influence level between medium and considerable (see figure 1). The results are accompanied by direct quotes from the interviewees, in quotation marks.

Figure 1. Perceived level of influence of training on engagement



One of the positive aspects highlighted after the training is the increase in the feeling of appreciation:

“The personal appreciation that they assume from taking them into account in their professional training, especially when they are working days outside the work environment.”

Another aspect highlighted by human resources professionals is the greater awareness of the impact they have as leaders on collaborators and work teams:

“The main indicators in the behavior of leaders that I observe are being more reflective and analyzing the impact of the actions they carry out, which before the training would not have caught their attention.” “Fundamentally, what we identified is a change of mindset in some leaders on “soft” issues that perhaps were not initially a priority on their agendas and became so.”

Particularly, some changes in the leaders’ behavior after training are highlighted with greater frequency in relation to listening, empathy, feedback and the participation given to collaborators:

“In the way of giving and receiving feedback, some leaders were more open to allowing collaborators to express themselves and build challenges and/or action plans in a collaborative manner.” “In the case of our organization, the quality of leadership increased in terms of listening and empathy.” “I have observed that leaders are more concerned about knowing and considering the opinions of the people on their team and accepting other points of view as natural within the decision-making process.”

#### **4. Conclusion**

Soft skills training has been shown to positively influence leaders’ engagement in its three factors: vigor, dedication and absorption. In addition, a positive influence was seen in adherence to the culture, especially in relation to the company’s values. The perception of human resources professionals is aligned with this positive influence.

Regarding the practical implications of the research, the results of this study particularly contribute to reaffirming the importance of leadership training, not only for the acquisition of skills, but as a contextual factor driving engagement. This shows the sense of incorporating measurement indices after training, not only of learning but also of the level of engagement.

In conclusion, this study represents an initial approach to the problem, and it is important to continue analyzing the evolution of engagement over time. In the future, new studies could also be enriched

with longitudinal approaches, additional scopes and sample types, with other organizational position levels.

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## 5. Appendix

### *A. Work & Well-being Survey (UWES) ©*

The following 17 statements are about how you feel at work. Please read each statement carefully and decide if you ever feel this way about your job. If you have never had this feeling, cross the '0' (zero) in the space after the statement. If you have had this feeling, indicate how often you feel it by crossing the number (from 1 to 6) that best describes how frequently you feel that way.

0 (Never); 1 (Almost Never-A few times a year or less); 2 (Rarely-Once a month or less); 3 (Sometimes-A few times a month); 4 (Often-Once a week); 5 (Very Often-A few times a week) 6 (Always-Every day).

1. \_\_\_\_\_ At my work, I feel bursting with energy (VI1)
2. \_\_\_\_\_ I find the work that I do full of meaning and purpose (DE1)
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Time flies when I'm working (AB1)
4. \_\_\_\_\_ At my job, I feel strong and vigorous (VI2)
5. \_\_\_\_\_ I am enthusiastic about my job (DE2)

6. \_\_\_\_\_ When I am working, I forget everything else around me (AB2)
7. \_\_\_\_\_ My job inspires me (DE3)
8. \_\_\_\_\_ When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work (VI3)
9. \_\_\_\_\_ I feel happy when I am working intensely (AB3)
10. \_\_\_\_\_ I am proud on the work that I do (DE4)
11. \_\_\_\_\_ I am immersed in my work (AB4)
12. \_\_\_\_\_ I can continue working for very long periods at a time (VI4)
13. \_\_\_\_\_ To me, my job is challenging (DE5)
14. \_\_\_\_\_ I get carried away when I'm working (AB5)
15. \_\_\_\_\_ At my job, I am very resilient, mentally (VI5)
16. \_\_\_\_\_ It is difficult to detach myself from my job (AB6)
17. \_\_\_\_\_ At my work I always persevere, even when things do not go well (VI6)

VI= vigor; DE = dedication; AB = absorption

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### ***B.Human Resources Interview Guide***

1. Considering the engagement factors (vigor, dedication, and absorption), what level of influence of training on engagement have you noticed in leaders who have received soft skills training?
2. Which of the following levels of influence of training on leaders' engagement do you think has occurred? None, scarce, medium, or considerable?
3. What behavioral changes have you observed following training?

4. In what situations have you observed the above behavioral changes?Tartalomszolg%C3%A1ltat%C3%B3k%22],%22documentcollectionid%22:[%22GRANDCHAMBER%22,%22CHAMBER%22],%22itemid%22:[%22001-160314%22]}

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