

EMPLOYEE INSPIRATION: CONCEPTUALIZATION AND IDENTIFICATION OF DRIVERS

Employee inspiration is often conceptualized quite narrowly – for example, within the context of inspirational leadership techniques. But inspirational leadership is just one element among many within the construct of employee inspiration. Indeed, extensive research in social psychology suggests that feeling inspired depends both on the source of inspiration as well as the recipient of inspiration. This research stresses the importance of investigating inspiration and its drivers within the organizational context. Drawing on a literature review and a qualitative study among 24 frontline employees and managers, we determine the meaning of inspiration from an employee's perspective and identify its sources. We extend previous work on employee behavior, by proposing employee inspiration as a new construct in the service marketing literature. Our research contributes to the fields of marketing and service management by offering alternative ways to motivate frontline employees to bring their best to work every day.

Keywords: Inspiration, Frontline Employees, Sources of Inspiration

LITERATURE GAP AND RESEARCH PROBLEM

Service providers and retailers have come to realize the relevance of *inspiring* their FLEs (FLE) to enhance service interactions and firm outcomes (Evanschitzky, Sharma, & Prykop, 2012; Kumar & Pansari, 2014; Solomon, Surprenant, Czepiel, & Gutman, 1985). To enhance frontline employee performance in service interactions, leading retailers and service providers (e.g. IKEA, Puma, Starbucks) are no longer just motivating their employees with salaries or workplace amenities. Rather, they have begun *inspiring* their FLEs with different levers, such as the company's vision and values. A practitioner study provides initial evidence that employees who are inspired are 2.25 times more productive than employees who are simply satisfied with their working conditions (Garton & Mankins, 2015).

Despite its potential to increase firm profitability, our understanding of FLE inspiration remains limited and prior research should be expanded in at least two ways: First, marketing research has yet to investigate inspiration as a personal experience, as perceived by the individual employee (Thrash & Elliot, 2003). Second, marketing and organizational researchers alike tend to focus on leaders as the main source of inspiration (e.g. Baker, Rapp, Meyer, & Mullins, 2014; Bass, 1988; Bitner, 1992; Celsi & Gilly, 2010; van Dolen, Lemmink, Ruyter, & Jong, 2002).

Regardless of content (e.g. spiritual, creative) or source (e.g., the unconscious, nature), inspiration is conceptualized as having three core characteristics: *transcendence*, *evocation*, and *motivation*. *Evocation* implies that inspiration arises spontaneously as a reaction to a stimulus (e.g., a role model) that one encounters in the external environment or an intrapsychic source (e.g., memory). *Transcendence* implies that one gains novel ideas beyond one's horizon. *Motivation* suggests that the individual is motivated actualize the newly gained idea" (Thrash, Maruskin, Cassidy, Fryer, & Ryan, 2010). Further, inspiration consist of two processes: an epistemic process (*inspired by*) and a motivational process (*inspired to*) (Thrash & Elliot, 2004). Being *inspired by* describes the process through which individuals come to appreciate the intrinsic value of a stimulus object or the "Aha"-moment when a novel idea enters awareness. *Being inspired to* refers to a motivational process during which one feels compelled to realize an idea.

METHOD AND PROCEDURE

To understand employee inspiration and its drivers, we conducted 24 personal in-depth interviews with FLEs and managers (Creswell & Clark, 2018). We structured the interviews around the following questions: (1) Tell us about a situation in which you experienced inspiration within the work context. (2) What has inspired you? (3) How could your company design your workplace to make it more inspiring? Interview material was coded (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

FINDINGS

Our data revealed in-depth insights on employee inspiration that can be grouped along three overarching findings: (1) Employee inspiration includes the reception of a *work-related* idea and the pursuit of this idea at work. (2) Employee inspiration happens spontaneously and voluntarily. This results in a strong ambition to implement newly gained ideas. (3) There are diverse sources of inspiration from both the work-related and non-work-related context.

Evidence of employee inspiration

The interviews revealed that inspiration is a prevalent work phenomenon. The data illustrate that employee inspiration is conceptualized by three components: evocation, transcendence and motivation (Figure 1).

--- Insert Fig. 1 about here ---

Activation Component of Inspiration

Employees described the feeling of inspiration as a trigger to “grow beyond yourself”, which accounts for the motivational component of inspiration (Figure 1). Upon receiving a new idea, employees “felt inspired to implement these new ideas at work” or wanted to “realize and express” the newly gained idea at work. Nine employees associated inspiration with a high degree of self-development and growth. When being inspired, employees felt awakened to new ideas and possibilities to enhance their work. They highlighted that “new ideas *come* to them spontaneously,” or they felt “invaded by a new idea.” Thus, inspiration is evoked beyond the employee’s (or the supervisor’s) control. Employees associate *voluntariness* and *spontaneousness* with the process of becoming inspired. Thus, employees felt they had the decision-making power to initiate and regulate their own action. This feeling of self-determination resulted in a strong drive to implement the newly gained ideas (Deci, Connell, & Ryan, 1989).

Sources of Inspiration

Employees may be inspired by various sources at work and outside work. We summarize the sources in Table 1. We grouped the sources into four categories: Personal (e.g. private life), company internal (e.g. co-workers), the company’s micro-environment (e.g. customers), and the employee’s macro-environment (e.g. social media).

--- Insert Tab. 1 about here ---

To understand the importance of the identified sources, we conducted a quantitative content analysis (frequency analysis), following Mayring (2010).

--- Insert Fig. 2 about here ---

DISCUSSION

This research conceptualizes employee inspiration as a psychological state perceived by the individual employee. Findings reveal that FLEs are not primarily inspired by leaders but by customers and co-workers, as well as sources outside their immediate work context. However, to qualify as employee inspiration, employees also have to be *inspired to* implement the newly gained ideas at work.

Our research recognizes the importance of FLEs and advances existing research in this area (Hüttel et al., 2019) and provides a valuable starting point for investigating its impact on customers during service interactions. As inspired employees appear to be willing to walk the extra mile, they are more likely to solve the customers’ problems creatively and to create a unique shopping experience (Verhoef et al., 2009). Thus, employee inspiration may be an important variable to enhance the customer experience. Precisely, employee inspiration could be explored as a possible antecedent to relevant metrics at the employee or customer level (e.g. employee innovation, customer inspiration) (Böttger, Rudolph, Evanschitzky, & Pfrang, 2017).

Figure 1: Characteristics of Employee Inspiration

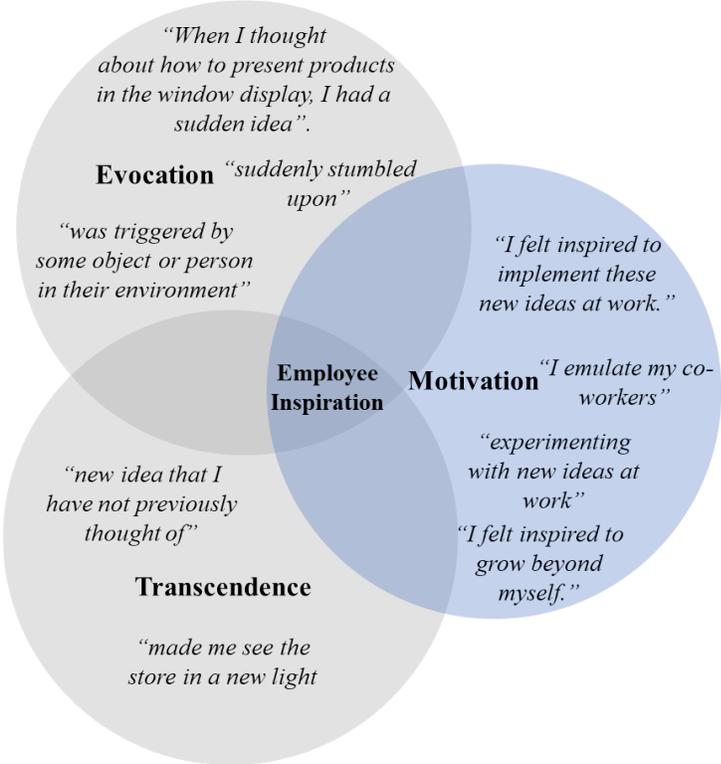


Figure 2: Sources of Employee Inspiration

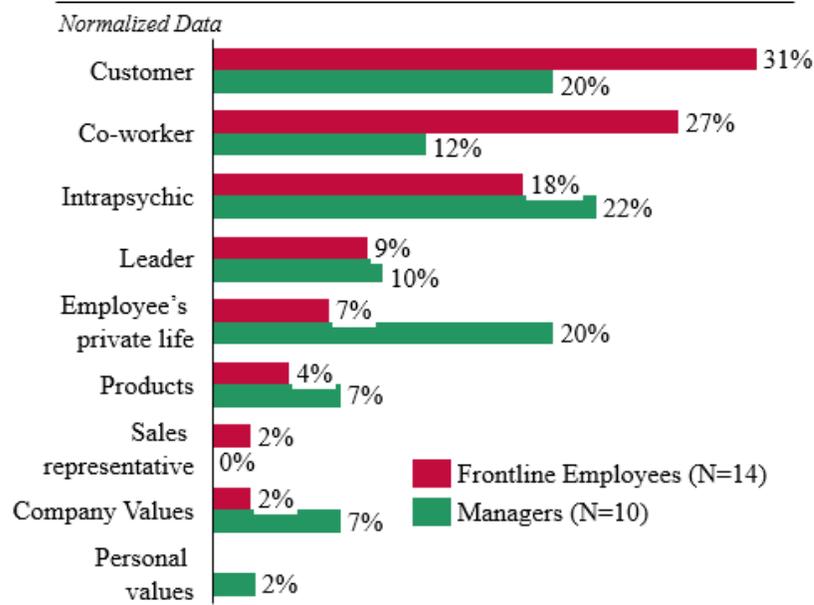


Table 1: Drivers of Employee Inspiration

Driver	Driver – Subcategories	Illustrative quote
Personal	Personal values	“I am interested in offering the customer something that he would not find in another shop”.
	Employee’s private life	“If you go out. You just see things outside”.
	Intrapsychic	“It suddenly came to my memory”.
Company-in-ternal	Company values	“The company philosophy inspires me”.
	Co-workers	“Most of my co-workers come from another industry and were not trained to be sales people. It is inspiring what stories and experiences they bring with themselves.”
	Products	“Product promotions inspire me to display them in a nice way”.
Company’s micro-environment	Customers	“If customers want a product that we do not have. At the same time, I want to offer this product to the customers to make them happy. This is inspiring to me”.
	Sales representatives	“Many sales representatives [from cosmetic companies] visit us and present us new products, which inspires me [...] to expand my knowledge”.
Employee’s macroenvironment	Societal change	“It is the social change that inspires me. For example, how I go shopping. Before I go to the store, I check out offers online and receive information”.
	Social Media	“Yes, Instagram inspires me”.

References (for reviewers)

- Baker, T. L., Rapp, A., Meyer, T., & Mullins, R. (2014). The role of brand communications on front line service employee beliefs, behaviors, and performance. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 42(6), 642–657.
- Bass, B. M. (1988). The Inspirational Processes of Leadership. *Journal of Management Development*, 7(5), 21–31.
- Bitner, M. J. (1992). Servicescapes: The Impact of Physical Surroundings on Customers and Employees. *Journal of Marketing*, 56(2), 57–71.
- Böttger, T., Rudolph, T., Evanschitzky, H., & Pfrang, T. (2017). Customer Inspiration: Conceptualization, Scale Development, and Validation. *Journal of Marketing*, 81(6), 116–131.
- Celsi, M. W., & Gilly, M. C. (2010). Employees as internal audience: how advertising affects employees' customer focus. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 38(4), 520–529.
- Creswell, J. W., & Clark, V. (2018). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*. (Third edition): SAGE Publications.
- Deci, E. L., Connell, J. P., & Ryan, R. M. (1989). Self-determination in a work organization. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 74(4), 580–590.
- Evanschitzky, H., Sharma, A., & Prykop, C. (2012). The role of the sales employee in securing customer satisfaction. *European Journal of Marketing*, 46(3-4), 489–508.
- Garton, E., & Mankins, M. C. (2015). Engaging Your Employees Is Good, but Don't Stop There. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2015/12/engaging-your-employees-is-good-but-dont-stop-there>
- Hackman, J. R. (1980). Work redesign and motivation. *Professional Psychology*, 11(3), 445–455.
- Harter, J. K., Schmidt, F. L., Asplund, J. W., Killham, E. A., & Agrawal, S. (2010). Causal Impact of Employee Work Perceptions on the Bottom Line of Organizations. *Perspectives on Psychological Science: Journal of the Association for Psychological Science*, 5(4), 378–389.
- Hüttel, B. A., Ates, Z., Schumann, J. H., Büttgen, M., Haager, S., Komor, M., & Volz, J. (2019). The influence of customer characteristics on FLEs' customer need knowledge. *Journal of Services Marketing*, 33(2), 220–232.
- Kumar, V., & Pansari, A. (2014). The Construct, Measurement, and Impact of Employee Engagement: a Marketing Perspective. *Customer Needs and Solutions*, 1(1), 52–67.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Yvonna S. Lincoln, Egon G. Guba: Sage.
- Mayring, P. (2010). *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse. Grundlagen und Techniken*. Philipp Mayring (11., aktualis. und überarb. Aufl.). Pädagogik (Beltz): Beltz.
- McCracken, G. D. (1988). *The long interview*. Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications Inc.
- Solomon, M. R., Surprenant, C., Czepiel, J. A., & Gutman, E. G. (1985). A Role Theory Perspective on Dyadic Interactions: The Service Encounter. *Journal of Marketing*, 49(1), 99–111.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Thrash, T. M., & Elliot, A. J. (2003). Inspiration as a psychological construct. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84(4), 871–889.
- Thrash, T. M., & Elliot, A. J. (2004). Inspiration: Core Characteristics, Component Processes, Antecedents, and Function. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 87(6), 957–973.

- Thrash, T. M., Maruskin, L. A., Cassidy, S. E., Fryer, J. W., & Ryan, R. M. (2010). Mediating Between the Muse and the Masses: Inspiration and the Actualization of Creative Ideas. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 98(3), 469–487.
- Van Dolen, W., Lemmink, J., Ruyter, K. de, & Jong, A. de. (2002). Customer-sales employee encounters: a dyadic perspective. *Journal of Retailing*, 78(4), 265–279.
- Verhoef, P. C., Lemon, K. N., Parasuraman, A., Roggeveen, A., Tsiros, M., & Schlesinger, L. A. (2009). Customer Experience Creation: Determinants, Dynamics and Management Strategies. *Journal of Retailing*, 85(1), 31–41.
- Wangenheim, F. v., Evanschitzky, H., & Wunderlich, M. (2007). Does the employee–customer satisfaction link hold for all employee groups? *Journal of Business Research*, 60(7), 690–697.