

## Big Five Personality, Transformational Leadership, Psychological Safety, and Employee Engagement of Private Sector Employees in Southern Thailand

*(Lima Faktor Personaliti, Kepimpinan Transformasi, Keselamatan Psikologi dan Penglibatan Pekerja oleh Pekerja Sektor Swasta di Selatan Thailand)*

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### ABSTRACT

*This study examines the relationship between five factor model of personality (i.e. extraversion, conscientiousness, openness to experience, agreeableness and neuroticism), transformational leadership and psychological safety and their impact on employee engagement. A total of 402 of private sector companies in Southern Thailand participated in this study. PLS-SEM was used to analyze the data. Overall measurement model showed appropriate psychometric properties in term of reliability and validity. The propose model of this research has relied primarily on reflective measurement model. Out of the five personality factors, three proved to have an influence on employee engagement (extraversion, conscientiousness, and openness to experience), however the influence of agreeableness and neuroticism were not supported. Transformational leadership and psychological safety also showed direct influence on employee engagement. The results of predictive power of the structural model was 0.337 indicating that 33.7% of the variance in the employee engagement construct was explained by the five factor model of personality, transformational leadership and psychological safety. Theoretical and practical implications of the study are highlighted. Finally, limitations and further research are discussed.*

*Keywords: Employee engagement; five factor model of personality; transformational leadership; psychological safety*

### ABSTRAK

*Kajian ini meneliti hubungan antara model lima faktor personaliti (extraversion, conscientiousness, openness to experience, agreeableness dan neuroticism), kepimpinan transformasi dan keselamatan psikologi terhadap penglibatan pekerja. Sejumlah 402 syarikat sektor swasta di Thailand Selatan mengambil bahagian dalam kajian ini. PLS-SEM digunakan untuk menganalisis data. Model pengukuran keseluruhannya menunjukkan sifat psikometrik yang sesuai dari segi kebolehpercayaan dan kesahan. Model pengukuran dalam kajian ini adalah model pengukuran reflektif. Daripada lima faktor personaliti, tiga terbukti mempunyai pengaruh terhadap penglibatan pekerja (extraversion, conscientiousness dan openness to experience), namun agreeableness dan neurotisme tidak mempengaruhi penglibatan pekerja. Kepimpinan transformasional dan keselamatan psikologi juga menunjukkan pengaruh langsung terhadap penglibatan pekerja. Model struktur menunjukkan kekuatan ramalan adalah 0.337 atau 33.7% daripada varian dalam penglibatan pekerja dijelaskan oleh model lima faktor personaliti, kepimpinan transformasi dan keselamatan psikologi. Implikasi teoretikal dan praktikal kajian juga diketengahkan. Akhirnya, batasan dan penyelidikan selanjutnya dibincangkan.*

*Kata kunci: Penglibatan pekerja; model lima faktor personaliti; kepimpinan transformasi; keselamatan psikologi*

### INTRODUCTION

Engagement is the key to the success of an organization because employee performance does not only depend on the employees' intellectual skills, but also on their attitude toward their work and organization (Ulrich 2007). Employee engagement is the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances (Kahn 1990). However, there seems to be a rise in disengagement among employees lately (AonHewitt 2013; Bates 2004; Gallup 2013; Shuck 2009). For example, Gallup (2013)

reported that 80-87% of employees in the world were not highly engaged in their organization. Blessing White Inc. (2008) surveyed 7,508 individuals from Southeast Asia, India, Australia/New Zealand, Europe, China, and North America. The results showed that only 10% of the individuals were fully engaged, whereas a full third were disengaged.

The Gallup Organization surveyed employee engagement in Thailand and found out that only 14% of Thai employees were engaged, 84% were not engaged, and 2% were disengaged (Gallup 2013). The report also showed that Thailand has the highest proportion of not engaged employees in the world (Gallup 2013). One of

the regions in Thailand where the private sector is poised to play a key player in the economic growth is Southern Thailand. The workforce in this region made up about 70% of the total regional population, which is a positive factor for future productive activity and development.

The Bank of Thailand reports that the overall economy of the Southern region in February 2015 improved continually from the previous months. Despite the economic indicators that show improvement, Southern Thailand also face the highest percentage of employee turnover, as high as 34.79% (Department of Employment Thailand 2012). Previous research argued that employee turnover is an indicator of disengagement at the workplace (Baumruk 2004; Gagnon & Michael 2003), which leads to reduced revenue, productivity, profitability, and customer loyalty (Baumruk 2004; Gagnon & Michael 2003). Although understanding employee engagement has great practical importance, academic research works on this issue are relatively limited (Lewis, Donaldson & Tharani 2011; Macey & Schneider 2008; Sally, Natalie & Clair 2014). To fill this gap, this research was interested in studying the factors purported to influence employee engagement in Southern Thailand.

It is suggested that individual differences, such as personality, influence employee engagement (Kahn 1990; Wildermuth 2008). Five Factor Model is a probable tool to determine engagement (McCrae & Costa 1997). The Five Factor Model is a highly stable personality model and it is able to predict individual behavior (Mat 2008; Moss & Ngu 2006). Few studies have concentrated on the influence of all five dimensions of this model on employee engagement (Langelaan et al. 2004; Rich 2006; Wildermuth 2008). Thus, this study contributes to positive organizational behavior by investigating the effect of the Five Factor Model on employee engagement.

According to Blessing White (2006), Clifton (2008), The Towers Perrin Talent Report (2003), a leader behavior is key to employee engagement. One of the leadership styles found in the literature that can influence employee engagement is transformational leadership (Yammarino, Spangler & Bass 1993; Zhang 2010). The growing globalization demands that leaders instill inspiration in employees so that they become engaged in the organization. However, limited studies focused on the influence of transformational leadership on employee engagement and inconclusive findings on the effect of leadership have been reported (Macleod & Clarke 2009; Zhang 2010). Bass (1997) proposed that transformational leadership is more effective than other styles.

Previous researchers tend to neglect psychological conditions (Brown 1996; Fried & Ferris 1987) even though the conditions could help us better understand how individuals engage at work. One of such psychological conditions is psychological safety. Within the organizational behavior literature, psychological safety is the employee's sense of being able to show and employ one's self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career (Kahn 1990). Dollard and Bakker (2009), Eggers

(2011), Dunne (2013), May, Gilson and Harter (2004), and Vogelgesang (2007) demonstrated that psychological safety positively affected employee engagement because it reflects the employees' belief that they may engage and employ their true selves at work without the fear of negative consequences.

In the interest of filling the practical and theoretical gaps and furthering the understanding of the factors that influence employee engagement in the private sector in Southern Thailand, the present study sought to investigate the influence of transformational leadership behavior, psychological safety and the Five Factor Model of personality on employee engagement.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous studies suggested that individual differences, such as personality, influence employee engagement (Kahn 1990; Wildermuth 2008). The Five Factor Model is a highly stable personality model and it is able to predict individual behavior (Mat 2008; Moss & Ngu 2006). Further, previous studies seemed to indicate that a leader behavior, specifically transformational leadership is key to employee engagement (Blessing White 2006; Clifton & James 2008; The Towers Perrin Talent Report 2003) because a leader can make the workplace conducive for employees to work. Psychological safety, the extent to which individuals feel "safe to engage" was found positively related to employee engagement (Kahn 1990). Thus, future research should investigate whether personality trait, leadership style and the extent to which individuals feel "safe to engage" at work explain employee engagement.

Human beings can be proactive and engaged or, alternatively, passive and alienated, largely as a function of the social conditions in which they develop and function. Accordingly, this study was guided by self-determination theory that has focused on the social-contextual conditions that facilitate versus forestall the natural processes of self-motivation (e.g. personality trait) and healthy psychological development (e.g. psychological safety). Specifically, factors have been examined that enhance versus undermine intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (e.g. transformational leadership), self-regulation, and well-being.

## PERSONALITY TRAITS AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Many researchers agreed the Five Factor Model (FFM) best captures personality. Digman (1990), Gholipour et al. (2011), McCrae and John (1992), and Rammstedt and Kemper (2011) asserted that the FFM best describes the structure of personality traits validated by personality theory and has psychological implications. In addition, the five factors of personality trait structure are universal (McCrae & Costa 1997) and highly consistent (Gosling, Rentfrow & Swan 2003).

Five-factor dimensions were related to both work-related attitudes and behavior based on previous studies. In terms of job-related attitudes, the big five factors model were found to be significant predictors of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and job involvement (Ahmad, Ather & Hussain 2014; Bozionelos 2004; Choi, Oh & Colbert 2015; Daneshfard 2012; Furnham, Eracleous & Chamorro-Premuzic 2009; Hackney 2012; Hurtz & Donovan 2000; Ijaz & Khan 2015; Kappagoda 2013; Lättman 2012; Naik 2015; Pandey & Kavitha 2015; Panaccio & Vandenberghe 2002; Prayitno & Suwandi 2016; Syed, Saeed & Farrukh 2015; Templer 2012; Yahaya et al. 2012).

Extraversion has been identified as affiliation (strongly desiring social interaction) and social potency (proactivity in influencing other people) (DeYoung, Quilty & Peterson 2007). It was found that individuals who had a high score on extraversion had a positive emotion (Judge & Bono 2000). Highly extroverted individuals probably experience vigor (Brief & Weiss 2002). This trait has been one of most used, among the five factors, to examine its association with employee engagement (Vanam 2009). Indeed past research demonstrated a significant link between extraversion and employee engagement (Akhtar et al. 2014; Inceoglu 2012; Mostert & Rothmann 2006; Vanam 2009; Zaidi et al. 2013). Rich's (2006) found that the relationship between extraversion and employee engagement was stronger than other four personality traits. His results also revealed that the extraversion had the highest correlation with employee engagement.

Agreeableness is a trait related to service orientation, harmony-seeking, and the propensity to defer to others (Wildermuth 2008). This trait represents the tendency to be trusting and trustworthy, gentle, kind and warm. Zaidi et al. (2013) investigated the relationship between FFM personality traits and work engagement among public sector university teachers in Lahore. They also found that agreeableness and engagement had a significant and positive relationship with employee engagement. Similar results were also reported elsewhere (Wefald, Reichard, & Serrano 2011; Kim, Shin & Umbreit 2007; Mostert & Rothmann 2006). Many researchers found that conscientiousness at the workplace shaped work behaviors (Hogan & Ones 1997). Previous research demonstrated a significant link between conscientiousness at work and attendance at work (Judge, Martocchio & Thoresen 1997), job performance (Barrick & Mount 1991; Hurtz & Donovan 2000; Robertson et al. 2000; Salgado 2003; Salgado & DeFruyt 2005), retention (Barrick & Mount 1991), OCB (Halbesleben, Harvey & Bolino 2009), teaching effectiveness (Mat 2008), and career success (Judge et al. 1999). This type of personality trait was consistently found to have a positive relationship with employee engagement. Mostert and Rothmann (2006) found conscientiousness to be a significant predictor of engagement in a survey of 1,794 South African police officers. Rich (2006) also found that conscientiousness predicted employee engagement among firefighters positively.

Openness to experience is related to scientific and artistic creativity, divergent thinking, and political liberalism. In a different study, Smith (2012) examined the Big Five personality traits as predictors of cultural intelligence of ethnic minority college students in the USA. He observed that openness to experience was the strongest predictor of cultural intelligence. The result is consistent with other researchers (Ang et al. 2007; Barrick & Mount 1991; Hurtz & Donovan 2000; Moody 2007). Despite the existing studies on the relationship between openness and job engagement (Vanam 2009), the number of research works is still less than the number of studies that have looked at other personality traits and employee engagement.

Neuroticism or need for stability is defined in terms of worry, insecurity, self-consciousness and temper. It is represented as a variety of negative effects such as anger, embarrassment, worry, unhappiness as well as worried thinking and behaviors that carry on emotional concern (McCrae & Costa 1987). Individuals who are highly neurotic have a tendency to experience negative emotions. Neurotic individuals tend to be stressful as they are likely to perceive their environment as threatening (Sulea et al. 2015). Thus, neuroticism seems to relate to negative behavior at work such as disengagement. Previous research found evidence that neuroticism was negatively related to employee engagement. Therefore, drawing on this idea, the following hypotheses are formulated:

- H<sub>1a</sub> Extraversion is positively related to employee engagement.
- H<sub>1b</sub> Agreeableness is positively related to employee engagement.
- H<sub>1c</sub> Conscientiousness is positively related to employee engagement.
- H<sub>1d</sub> Openness to experience is positively related to employee engagement.
- H<sub>1e</sub> Neuroticism is negatively related to employee engagement.

#### TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Previous research also tended to show that leadership styles play an importance role in influencing employee engagement in organization (Blessing White 2006; Clifton 2008; DDI 2005; Luthans & Peterson 2002; Schneider et al. 2009; Schaufeli & Salanova 2007; The Towers Perrin Talent Report (2003); Zhang (2010); Kahn (1990); and Macey and Schneider (2008).

Transformational leadership involves supportive behavior, which, according to Ryan and Deci (2000), is a job resource that can prompt an individual's intrinsic motivation, which affects employee work engagement. Other researchers have also reported the significant influence of transformational leadership on employee engagement (Attridge 2009; Breevaart et al. 2014; Cartwright & Holmes 2006; Macey & Schneider 2008; Nohria, Groysberg, & Lee 2008; Shuck 2009; Shuck &

Herd 2012; Song et al. 2012; Wang & Walumbwa 2007). For example, Albrecht and Andreetta (2011) found that employees who perceived their leaders and managers to have an empowering style of leadership tended to feel that they were engaged with and belong to their organization. Shirom (2003) argued that leaders who encourage their followers to demonstrate creative thinking are likely to develop a sense of engagement in the employees. It was also found that supportive leadership behavior enhanced employee engagement (Aguilar & Salanova 2005). Therefore, drawing on this idea, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H<sub>2</sub> Transformational leadership is positively related to employee engagement

#### PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Dollard and Bakker (2009), Eggers (2011), Dunne (2013), May et al. (2004), and Vogelgesang (2007) demonstrated that psychological safety positively affected employee engagement because it reflects the employees' belief that they may engage and employ their true selves at work without the fear of negative consequences. As discussed earlier, a few scholars have tested the relationship between psychological safety and engagement. Dollard and Bakker (2009) constructed a model of workplace psychosocial safety climate (PSC) to explain the origins of job demands and resources, worker psychological health, and employee engagement of Australian education workers. They found that psychosocial safety climate predicted a change in employee engagement. The relation with one's immediate manager can have a dramatic impact on an individual's perception of the safety of a work environment. A supportive, and not controlling, relation should foster perceptions of safety (Edmondson 1999) and enhance

employee engagement (Kahn 1990; May et al. 2004). Therefore, drawing on this idea, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H<sub>4</sub> Psychological safety is positively related to employee engagement

## METHODOLOGY

### SAMPLE AND PROCEDURE

A quantitative research method (survey using questionnaire) was used to solicit responses from 608 employees working in private sectors in southern Thailand. The target population consisted of all full-time employees in service, production and trading sector. There is a total of 7,986 private companies and 134,838 full-time employees as of 2012 as shown in Table 1 (The Department of Labour Protection and Welfare, Thailand 2012). This study adopted stratified sampling which is a probability sampling technique wherein the researcher divides the entire population into different subgroups or strata, then randomly selects the final subjects. The proportionate stratified was used where the population was divided into three category of strata according to type of industry. With proportionate sampling, the different strata have different sampling fractions. The minimum sample required for this research was 382 (Krejcie & Morgan 1970).

In this study, structural equation modeling was employed to analyze the proposed relationship in this study. In particular, partial least squares technique (PLS) which is a variance-based structural equation modeling technique is applied. Given that the objective in this study was predictive in nature, thus PLS is more appropriate than covariance-based SEM.

TABLE 1. Proportionate sampling: Size of participants in private companies in Southern Thailand

Strata based on type of industry	Number of Employees	% employees	Proportionate Sampling	No. of Subjects in Sample
Production	49,970	37%	141	183
Trading	9,335	7%	27	75
service	75,533	56%	214	350
Total	134,838	100%	382	608

### MEASURES

Employee engagement was assessed by employing the Rich Engagement Scale developed by Rich (2006). The instrument has 13 questions. A seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 to 7 (from strongly disagree to strongly agree) was used. Sample items include "I work with intensity on my job," "I am enthusiastic about my job," and "At work, I concentrate on my job".

Employee personality was measured using Saucier (1994) "mini-markers" of the Big Five Personality dimension. The Big Five marker set comprises of

five dimensions: extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness, and neuroticism which were measured on a seven-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (extremely inaccurate) to 7 (extremely accurate). Meanwhile, transformational leadership of employees' immediate supervisor was assessed by adapting the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire 5X of Bass and Avolio (2000) which is also known as the MLQ 5X. The survey had 20 items, which were measured on a seven-point Likert-type response format that varies from 1-none, 2-slight, 3-mild, 4-moderate, 5-severe, 6- very severe, and 7- maximal.

The items for psychological safety scale were adapted from Shuck (2010). These items evaluate to what extent a person feels pleasant to be himself or herself and illustrate his or her point of view at work or whether there is a threatening environment at work. In this study, the survey had four questions measured on a seven-point Likert response format ranging from 1-strongly disagree to 7-strongly agree. Sample items include “I can be myself at work”. All the measurements used in this study are considered appropriate to the context of the study, valid, reliable where the reported Cronbach’s Alpha for all measures meet the minimum threshold of 0.70 (Nunnally 1978).

RESULTS

RESPONSE RATE

Out of 608 employees in private companies invited to participate in this study, 422 responded. However, 20 responses were excluded from the analysis because of incomplete responses. Only 402 were usable and gave an effective response rate of 66.12%. Babbie (1973) argued that a response rate of 50 % is acceptable for social research surveys. Hair et al. (2014) suggested that a sample size should be 10 times the number of the variables under study. In this study, there were eight variables. Hence, a sample of 80 is adequate for the analysis. Moreover, PLS requires only a minimum of 30 participants (Chin 1998). Therefore, a total of 402 response rate is greatly adequate for this analysis.

PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

The participants were mostly female (61.9%). In terms of age, those who were between the age of 21 and 30 years old were 56.2% while 31.3% percent were between 31 and 40 years old. In terms of the level of education, the majority had a bachelor’s degree (70.1%). In contrast, 2.7% had a postgraduate degree. Forty-five percent of the participants had worked in the organization less than 5 years. In addition, the participants who came from the organization that employed more than 100 employees were 48%, followed by those from the organization that had less than 50 employees (34.8%). With regards to the type of organization, almost half of the participants worked in the service sector (44.5%), followed by the production sector (37.3%). Only 18.2% worked in the trading sector.

EVALUATION OF MEASUREMENT MODEL

Before data could be analyzed, they should be screened first to eliminate spurious data that may affect the results. At this stage, data transformation, the accuracy of data, missing data, outliers, data distribution, non-response bias and common method variance were performed. The results demonstrated that the data in this study are satisfactory enough and can proceed for further analysis.

The loadings for most of the items are satisfying the minimum threshold of 0.60 recommended by Chin (1998). The result is presented in Table 2 as below. The composite reliability range from 0.776 to 0.967 indicated the satisfactory level of the internal consistency in the measurement model. To determine the convergent validity,

TABLE 2. Summary results of the reflective measurement model

Reflective Indicator	Loading	T-stat	CR	AVE
<b>Employee Engagement</b>			<b>0.940</b>	<b>0.589</b>
EE 1. I work with intensity on my job.	0.759	26.124		
EE 2. I exert my full effort to my job.	0.792	38.554		
EE 3. I devote a lot of energy to my job.	0.710	22.952		
EE 4. I try my hardest to perform well on my job	0.761	24.963		
EE 5. I am enthusiastic about my job.	0.785	30.321		
EE 6. I am interested in my job.	0.835	45.223		
EE 7. I am proud of my job.	0.721	21.790		
EE 8. I feel positive about my job.	0.700	19.502		
EE 10. At work, I pay a lot of attention to my job	0.802	33.919		
EE 11. At work, I concentrate on my job.	0.786	30.419		
EE 13. At work, I devote a lot of attention to my job	0.779	33.331		
<b>Transformational Leadership</b>			<b>0.967</b>	<b>0.619</b>
L3. seek differing perspectives when solving problems	0.721	23.649		
L 4. talk optimistically about the future	0.739	22.046		
L 5. instill pride in others for being associated with him/her	0.752	26.237		
L 6. talk enthusiastically about what needs to be accomplished	0.756	27.472		
L 7. specify the importance of having a strong sense of purpose	0.700	16.682		
L 8. spend time teaching and coaching	0.784	36.910		
L 9. go beyond self-interest for the good of the group	0.790	32.131		
L 10. treat others as an individual rather than just as a member of the group	0.717	20.783		
L 11. act in ways that builds others’ respect for him/her	0.835	49.722		
L 12. consider the moral and ethical consequences of decisions	0.814	38.879		

Continue

TABLE 2. *Continued*

Reflective Indicator	Loading	T-stat	CR	AVE
L 13. display a sense of power and confidence	0.703	16.492		
L 14. articulate a compelling vision of the future	0.845	47.687		
L 15. consider an individual as having different needs, abilities, and aspirations from others	0.815	37.104		
L 16. get others to look at problems from many different angles	0.793	28.924		
L 17. help others to develop their strengths	0.827	43.895		
L 18. suggest new ways of looking at how to complete assignments	0.856	56.686		
L 19. emphasize the importance of having a collective sense of mission	0.847	47.008		
L 20. express confidence that goals will be achieved	0.839	48.894		
<b>Psychological Safety</b>			<b>0.797</b>	<b>0.566</b>
1. I can be myself at work.	0.756	17.859		
2. At work I can bring up problems and tough issues without fear of being teased or made fun of.	0.769	20.634		
3. I feel physically safe at work.	0.732	18.029		
<b>Personality Extraversion</b>			<b>0.797</b>	<b>0.571</b>
P1.1: Talkative	0.787	20.843		
P1.2: Extraverted	0.840	33.037		
P 1.3: Bold	0.622	9.160		
<b>Agreeableness</b>			<b>0.810</b>	<b>0.682</b>
P2.1: Sympathetic	0.849	24.104		
P2.4: Cooperative	0.802	19.421		
<b>Conscientiousness</b>			<b>0.809</b>	<b>0.515</b>
P3.1: Organized	0.751	20.658		
P3.2: Efficient	0.670	15.719		
P3.3: Systematic	0.726	19.487		
P3.4: Practical	0.720	16.813		
<b>Openness to Experience</b>			<b>0.856</b>	<b>0.546</b>
P4.3: Philosophical	0.744	15.092		
P4.4: Intellectual	0.667	10.937		
P4.5: Complex	0.803	20.412		
P4.7: Uncreative	0.815	21.502		
P4.8: Unintellectual	0.650	10.332		
<b>Neuroticism</b>			<b>0.776</b>	<b>0.537</b>
P5.4: Jealous	0.686	9.098		
P5.5: Temperamental	0.803	16.736		
P5.8 Fretful	0.704	9.4441		

Fornell and Larcker (1981) suggested the minimum AVE of 0.5. Based on the result tabulated in Table 2, it can be said that the measurement model has sufficient convergent validity given that the AVE values ranged from 0.515 to 0.682.

To measure the discriminant validity, heterotrait-monotrait ratio criterion (HTMT) was employed. The HTMT

ratio is the geometric mean of heterotrait-heteromethod correlation. According to Garson (2016), a well-fitting model, the HTMT ratio should be below 1.0. As shown in Table 3, the threshold value is less than 0.888. The constructs in this study shows adequate discriminant validity.

TABLE 3. Results of Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

	EE	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	Psy	TL
<b>EE</b>	1.000							
<b>P1</b>	0.525	1.000						
<b>P2</b>	0.514	0.661	1.000					
<b>P3</b>	0.517	0.651	0.763	1.000				
<b>P4</b>	0.227	0.157	0.274	0.320	1.000			
<b>P5</b>	0.408	0.654	0.687	0.206	0.291	1.000		
<b>Psy</b>	0.519	0.410	0.445	0.236	0.087	0.451	1.000	
<b>TL</b>	0.341	0.209	0.281	0.183	0.059	0.238	0.464	1.000

Note: EE-Employee Engagement; P1-Extraversion; P2-Agreeableness; P3-Conscientiousness; P4- Openness to experience; P5-Neuroticism

## EVALUATION OF STRUCTURAL MODEL

The R<sup>2</sup> value of the employee engagement was 0.337, indicating that 33.7% of the variance in the employee engagement construct was explained by extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness, neuroticism, transformational leadership, and psychological safety.

In order to test whether or not the path coefficient are statistically significant, data were run using 5000 bootstrapped resampling procedure. Table 4 shows the results for the relationship between personality, transformational leadership and psychological safety on employee engagement. Out of seven hypotheses developed for the study, five hypotheses, namely extraversion, conscientiousness, openness to experience, psychological safety and transformational leadership influence employee engagement significantly. However, agreeableness and neuroticism do not influence employee engagement.

TABLE 4. Results for hypotheses testing

Predictor Construct	Path coefficients ( $\beta$ )	Standard error	T value
Extra -> EE	0.138	0.0575	2.401*
Agreeable -> EE	0.094	0.0573	1.645
Conscien -> EE	0.244	0.0466	5.227***
Openness-> EE	0.169	0.0457	3.703***
Neuroticism -> EE	-0.037	0.0536	0.694
Psy -> EE	0.203	0.0476	4.261***
TL -> EE	0.132	0.0487	2.718*

Note: \*\*\* Indicates the item is significant at the  $p < 0.001$ . \*\* Indicates the item is significant at the  $p < 0.01$ . \* Indicates the item is significant at the  $p < 0.05$ .

## MANAGERIAL IMPLICATION

## EXTRAVERSION AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

The result in Table 4 shows that extraversion positively influenced employee engagement. The result of this study is consistent with previous works (Inceoglu & Warr 2012; Kim, Shin & Swanger 2009; Langelaan et al. 2006; Salanova, Agut & Peiro 2005; Wildermuth 2008; Zaidi et al. 2012). Extraversion is characterized by fun-loving, affectionate, sociable, talkative, friendly, cheerful (McCrae & Costa 1983), enthusiastic, optimistic and energetic (McCrae & John 1992) traits. An individual who has these characteristics are socially oriented and active person. Moreover, he/she has a tendency to express positive feelings, emotion and has many friends in the organization (Watson & Clark 1997). An extrovert person would pay more attention to the value of a person in a group (Huitt 2007). Therefore, an employee who has extraversion trait can easily get happy and be engaged in the organization. As participants in this study were employees of private companies, they must interact highly with co-workers, leaders, and clients to accomplish their job. Thus, extrovert employees could get support and

encouragement from their co-workers, supervisors, and clients, leading them to be engaged at work.

## AGREEABLENESS AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

The result in Table 4 shows that agreeableness did not relate significantly with employee engagement. The result is consistent with Wildermuth (2008) and Akhtar et al. (2015). An agreeable individual has the tendency to be sympathetic, warm, and cooperative, helpful, and friendly. This trait is connected to harmony-seeking, service orientation, and propensity to defer to others. As such, an individual is sympathetic to others and has the desire to help others; he/she expects others to help in return (Costa & McCrae 1992; Zaidi et al. 2013). These tendencies of agreeableness may seem to be preferably especially in work team player, however, agreeableness also was found to have disadvantages. Individual who are high in agreeableness are seem to be more concern about to maintain good inter personal relationship, low self-esteem, and likely to keep quiet and do not speak up their mind. This might cause an organization to unable to provide satisfaction to meet their needs. When the needs are not met, employee would be less engaged in their job and will often undermine their own professionalism and ability that may result in less engaged in their work.

## CONSCIENTIOUSNESS AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

This study found that conscientiousness was the strongest influence on employee engagement. The result is consistent with Kim et al. (2009). The result was not surprising because conscientiousness is required across occupations regardless of sectors. For instance, Hurtz and Donovan (2000) found that conscientiousness was the most important factor that correlated with job performance across all occupations. Rich (2006) also found a correlation between consolidation (conscientiousness) and engagement of firefighters. This finding is also in line with Hogan and Ones (1997), McCrae and Costa (1987), Mostert and Rothmann (2006), Zaidi et al. (2013).

An individual who is conscientious is organized, careful, responsible, and hardworking. These are important attributes for accomplishing work tasks. Costa and Widiger (2002) stated that employees who score highly on conscientiousness have a high aspiration level and work hard to achieve their goals. The result is also in accordance with the proposition by Maslow in that if employees have self-esteem, a sense of achievement, mastery, and managerial responsibility, they will have a positive attitude toward the organization. Therefore, it is not surprising that these characteristics contribute to engagement in the organization.

## OPENNESS TO EXPERIENCE AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

The result in Table 4 found a significant influence of openness to experience on employee engagement. Openness to experience is the degree to which an

individual is philosophical, intellectual, complex, and creative. In addition, openness could be manifest in fantasy, actions, feelings, ideas, and values (McCrae & Costa 1987). This personality trait tends to be associated with interests in a wider range of topic and theories (Wildermuth 2008). Thus, individuals who score highly in this trait are expected to be engaged highly (McCrae & Costa 1987). Previous studies showed that this trait forms the basis for such important social roles as entrepreneurs, architects, change agents, artists that most work in private companies. It may be concluded that openness trait is appropriate for employees in a private company operating in a competitive business environment, especially in Southern Thailand.

#### NEUROTICISM AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

No significant influence of neuroticism on employee engagement was found. The result is consistent with Zaidi et al. (2013), Wildermuth (2008) and Akhtar et al. (2015). Neuroticism refers to an individual who experiences negative emotions and reports less satisfaction with life than most people. The non-significant result could be due to people with this trait tend to be more jealousy, temperament, and fretfulness which may in turn lead to low engagement.

#### TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

The finding in Table 4 showed that employee engagement was influenced positively by transformational leadership, which supported hypothesis 2. In the Thai culture, employees place a high value on relationships and on meeting the needs of a group (Bochner 1994). A transformational leadership concentrates on team building, motivation and cooperation with employees in an organization and push them to higher performance levels (Yammarino et al. 1993) and subsequent engagement (Macey & Schneider 2008; Shirey 2006). Moreover, a transformational leader is able to motivate employees by inspiring them and transforming their attitudes, beliefs, and values into a common vision and goals (Bass 1990; Breevaart et al. 2014). Similarly, supportive behavior for autonomy includes providing meaningful rationale and feedback, allowing choices on how to accomplish the desired results and building trust to increase motivation at work between leaders and followers (Gagné et al. 2000; Gagné 2003). Therefore, it is important for organizations to employ leaders who exhibit transformational leadership behavior so that employee engagement can be enhanced. The result is in agreement with previous studies (Attridge 2009; Breevaart et al. 2014; Cartwright & Holmes 2006; Hoon, et al. 2012; Macey & Schneider 2008; Nohria et al. 2008; Shuck 2009; Shuck & Herd 2012; Tims, Bakker & Xanthopoulou 2011; Wang & Walumbwa 2007; Zhu, Avolio & Walumbwa 2009).

#### PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

As expected, the result provided support for hypothesis 4 as it demonstrated a positive influence on psychological safety on employee engagement. When employees feel psychologically safe, they will ask questions, inquire feedback, report a mistake, or offer a new idea in their job (Edmondson 1999) that make them proud of themselves and engaged in their job. This finding supports Kahn's (1990) engagement model that postulates that when employees feel safe for their career they are likely to be engaged in their tasks. Kahn (1990), May et al. (2004), Egger (2011), Vogelgesang (2007) and Robinson, Perryman & Hayday (2004) demonstrated that psychological safety improved the employee engagement level. In the context of the study, psychological safety is very much needed in private sector organizations to remain competitive where employees are encourage to come out with new and innovative ideas without fear of being punished.

#### THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study empirically supported the effect of personality traits, psychological safety and transformational leadership on employee engagement. Therefore, this study has contributed further knowledge to the importance of personality traits, transformational leadership, and psychological safety as predictors of employee engagement. This research has also provided empirical evidence to support self-determination theory (SDT), which speculates that individuals are autonomously engaged in activities when their basic psychological needs are met (Ryan & Deci 2000). According to Ryan and Deci (2000), the psychological need can be satisfied by both extrinsic (transformational leadership) and intrinsic (personality trait). The results of the present study provided evidence for the SDT's assumption that employees are likely to exhibit excellent performance when the extrinsic and intrinsic motivations are available.

The finding is useful particularly for human resources management in terms of the selection of employees who are self-disciplined, hard work, and highly focused on goal setting and achievement (McCrae & Costa 1987) through personality test. The findings of the present study indicated that transformational leadership had an impact on psychological safety and employee engagement. Therefore, human resources (HR) practitioners in private companies would be wise to focus on leadership training and development programs.

#### CONCLUSION

The present research was conducted to investigate the influence of employee personality, psychological safety and transformational leadership on employee engagement in southern Thailand. The results showed that of the five personality traits, agreeableness and neuroticism were found not significantly affect employee



engagement. This study also was able to fill the gap in the engagement literature by exploring the relationship between transformational leadership and psychological safety on employee engagement. In addition, the results of this study validated the propositions by self-determination theory in explaining the development of employee engagement by satisfying the need of employees for psychological safety, which will prompt the feeling of autonomy and subsequent engagement at work

Notwithstanding the contributions of this study, it is worth to mention several limitations. First, this study only concentrated on private companies and did not include employees belonging to other industries such as financing and educational industries. Therefore, the results of this study may not be generalized to employees in other industries as they might have different work cultures which require distinct types of personality traits and leadership style in order to increase employee engagement. Second, although the study found that personality traits and transformation leadership were viable tools for increasing employee engagement in private companies, it did not look at the effects of such engagement on organizational consequences such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and intention to stay. Future studies should continue to explore the implications of employee engagement. Third, even though the questions in the questionnaire were carefully translated from English to the Thai language, it was impossible to get a perfect translation due to the cultural nuances. For instance, the personality questionnaire used mini-markers that are short words for the list of traits, such as philosophical, systematic, deep, and complex, etc. These words may cause confusion when presented in the Thai language. Therefore, some items were deleted based on the result of the pilot test and factor analysis.

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