Understanding employee engagement during organisational crises

by

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That this thesis has reached this final stage can be attributed to the enduring support I have received from two Johns.

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Abstract

The aim of the present research was to understand employee engagement during organisational crises, the culmination of which has been the empirical combination of two constructs that are both increasing in attention and concern among scholars and practitioners alike. This objective emerged as a result of an extensive literature review during which it became apparent that research on organisational crises, in relation to their impact on employees, has concentrated thus far on emotions. The current study was premised on the assumption that employee engagement may be a construct equally worthy of scholarly attention because it incorporates not just emotions but also the exertion of physical and cognitive effort. Further, in recent years, studies on employee engagement have been criticised for the acontextual environments in which they have been held. The present research is one attempt to better understand this organisational imperative in what is becoming an increasingly common context – a context where the organisation's survival is at risk. In contrast, it appears as though research on employee engagement has thus far occurred in environments characterised by stability.

To better understand the aforementioned context, the job demands-resources model (JD-R) was adopted as the conceptual framework for the present research. Whilst the number of potential demands and resources is limitless, the current study distilled them into three categories: leadership-related factors; work-related factors; and personal factors. Whilst the JD-R is evidently the predominant empirical explanation for employee engagement, its application in the context of an organisational crisis is not as apparent.

The current study utilised phenomenology as the preferred research method due to the exploratory nature of the research problem and the subjectivity inherent in both the organisational crisis and employee engagement constructs. Thirty participants were interviewed from a variety of Australian locations, industries, and job roles, all of whom had experienced an organisational crisis in the preceding year. Whilst employee engagement has been the beneficiary of
phenomenological inquiry, the same cannot be said for organisational crises, which is why there have been recent calls for such research to be conducted so that crisis-related perceptions can be better understood.

The present research generated a number of important findings, the theoretical implications of which culminated in a crisis-specific adaptation of the JD-R. The most significant finding was in relation to leadership. Most notably, laissez-faire leadership was the most commonly cited factor for disengagement during an organisational crisis, followed by autocratic leadership. In regards to work-related factors, the crisis itself was invariably perceived as a demand, mitigated somewhat by a number of work-related resources: human agency, employee voice, social support, and job satisfaction. In relation to personal factors, the current study identified several resources that protected employees from the adverse effects of the organisational crisis. These included self-efficacy, positive affect, proactivity, focus of attention, and autotelic personality. A final finding was that of deviant behaviour: even those who felt engaged throughout the organisational crisis embarked on retaliatory actions in response to how they were treated by their leaders. As a result of these theoretical implications, ten recommendations were identified for practitioners. These included specific programs in relation to learning and development, refined recruitment practices, insights into sustainable job design, as well as crisis management strategies that prioritise communication, information, and coping mechanisms.
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Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Opening comments

Organisational crises, defined by Pearson and Clair (1998, p. 60) as events that threaten “the viability of the organization”, are increasing in frequency (Sommer et al 2015). There are a number of associated consequences that ensue, most of which are negative (Barton 2001) particularly in relation to the impact on employees (Pang et al 2013). These include anger (Frandsen and Johansen 2011), sorrow (Klann 2003), cynicism (Cole et al 2006), anxiety (Campbell-Sills et al 2014), exhaustion (Chong 2004), and stress (Christensen and Kohls 2003). These consequences culminate in a variety of implications such as job dissatisfaction and diminished organisational commitment (Harvey and Haines 2005), as well as harassment and sabotage (Crandall et al 2010). This dissertation is predicated on the premise that there may be another construct equally worthy of empirical consideration in the context of organisational crises – employee engagement – which is a combination of vigour, dedication and absorption (Schaufeli et al 2002).

Much like the study of organisational crises, employee engagement is similarly increasing in scholarly activity (Rana 2015). Employee engagement’s utility in relation to crisis environments is reflected in Kahn’s (1990) conceptualisation, which depicts employee engagement as comprising more than just emotions; it also includes the exertion of physical and cognitive effort (Kahn 1990). This implies that scholarship of both the employee engagement and the organisational crisis constructs can be furthered in two significant ways. The first is that maintaining an engaged workforce may be one way through which an organisational crisis could be managed more resiliently and effectively (Graen 2010; Richardson and West 2010). The second is that the literature on employee engagement has been criticised as having been conducted in acontextual environments (Jenkins and Delbridge 2013; Purcell 2014b). Studying the impact, therefore, of employee engagement on organisational
crises and, conversely, of organisational crises on employee engagement, may be an instructive context of interest to scholars and practitioners alike.

Embarking on such a field of inquiry necessitates the use of the job demands-resources model (JD-R), which is the most popular elucidation of employee engagement (Schaufeli 2014). The JD-R suggests that employee engagement becomes manifest when job resources exceed job demands (Demerouti et al 2001). Job resources are the factors that have a motivating effect on employees, whilst job demands generally have an energy-depleting effect. As will become evident in this dissertation, the JD-R is an instrument that can illustrate the factors that generate an engaging or disengaging influence on employees during an organisational crisis. More specifically, the literature review throughout Chapter 2 will classify these factors into three categories: leadership resources and demands, work-related resources and demands, and personal resources and demands. This will culminate in an initial crisis-specific adaptation of the JD-R (see section 2.5), which will be modified as the findings of the current study are explicated throughout Chapter 5 – the Discussion.

In the meantime, this introduction will address the pressing need for the current study. This will lead into an articulation of the problem statement, the purpose and significance of the research to follow, and the associated research questions that underpin the chosen methodology.

1.2 Need for the present research

The necessity of the present research is evidenced by the way in which it furthers scholarly knowledge in the organisational crisis and employee engagement literature, in addition to the guidance it provides practitioners, particularly organisational leaders. There are six major needs that will be discussed in this section. From a theoretical perspective, these include an extension of the JD-R to the organisational crisis environment; the exploration of employee engagement in environments characterised by turbulence; and the application of phenomenology to the organisational crisis construct. From a
practitioner perspective, these needs include risk mitigation; financial imperatives; and moral imperatives.

The first of the six needs is that, to the best of this researcher’s knowledge, the JD-R has yet to be applied in the context of an organisational crisis. Since the JD-R is the standard explanation for employee engagement (Schaufeli 2014), it could perhaps be assumed that employee engagement’s application in a crisis environment – even in the absence of the JD-R as an explanatory framework – would suffice. However, with the exception of two studies, both of which will be explicated in more detail in section 2.3.6, employee engagement has not been the beneficiary of such scholarly examination. For example, one of the two studies, by Maslach and Leiter (2008), explored a crisis that is questionable in terms of its ability to meet Pearson and Clair’s (1998) widely used definition of an organisational crisis being an event that threatens the organisation’s survival. The second study, by Van Rooy et al (2011), is not so much a study as it is a report of macroeconomic trends during a nationwide recession. The present research is instead concerned with microeconomic organisational crises. In addition, as has been alluded to earlier in this passage, neither the Maslach and Leiter (2008) nor the Van Rooy et al (2011) studies utilised the JD-R as a conceptual framework, thereby presenting a theoretical justification for extending the JD-R to the organisational crisis context.

The second of the six needs is that the employee engagement construct deserves to be explored in environments characterised by uncertainty and turbulence in order to strengthen its scholarly understanding. For instance, there is qualitative evidence to suggest the higher rates of employee engagement in Latin America can be attributed to the higher rates of unemployment on the continent (Van Rooy et al 2011). In other words, employees may be highly engaged simply because they are employed. They seemingly do not require the job resources to which other employees feel entitled in parts of the world where employment markets are more robust. It could be, then, that the existence of an organisational crisis, and the retrenchments that often ensue (Carmeli and Sheaffer 2009), may compel surviving employees to be more engaged on
account of still being employed, thereby rendering employee engagement strategies less necessary. Indeed, the reverse may also be the case. The findings of the present research may therefore serve to validate or invalidate the importance of employee engagement beyond the stable environments with which it has thus far been associated.

The third need is in relation to the current study’s phenomenological research method. Employee engagement has already been studied using such a method. For example, Carter and Baghurst (2014, p. 456) used phenomenology to understand the relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement via “the exploration of psychological concepts such as shared experiences”. Likewise, Vinje and Mittelmark (2008, p. 196) used phenomenology to “explore and gather experiential material" to understand how self-reflection can enhance employee engagement. In contrast, organisational crises do not appear to have been studied phenomenologically. Indeed, this gap in the literature is what prompted Jacobsen and Simonsen (2011) to suggest that phenomenological inquiry may be of benefit to organisational crisis scholars because the literature to date has been inordinately focused on organisation-centred and stakeholder approaches. Neither of these is said to account for the subjectivity inherent in an individual’s perception of an organisational crisis. The value of these subjective experiences and their collective substance among a group of employees explains why Gill (2014) has called for more phenomenological research among organisational scholars in order to comprehensively “describe or interpret the meanings replete within organizations” (p. 133).

The fourth need that justifies the present research is risk mitigation. When Graen (2010, p. 346) suggests organisations should “prepare for the sharks that will follow the tsunami to your doors”, he is referring to the need for organisations to prioritise employee engagement in preparation for the increasing frequency of organisational emergencies. This stems from a belief that engaged employees would be more likely to weather an organisational crisis resiliently and to proactively contribute to its recovery (Richardson and
West 2010). Since the very definition of an organisational crisis implies the organisation’s survival could be at risk (Drennan et al 2015; Lerbinger 2012), and since employee engagement is in itself considered a risk mitigation strategy (Guest 2014), the current study is thereby further justified.

The fifth need is the financial imperative. Both employee engagement and successful crisis management have been credited with a range of quantitative outcomes. In relation to employee engagement, Harter et al’s (2002) analysis concluded that organisations in the top quartile of employee engagement had profitability that was up to 4 percentage points higher than competitors in the bottom quartile. Similarly, in a study by Knight and Pretty (1997), organisations that managed organisational crises well reported share prices that were 7 per cent higher, on average, post the crisis. Their competitors, in contrast, were left with share prices that were 15 per cent lower. These financial imperatives provide a material reason why the present research, which combines both of the aforementioned constructs, may be of particular value to investment-focused practitioners.

The final need for the present research is the moral imperative. This chapter opened with a brief synopsis of the impact of organisational crises on employees. These impacts, the vast majority of which are negative (Pang et al 2013), are expanded upon in section 2.2.8. An argument can be made that leaders have a moral obligation to minimise these negative consequences on the people for whom they are ultimately responsible. Indeed, employee engagement is in itself a moral leadership obligation (Mirvis 2012), as is the successful management of organisational crises (Christensen and Kohls 2003; Seeger and Ulmer 2001). This combined moral imperative further supports the need for the current study, the outcomes of which are expected to improve the wellbeing of employees in difficult organisational contexts.

This section has articulated the theoretical justifications (i.e. the extension of the JD-R; the contextual exploration of the employee engagement construct; and the phenomenological study of organisational crises) as well as the practitioner-
related justifications (i.e. risk mitigation; financial imperatives; and moral imperatives) of the present research. In doing so, this leads to the identification of the problem statement to which this dissertation will now turn.

### 1.3 Problem statement

The problem statement for the present research is as follows: *To understand employee engagement during organisational crises.* This section will make the case as to why this problem statement is important and necessary.

There has never been a period during which the possibility of a crisis has been more heightened (OECD 2015). This can be attributed to the interconnected and interdependent influence of globalisation, which increases the complexity and uncertainty of modern-day crises. As the OECD (p. 13) advises, "leadership during a crisis is fundamental", particularly when considering the added complication of media scrutiny. Further, the incidence of organisational crises appears to not only be increasing (Sommer et al 2015) but to also be prevalent (Lachlan et al 2016). Employee engagement, too, or rather a lack of it, is similarly a current problem for organisations. It is becoming a leadership priority particularly at times like the present when hyper-competition, continuous change, and organisational challenges are prolific (Eldor and Harpaz 2016; Lee and Ok 2016).

The problems just mentioned are not just current; they are also critical. Organisational crises, for example, are a valuable context for empirical research because their existence threatens routines and relationships, the culmination of which could be informative when analysing workplace dynamics (Hurt and Abebe 2015). In a similar vein, the tendency for many crises to threaten the survival of the organisation necessitates an understanding of how leaders can build resilience among teams in the hope this will assist the organisation to emerge stronger post the crisis (Sommer et al 2015). The importance of effective crisis management was further emphasised by Appelbaum et al (2012) who depicted significant organisational crises as pivotal moments in an
organisation’s life cycle. These are moments when an organisation is left with two choices: adaptability or death. The two case studies that Appelbaum and colleagues examined were Lehman Brothers and Paulson & Company, both of which were affected by the financial crisis in 2007. Lehman Brothers, in the absence of a comprehensive crisis management strategy, was liquidated the following year. In contrast, Paulson & Company, which was well equipped with a crisis management plan, grew to become the world’s third-biggest hedge fund.

The importance of employee engagement is likewise widely recognised by scholars and practitioners (Albrecht 2010). Albrecht references the millions of search engine hits, the growing field of research, the proliferation of journal articles, and the widespread use of survey instruments as evidence of employee engagement’s significance. This significance can be attributed to employee engagement’s ability to stimulate not only individual wellbeing but also organisational performance (Truss et al 2014). This dual effect was articulated succinctly by Leiter and Bakker (2010, p. 1) who stated that employee engagement “can make a true difference for employees and may offer organizations a competitive advantage”. The difference for employees can be seen in a variety of metrics, such as a reduction in sickness absenteeism (Schaufeli et al 2009) and an enhancement of family life (Culbertson et al 2012). The difference for organisations is evident in greater rates of affective commitment (Scrima et al 2014) and profitability (Harter et al 2010).

Whilst this section has used currency and importance to justify the selection of the problem statement, it is also necessary to clarify the purpose of the present research. This underlying purpose will be addressed next.

1.4 Purpose of the present research

The purpose statement arises as a result of the problem statement (Bloomberg and Volpe 2016). According to Bloomberg and Volpe, it comprises: (i) brief information on the participants to be studied; (ii) their perceptions in relation to the problem; and (iii) an overview of the methodology to be used. This
section will address each of these requirements in turn before concluding with their amalgamation, thereby forming the purpose of the present research.

The present research comprised interviews with 30 participants, each of whom had experienced an organisational crisis in the preceding 12 months. In order to overcome the definitional inconsistency associated with the Maslach and Leiter (2008) study, it was important for each of the participants to have experienced a crisis in line with the definition by Pearson and Clair (1998, p. 60). In short, the crisis must have posed a threat to the organisation’s survival. The 30 participants were selected from a variety of industries and a number of Australian cities and towns, while the participants themselves were a mix of employees (16) and leaders (14).

The participants’ perceptions of the problem were expected to be varied since organisational crises and employee engagement are perceptual experiences. This infers that the existence of a crisis and its severity are determined in part by the stakeholders’ subjective interpretations (Coombs 2012a) while the intensity of an employee’s engagement is similarly a subjective assessment of personal energy, capacity for involvement, and self-efficacy (Leiter and Maslach 2010). Irrespective of these varied interpretations, there nonetheless appears to be some consistency in the literature. In the case of organisational crises, employees’ emotions tend to be affected negatively (Pang et al 2013). The three most common, according to Pang et al (2013), are anger, sadness and fear. This can be attributed to job insecurity (Adkins et al 2001) and unpredictability (Seeger 2006) that are often associated with organisational crises. In the context of the current study, then, it is possible that the participants’ perceptions of their organisational crisis would be unfavourable and that this would have flow-on effects on employee engagement because disengagement (or non-engagement) is likely to materialise during times of instability, insecurity, restructuring, stress and anxiety (Pech and Slade 2006). However, the subjectivity of both constructs could also mean that participants remained engaged irrespective of the organisational crisis. This would infer they experienced a “positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind” (Schaufeli et al
2002, p. 74). To account for this possibility, phenomenological research methods were adopted. Phenomenology is a descriptive methodology rather than an explanatory one (Husserl 1970). It seeks to understand the lived experience of those being studied (Moustakas 1990). By embarking on such an exploration with a group of participants who experienced a similar phenomenon, commonalities may become apparent (Creswell 2013). The present research therefore used face-to-face semi-structured interviews as the method through which these commonalities could be identified. In line with the JD-R and the literature to be reviewed in Chapter 2, it was expected that these commonalities would be leadership-related, work-related and personal-related resources and demands.

The preceding passages have expanded upon the participants, their perceptions, and the methodology pertaining to the present research. This leads to the formation of the purpose statement, which is as follows:

*The purpose of the present phenomenological research has been to explore employee engagement among 30 participants who experienced a recent organisational crisis. By better understanding the resources and demands that lead to moments of engagement or disengagement during a crisis, it is envisioned that organisations and employees will be able to emerge from the threatening phenomenon stronger than would otherwise have been possible.*

The elucidation of the purpose statement culminates in a number of research questions (Bloomberg and Volpe 2016), to which this dissertation will now turn.
1.5 Research questions

Creswell (2013) advises that qualitative research questions should be *open-ended*, which means the participants’ answers elicit more than just one-word responses; they should *evolving*, which infers they ought to lead to the generation of additional lines of inquiry; and they should be *non-directional*, which implies they ought to be without preconception in regards to the specific outcomes that will arise. The central research question of the current study is therefore as follows:

*Research Question 1: How does employee engagement relate to the context of organisational crises?*

Creswell (2013) recommends that all sub-questions be derived from the central question. As explained in the previous sections of this introduction, the present research is based on the application of the JD-R, which means the sub-questions pertain to leadership-related, work-related, and personal-related resources and demands. Whilst it may not be apparent at first as to why some of these sub-questions have been selected, the literature review throughout Chapter 2 will elaborate in substantial detail on the justification for their inclusion. The sub-questions in regards to leadership are as follows:

*Research Question 2a: How does transformational leadership relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?*

*Research Question 2b: How does transactional leadership relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?*

*Research Question 2c: How does servant leadership relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?*

*Research Question 2d: How does authentic leadership relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?*
Research Question 2e: How does laissez-faire leadership relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?

Research Question 2f: How does autocratic leadership relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?

The sub-questions in relation to work-related factors are as follows:

Research Question 3a: How does human agency relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?

Research Question 3b: How does employee voice relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?

Research Question 3c: How does social support relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?

Research Question 3d: How does job satisfaction relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?

Research Question 3e: How does challenging work relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?

The sub-questions in relation to personal-related factors are as follows:

Research Question 4a: How does hope relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?

Research Question 4b: How does resilience relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?
Research Question 4c: How does self-efficacy relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?

Research Question 4d: How does positive affect relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?

Research Question 4e: How does proactivity relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?

Research Question 4f: How does focus of attention relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?

Research Question 4g: How does conscientiousness relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?

Research Question 4h: How does autotelic personality relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?

It has not been the intention of the present research to answer each of the aforementioned questions, nor has it been the intention to necessarily explore them in the interviews. As will be explicated in Chapter 3, the participants were asked only a few broad questions. That is because research questions provide the framework that facilitates a more robust understanding of the phenomenon while the subsequent interview questions generate the data that may help to answer those research questions (Bloomberg and Volpe 2016). Such an approach ensures the participants are free to volunteer the information of most importance to them. This is in line with best practice for phenomenological research, which instructs researchers to adopt an open mind as opposed to leading participants towards a positivistic line of inquiry (Almeida 2012).

As is the norm in phenomenology, the present research has generated rich descriptions of what the participants experienced from an engagement perspective throughout their organisational crisis. These will be detailed in
Chapter 4. While these findings are certainly not reflective of causal relationships, they nonetheless strengthen scholarly and practitioner understanding of the phenomenon. Therein lies the significance of the present research, which this dissertation will address next.

1.6 Significance of the present research

The significance of a phenomenological dissertation is determined by the extent to which it influences theory, practice, policy and curriculum (Almeida 2012). This section will therefore demonstrate how the current study can be deemed significant by explaining its impact on each of the four aforementioned areas.

The preceding sections of this introduction have emphasised that the primary theoretical implication of the present research has been the development of a crisis-specific adaptation of the JD-R. The question that then arises is as follows: What is the significance of this conceptual adaptation? An answer to that question can be gleaned from exploring the impact of prior adaptations of the JD-R. There are two in particular that stand out. The first, and perhaps the most prominent, is the one by Xanthopoulou et al (2007) who expanded the model to include personal resources. The model was previously restricted only to resources of a work-related nature. Since Xanthopoulou et al’s adaptation, personal resources have been a focus of widely cited empirical research. These personal resources have included optimism and emotional competence (Garrosa et al 2011), as well as competitiveness and self-efficacy (Karatepe and Olugbade 2009). The second adaptation is the one by Crawford et al (2010), who modified the JD-R to account for the distinction between challenge demands and hindrance demands, with the former leading to engagement and the latter to burnout. Crawford et al’s adaptation has since been adopted for important scholarly work in relation to the influence of empowering leadership on challenge demands (Tuckey et al 2012) and the use of job crafting to diminish hindrance demands (Tims et al 2012).
It is not expected that the crisis-specific adaptation of the JD-R arising from the present research will have an influence as widespread as those by Xanthopoulou et al (2007) and Crawford et al (2010). Indeed, one reason for this modest expectation is that the current study is phenomenological. This means that even though the language, particularly in chapters 4 and 5, may sound explanatory, that is only because the participants themselves selected explanations as the primary recourse of describing why their engagement fluctuated during the crisis. Nonetheless, it is still expected that this crisis-specific adaptation will be received as a model worth exploring further, especially quantitatively, by crisis and engagement scholars alike. Crisis scholars may value the adapted model’s ability to understand the employee-related impacts of organisational crises on more than just the way in which employees are impacted emotionally, while engagement scholars may value the model’s ability to illustrate the resources and demands that pertain to a unique context, particularly one as severe as an organisational crisis. In any case, the conceptual development of this adapted JD-R is promising for the way in which it could refine or expand research in the future.

Preceding sections of this introduction have also articulated some of the practitioner-related benefits arising from the present research. These will be expanded upon in Chapter 5 when the practical recommendations are detailed. In sum, these include crisis prevention mechanisms; the provision of learning activities; targeted recruitment practices; strategic job design; and robust internal communication systems. However, much like the previous passage on theoretical implications, a similar question emerges: What is the significance of these practice-related benefits? To answer that question, it is important to make clear that each of the practitioner recommendations in this dissertation is directed towards leaders. That is because leaders are at the core of effective crisis management (Carmeli and Schaubroeck 2008). As Carmeli and Schaubroeck found, leaders are responsible for managing risk, preparing for crises, and leading through the recovery. The problem, though, is that most leaders struggle with these responsibilities because they have yet to develop essential competencies such as signal detection and effective communication
(Wooten and James 2008). Further, their preferred style of leadership, such as laissez-faire leadership (Seeger et al. 2003) and autocratic leadership (Probst and Raisch 2005), may be incongruent with what the crisis recovery requires. The significance of the present research, then, is that struggling leaders will be better equipped to successfully lead through what is already a turbulent and sensitive period for stakeholders.

The third consideration in relation to the current study’s significance is in regards to policy. Governments are increasingly recognising the importance of employee engagement (Bridger 2015). As Bridger notes, this interest ranges from the implementation of employee engagement programs within government departments to the promotion of programs designed to increase awareness of employee engagement among organisations in the private sector. The predominant example is the ‘Engage for Success’ report in the United Kingdom (MacLeod and Clarke 2009), which was commissioned by the British government and has since been endorsed and financially supported by both Labour and the Coalition. There are now websites, social networks, statistics and tools designed to support British businesses to adopt the strategies that would lead to a more engaged workforce (http://engageforsuccess.org). In relation to policy-making, however, it is difficult to imagine governments embracing the need for legislated employee engagement. Even though it is unrealistic, therefore, for the present research to have an influence on policy, it is fair to assume that governments will view these findings with interest. That is because employee engagement is becoming a major source of concern for leaders in the public sector (Bakker 2015), as is crisis management (Stark 2014). The combination of both constructs, then, which is the purview of the present research, is likely to be of pertinence to leaders in the public service.

The final area of significance is in relation to curriculum. When reviewing three prominent textbooks on crisis management (see Crandall et al. 2014; Jaques 2014; Lerbinger 2012), none contains references to employee engagement. Crandall et al. (2014) refer to employee needs, employee communication and employee errors. Jaques (2014) refers to employee misconduct, employee
relations disputes, and employees as important stakeholders. Lerbinger (2012) refers to employee grievance procedures, employee security, and employee layoffs. While all three writers significantly overlap in respect to their content on the impact of organisational crises on employees, the significance of the present research is such that these texts and their accompanying curricula can be expanded by including employee engagement (and disengagement) as key learning outcomes.

When taking into account the scholarly potential of the JD-R’s crisis-specific adaptation, as well as the influence of better-informed leaders, an enhanced curriculum and an increasingly supportive public sector, the significance of the present research becomes apparent. With that significance established, this dissertation will now proceed to some concluding comments that will summarise and connect the sections that have constituted this introduction.

1.7 Concluding comments

This introduction has attempted to fulfil what Butin (2010) suggests is the overriding purpose of a dissertation’s first chapter: to outline the ‘big picture’ and to articulate how the present research fits into it. That big picture began with stating the need for the present research. Multiple needs have thus been identified such as the expansion of the JD-R, as well as the application of employee engagement and phenomenological research methods into the organisational crisis context. Financial and moral implications for practitioners have also been emphasised. This has led to the delineation of a problem statement, which was to understand employee engagement during organisational crises, which then led to the articulation of the current study’s purpose. That purpose was encapsulated by a statement that included the use of phenomenology among 30 participants with the objective of discovering the resources and demands most likely to play a role in the context of employee engagement during organisational crises. There were a number of research questions that arose from this purpose statement, all of which were situated within three categories: leader-related, work-related, and personal-related.
factors. The resolution of the problem and the successful fulfilment of the purpose were argued as being of significance for scholars and practitioners alike.

The remainder of this dissertation will be structured as follows. The literature review, to be addressed in the next chapter, will detail the work to date on organisational crises and employee engagement. Whilst the literature review will begin with a comprehensive overview of both constructs, the majority of the chapter will concentrate on the JD-R and the ways in which it can be used to fill the associated gaps in the literature. This dissertation will then proceed to the third chapter, which will make the case for why phenomenology was the most appropriate methodology for the present research. Chapter 4 of this dissertation will articulate the findings that subsequently arose. It will be revealed, for example, that the most disengaging demands during an organisational crisis are those of a leadership nature, particularly laissez-faire leadership and autocratic leadership. In contrast, the most engaging resources will be revealed as those of a work-related nature, such as human agency and employee voice. This dissertation will then proceed to the fifth chapter – the Discussion – which will revisit the research questions and the ways in which the associated findings make a theoretical and practical contribution to the literature. As has been alluded to throughout this introduction, the most significant contribution will be the development of a crisis-specific adaptation of the JD-R as well as ten subsequent recommendations for practitioners. This dissertation will then conclude with the final chapter, which will list the limitations, suggestions for future research, and a number of personal reflections that encapsulate the experience of this researcher throughout this doctoral qualification.
Chapter 2. Literature review

2.1 Introduction

This literature review serves to combine and contrast the scholarly work conducted to date on organisational crises and employee engagement. Both constructs have attracted increased academic and practitioner attention. For example, empirical research on organisational crises is rare even though their occurrence has increased in frequency in recent times (Sommer et al 2015). Similarly, interest in employee engagement has grown among academics from a number of different disciplines (Rana 2015). Likewise, it is not only industry professionals who have been prioritising employee engagement but also national governments (Bridger 2015). To this researcher’s knowledge, barring two studies to be discussed further in section 2.3.6, the study of organisational crises seems to have been explored from perspectives other than employee engagement. The purpose of this review is to demonstrate this gap in the literature and to make the case that such research is warranted and timely.

This literature review will begin with a detailed explanation of organisational crises, including the varieties of crisis, the associated consequences, causes and the ways in which employees are affected by their occurrence. This review will then progress to a comprehensive summary of employee engagement. It is in this part, particularly from section 2.3.3 onwards, where the gaps in the literature will become most apparent, especially in relation to leadership. The argument will be made that whilst understanding the impact of organisational crises on employee emotions, for instance, is important, it is perhaps also valuable to understand the role of employee engagement during this process and the way in which various leadership styles enable (or disable) it. These relationships will be demonstrated via the job demands-resources model.
2.2 Organisational crises

An organisational crisis has been defined as a “low-probability, high impact event that threatens the viability of the organization” (Pearson and Clair 1998, p. 60). The infrequency of an organisational crisis is counterbalanced by the significant consequences that eventually materialise (Weick 1988). These consequences, to be discussed in greater depth in section 2.2.2, are often negative and overwhelming (Barton 2001). The fact that organisational crises rarely occur means their manifestation is a surprise for leaders and employees (Seeger et al 2003) who suddenly find their organisation’s narrative disrupted (Tyler 2005). That narrative, as Tyler notes, is disrupted because a crisis often reveals to the public what the organisation has been attempting to contain, and what the public ends up hearing frequently contradicts the organisation’s official message.

It is important to note that the aforementioned references to rarity may be somewhat redundant now for there is evidence to suggest that organisational crises have been increasing in frequency, and will continue to do so due to the fast-paced and complex world in which organisations operate (Sommer et al 2015). Indeed, estimates indicate that approximately 50 per cent of organisations have endured a crisis in recent years (Barton 2008). There are a number of crises that can affect an organisation, the wide variety of which will be discussed next.

2.2.1 Types of organisational crisis

In order for leaders to be well prepared for an organisational crisis, they must first comprehend the types of crises that are likely to affect their organisation and whether or not they will be able to cope with the consequent damage (Carmeli and Schaubroeck 2008). The challenge, however, is that the list of potential crises is limitless, which poses a problem for leaders who cannot reasonably be expected to prepare for all of them (Coombs 2015). According to Pearson and Clair (1998), these include extortion, hostile takeovers, product
tampering, environmental spills, security breaches, executive kidnapping, product boycotts, work-related homicides, natural disasters, bribery, terrorist attacks, plant explosions, and product recalls. Complicating matters further is that organisational crises rarely occur in isolation, with a number of different crises often occurring at the same time (Pearson and Mitroff 1993).

Among the aforementioned list of crises, Pearson and Clair (1998) neglected to mention those of an economic or financial nature, which Probst and Raisch (2005) identified as the most common within organisations and the most closely linked to issues of leadership, culture and change. These types of crises belong in the ‘accidents’ and ‘transgressions’ categories of the Coombs and Holladay (1998) matrix (see Figure 2.1) because they have arisen due to decisions made by individuals within the organisation. ‘Accidents’ refers to the decisions that had unintended negative consequences whereas ‘transgressions’ refers to those where a purposeful act was committed in contravention of best practice.

Figure 2.1: Crisis category matrix adapted from Coombs and Holladay (1998)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UNINTENTIONAL</th>
<th>INTENTIONAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EXTERNAL</td>
<td>Faux pas</td>
<td>Terrorism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTERNAL</td>
<td>Accidents</td>
<td>Transgressions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Irrespective of the type of crisis, there are a number of consequences associated with an organisational crisis, which this literature review will now address.
2.2.2 Consequences of an organisational crisis

This literature review has thus far alluded to the negative nature of organisational crises. More specifically, these consequences include the damage inflicted on an organisation’s brand, operations, personnel, and profitability (Seeger et al 1998), with impacts ranging from insignificant to catastrophic (Herman et al 2004). On the insignificant end of the spectrum, as per Figure 2.2, the impact is negligible and the crisis is easily controlled. On the catastrophic extreme, the organisation’s survival is at risk and a number of stakeholders – such as customers and employees – could encounter significant problems. The cumulative effect of these consequences is accentuated by the media attention that follows, which is often aggressive (Seeger et al 2003).

Figure 2.2: Crisis magnitude spectrum adapted from Herman et al (2004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Insignificant</th>
<th>Minor</th>
<th>Moderate</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Catastrophic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Consequences have a negligible impact.</td>
<td>• Consequences threaten efficiencies and effectiveness.</td>
<td>• Consequences may result in structural changes.</td>
<td>• Consequences threaten the operation of a service or product.</td>
<td>• Consequences may threaten the organisation’s existence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Risks can be contained by current processes.</td>
<td>• Organisation is not at risk.</td>
<td>• Revenues may be impacted.</td>
<td>• Senior leaders’ attention is required.</td>
<td>• Significant impact on stakeholders and loss of revenue.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Several case studies demonstrate the impact that crises have on the organisations that are inflicted by them. One of these is Volkswagen, which has admitted to installing software in its vehicles that illegally concealed the true extent of carbon emissions. There is evidence to suggest this occurred due to the autocratic nature of the organisation’s leadership (McGrath-Goodman 2015). The consequences have included regulatory investigations, a substantial decline in the stock price, senior executive resignations, and billions of dollars in additional costs and reparations. Another example is Qantas, which in response to an industrial relations dispute, grounded all flights in 2011. The impact to the organisation included political conflict, a reduction in revenue of $194 million, and a significant loss of public goodwill (O’Neill 2012). A third example
is Patties Foods, which recalled its market-leading Nanna’s frozen berries products after they were linked to an outbreak of Hepatitis A. The organisation’s income subsequently dropped by 11 per cent and planning has since commenced to exit the frozen berries market (Jasper 2015).

The aforementioned consequences are predominately business related. There are numerous employee-related consequences too, most notably in relation to emotions and wellbeing. It is these employee-related impacts that essentially form the purpose of this thesis and will therefore be articulated in more detail in section 2.2.8. In the meantime, it is important to note that occasionally there can be positive outcomes that arise from an organisational crisis and it is to these benefits that this literature review will now turn.

2.2.3 Benefits of an organisational crisis

An organisational crisis is not always bad. It can indeed be a pivotal moment in an organisation’s history that enables it to act on problems that previously had not been noticed by its leaders (Carmeli and Schaubroeck 2008). These problems can include “hazards such as inertia, escalation, myopia and overlooked early warning signals” (p. 188). Even though organisational crises are often unpredictable, the shock that accompanies the next crisis can be softened somewhat when organisations have embarked on deep learning following prior crises. As Carmeli and Schaubroeck found in their study, this strengthens the organisation’s coping mechanisms such that a major crisis becomes “an opportunity to redesign and restructure a faulty system and turn it into a better one” (p. 192).

That newfound sense of focus and direction helps the organisation to overcome apathy and to embark on the type of change needed to be a sustainable enterprise (Romanelli and Tushman 1994). Romanelli and Tushman discovered this was especially the case when crises had been triggered by environmental changes, such as rapid advancements in technology for which the organisation was unprepared. These crisis-induced changes are often transformational,
owing to the shock that accompanies them (Shrivastava 1993). Shrivastava explains that organisations would once attempt to return the organisation back to its pre-crisis condition whereas the priority now is how to fortify it for the future. It is therefore not only the focus of the organisation that shifts but also its associated systems and practices, thereby resulting in fresh strategies, new personnel, and a stronger organisation that has learned from the mistakes of the past (Meyers and Holusha 1986). These positive results were evident in the case of an Australian public sector agency forced to undergo significant change arising from high-impact legislative reform. Almost ten years later, the cultural benefits derived from the organisation’s response to the crisis were still in place (Molineux 2013). Similar results were generated in the tourism sector after a series of major crises, such as the demise of Ansett Airlines (a major Australian airline that suffered a financial collapse) and the attacks on the World Trade Centre. One of the organisational benefits that arose from those crises was the subsequent learning that prompted leaders to review their business operations, to better understand their organisations, and to implement more-efficient methods of working (Anderson 2006).

It is for these reasons that scholars such as Hurst (2002) suggest there may be merit in the deliberate initiation of an organisational crisis so that leaders themselves are instigating renewal and innovation. He makes the case that the ubiquitous perception that crises are dysfunctional is an unhelpful belief that can prevent organisations from generating associated benefits. He warns, however, that the manufactured crisis must be real, urgent, believable and unambiguous lest the leader be regarded on par with the ‘Boy Who Cried Wolf’. Whilst Hurst’s approach may be viewed as unethical, it is important to note that he describes the practice as ‘ethical anarchy’, which infers that leaders must act with integrity throughout the initiated crisis. This means they ought to avoid standing “outside the situation that they have created but to join with it, sharing the fate of their people. Managers must create crises, and then they must become part of the situation” (p. 144). This necessitates a series of actions such as envisioning a brighter future, promoting openness, building trust, engaging in dialogue, eliminating unnecessary work, and empowering employees.
It is indeed a strategy used by several prominent organisations. One of these is Hyundai, which constructed a series of crises, such as urgent and overly ambitious goals, in order to stimulate an internal concentration on performance (Kim 1998). The result has been an intensification of organisational learning and information sharing. More recently, the streaming video service, Netflix, has been analysed using the scholarly lens of ‘ethical anarchy’. In 2011, the CEO made a number of unexpected decisions (such as a name change, price change and the splitting of the business) such that the stock price fell by 75%, which equated to approximately $12 billion in shareholder value (Ryan 2013). The CEO immediately apologised, took responsibility, and volunteered a significant cut in salary. His overall strategy, however, did not change, and remained the world’s dominant provider of streaming content.

Irrespective of the positive or negative outcomes of an organisational crisis, the literature has identified a number of common causes, the variety of which will be discussed next.

2.2.4 Causes of an organisational crisis

The complex nature of organisational crises means the true cause of each one is frequently unable to be determined (Seeger et al 2003). This confusion can stem from the problem of conflating causes with symptoms, which Mellahi and Wilkinson (2004) delineate in the context of organisational failure by stating that symptoms can include limited financial resources, poor profits and declining market share. None of those, however, are causes, which can include the leaders themselves in terms of the decisions they make or, conversely, environmental factors over which they have little control.

In the case of organisational crises, it appears that most originate from a failure in leadership (Nystrom and Starbuck 1984). This explains why, according to Nystrom and Starbuck, many senior leaders are retrenched at the onset of an organisational crisis – an acknowledgement that the practices preceding the
crisis were inappropriate for its recovery. Generally, leadership-related causes are driven by one of three types of vulnerabilities: psychological, organisational and political (Watkins and Bazerman 2003). Psychological vulnerabilities comprise cognitive biases that either neglect or misjudge potential risk factors. Organisational vulnerabilities are those that arise from structural issues, such as the existence of silos, the limited sharing of information, and a lack of accountability. Political vulnerabilities are related to poor decision-making such as that which occurs when there are power imbalances and hidden agendas. All three stem from inadequate leadership, culminating in what Watkins and Bazerman (2003) refer to as ‘predictable surprises’. In other words, they are surprises only insofar that sufficient foresight and preparation could have prevented them.

From a more tactical perspective, additional causes of an organisational crisis include unethical behaviour, poor communication, and a minimal understanding of risk management (Ulmer et al 2015). These and other causes are characterised by their stability, such as whether they were constant or variable over time; their locus, which refers to whether they were precipitated by internal or external factors; and their controllability, which reflects whether the events were beyond the organisation’s influence (Weiner 1995).

The challenge for many leaders is that the ambiguity associated with identifying the real cause often results in a delay in implementing the most appropriate crisis management plan (Coombs 2015). However, as will be seen in the next section, there are several methods through which an organisational crisis can be controlled irrespective of its cause.

2.2.5 Controlling an organisational crisis

Controlling an organisational crisis necessitates an understanding of the lifecycle through which crises progress. Fink’s (1986) conceptualisation comprised four stages. He stressed that whilst the four stages may appear in order in many crisis environments, as per Figure 2.3, it is a sequence that may
not actually eventuate linearly. In some cases, one or more of the stages might not become manifest at all. The first is referred to as ‘prodromal’, which reflects the symptoms that indicate a crisis is imminent, which is why Hensgen et al (2003) recommend vigilant leadership so that leaders notice warning signals to which they can respond with adequate resources. Fostering psychological safety so that employees feel comfortable expressing their concerns is another way through which these symptoms can be detected (Simola 2005), as can thorough audits (Pearson and Mitroff 1993). The second stage is known as ‘acute’, which represents an organisational crisis in action. It is during this period that leaders should disperse relevant and timely information to stakeholders (Ulmer and Sellnow 2000). Additional communication in the form of reliable instructions, confidence-building language and sense-making activities can temper the otherwise adverse reactions to which employees might resort (Frandsen and Johansen 2011). The third stage, ‘chronic’, refers to the enduring effects of an organisational crisis that can delay the recovery. These could include criminal charges, litigation, and unfavourable media attention. While the length of this period may be difficult to shorten, it could be an opportune time for surviving leaders to pause and reflect on the causes of the organisational crisis (Carmeli and Schaubroeck 2008). The fourth and final stage, referred to as ‘resolution’, appears when the organisational crisis has concluded.

Figure 2.3: Lifecycle of a crisis adapted from Fink (1986) and Mitroff (1994)

![Lifecycle of a crisis](image)

Several years after Fink’s (1986) four-stage lifecycle, Mitroff (1994) created a similar model that some scholars, such as Coombs (2012a), attest is more comprehensive. This is because it instructs leaders to embark on a fifth stage post the crisis whereby they engage in active learning and reflection, during which they assess what transpired throughout the lifecycle. The dissemination of knowledge and the commencement of organisational renewal can occur at
this juncture (Frandsen and Johansen 2011). That approach, however, may be somewhat too late. As a pre-emptive alternative, Antonacopoulou and Sheaffer (2014) coined the term ‘learning in crisis’ to describe the dynamic learning practices that should occur throughout the entire crisis period rather than strictly at the end. It requires “experimentation, improvisation, imagination, and pragmatism” (p. 13), driven in part by the organisation’s leaders, many of whom are plagued by ‘nightmares’ (Mitroff et al 1988) and may therefore miss these opportunities for rigorous crisis management. As will be demonstrated in the next section, failure to manage a crisis well exacerbates its effects.

2.2.6 Arguments for crisis management

While some scholars, most notably Boin and McConnell (2007), argue that crisis management has its limitations and that building organisational resilience is more vital, there nonetheless seems to be an abundance of empirical work extolling the virtues of crisis management. One of those is the quantitative imperative articulated by Knight and Pretty (1997), whose research found that leaders who managed their organisational crisis well were able to report share prices that were on average 7 per cent higher than their pre-crisis levels. In contrast, those who did not manage the crisis well reported share prices that were on average 15 per cent lower.

Quantitative measures aside, the need to engage in crisis management is essential for the purposes of lessening risk in a world where the frequency and severity of organisational crises has gained momentum (Lerbinge 2012). As Lerbinge notes, leaders have an inherent responsibility to protect their organisation from harm, and part of this harm minimisation necessitates the adoption of crisis management techniques. The alternative is ‘crash management’, which is a reactive mode of leadership that attempts to solve the crisis after a catastrophe has already occurred (Pauchant and Mitroff 1992). In contrast, crisis management incorporates planning, foresight and proactivity. The benefits of crisis management also extend beyond the organisation. All stakeholders are potential beneficiaries, which leads to the conclusion that
society in general can ultimately benefit from the practice (Coombs 2012b). These stakeholders, of course, can also be negatively impacted, if not by the (mis)management of the crisis, then certainly by the crisis itself. This literature review will now explore these stakeholder impacts in more depth.

2.2.7 Stakeholders in an organisational crisis

Stakeholders in an organisational crisis can include employees, leaders, suppliers, consumers, regulators, competitors, unions, shareholders, special interest groups, and the media (Pearson and Mitroff 1993). In essence, any individual in a relationship of some sort with an organisation has a stake in its operations and outcomes (Seeger et al 2003). Coombs (2012a) takes this a step further by suggesting that organisational crises are perceptual. By this he means that if a stakeholder assumes an organisation is in crisis, that organisation is, by default, in crisis – irrespective of whether the crisis is real or imagined. Coombs’s identification of crises as either real or imagined reflects the phenomenological construct of intentionality. Intentionality is “the inseparable connectedness of the human being to the world” (Van Manen 1990, p. 181), which means an individual’s “perceptions, thoughts, beliefs, hopes [and] fears” (McIntyre and Smith 1989, p. 147) influence their lived experience. In the context of the present research, intentionality is represented in an employee’s awareness of the crisis despite the possibility that the extent of the crisis may be a construct of the individual’s own mind. This ‘inseparable connectedness’ leads to the generation of meanings (Moustakas 1994), which have the ability to make the crisis better or worse, and for the affected stakeholders to become enemies or allies, villains or victims, protectors or rescuers.

It follows, then, that stakeholders are affected in different ways. For example, in a study of a fast-food restaurant, an outbreak of the E. coli bacteria saw suppliers and regulators unfairly exposed to greater scrutiny and pressure as a result of injudicious accusations (Ulmer and Sellnow 2000). In other cases, stakeholder consequences may include investors withdrawing their funds or clients cancelling their purchases. These actions could then spread to other
competitor organisations that have similar characteristics even when those organisations have not experienced such a crisis and are not culpable in any way (Yu et al 2008). It is a form of contagion that inadvertently ensnares additional victims, many of whom are innocent.

It is therefore important for leaders to identify and meet the needs and expectations of their stakeholders (Carmeli and Schaubroeck 2008) and to communicate and maintain robust relationships with them (Pollard and Hocho 2006). That is because stakeholders often do not become visible enough to leaders until after the organisational crisis is in motion (Ulmer and Sellnow 2000), but by then the damage has already been inflicted and has usually worsened. To reuse the Pauchant and Mitroff (1992) term cited earlier, the leader’s primary recourse in these situations is crash management rather than crisis management, which as demonstrated thus far, is not ideal.

Of the aforementioned stakeholders, there is one that will be the focus for the remainder of this literature review: the employee. As will become evident in the next section, the impact is usually negative.

2.2.8 Employee-leader relations during an organisational crisis

It is possible for employees to remain positive during an organisational crisis dependent on the degree to which they are treated well by their leaders (Cole et al 2006), even when pay freezes and retrenchments are widespread (Ulmer 2001). Langer and Thorup (2006), for example, identify storytelling as a means through which positive moods can be maintained. Similarly, if the organisational crisis is managed promptly, honestly and considerately, employees are more likely to be conscientious and confident (Spillan 2003). Likewise, resilience and adaptive behaviour can be enhanced when leaders engage in thorough information seeking (Somers 2009) or, conversely, when they are replaced with more-competent leadership in the event they are deemed responsible for the crisis (Nystrom and Starbuck 1984). These positive effects, however, are the exception. The organisational crisis literature is
replete with references to the negative impacts of this phenomenon. The rest of this section will summarise these effects, particularly in terms of how they relate to employee emotions.

During an organisational crisis, employee emotions are usually more intense and negative (Maitlis and Sonenshein 2010; Pang et al 2013). One of the most common emotions that arise in a crisis is anger (Rousseau 1989; Frandsen and Johansen 2011); another is sorrow (Klann 2003). These reactions can be explained by the construct of hope, which is important for wellbeing (Avey et al 2008) but is often lacking during times of crisis (St George 1998). As St George notes, this can be attributed to the perception that the organisational crisis is insurmountable, thereby making employees question their ability to cope. This hopelessness leads to emotional incapacity, as well as a loss of morale and a deterioration in teamwork (Klann 2003). Other consequences include disillusionment, a loss of shared meaning, and the disintegration of common values and beliefs (Pearson and Clair 1998).

Another emotion evident in crises is cynicism (Andersson 1996; Harlos and Pinder 2000). In research conducted by Cole et al (2006) and Harvey and Haines (2005), cynicism was found to materialise at times of crisis due to a breach in the psychological contract. A psychological contract reflects the implicit and reciprocal expectations between an employee and an employer (Robinson 1996). It is frequently violated when job insecurity is present (Adkins et al 2001), thereby generating greater amounts of cynicism, especially when retrenchments are enforced (Bateman et al 1992). This has consequent negative impacts on job satisfaction (Harvey and Haines 2005), which is a construct grounded in the study of emotions (Locke 1969; Fisher 2000), and likewise on organisational commitment (Harvey and Haines 2005), which has similar affective properties (Meyer and Allen 1991).

Anxiety, too, can be considered an emotion (Spielberger 1972; Campbell-Sills et al 2014) commonly endured by employees during times of crisis (Seeger et al 2003). Its cause can be explained by the chaos that ordinarily characterises the
uncertain environments of crises (Hensgen et al 2003). When anxiety during an organisational crisis is prolonged, it can result in withdrawal behaviour (Hermann 1963), such as absenteeism and a drop in productivity. Hermann adds that other crisis-related consequences can include errors, conflict, ostracism, factionalism, blame shifting, project delays and power plays. These are all manifestations of workplace deviance (Robinson and Bennett 1995), which is an intentional act precipitated by the onset of negative emotions, particularly hostility (Lee and Allen 2002), which in itself frequently appears during an organisational crisis (Kersten 2005). Other crisis-related deviant behaviours include harassment, gossip, theft and sabotage (Crandall et al 2010).

Added to the list of crisis-related effects can be emotional exhaustion (Chong 2004) and stress (Christensen and Kohls 2003). The latter, which is linked to emotion (Lazarus 1999) and is regarded as an emotion-related social construct (Fineman 1995), arises from the uncertainty that exists during organisational crises (Seeger et al 2003). These levels of stress can subsequently make it more difficult for leaders to respond appropriately to the crisis (Milburn et al 1983) and can culminate in counterproductive work behaviour (Fox et al 2001; Penney and Spector 2005). That is why scholars suggest leaders have a moral imperative to prioritise and protect their employees’ emotions, especially during an organisational crisis (Pang et al 2013).

Of course, these affective states, such as anger and sadness (Madera and Smith 2009), are also felt by leaders (Tiedens et al 2000), which can consequently result in nightmares (Mitroff et al 1988). The greater risk, however, is that these emotions could result in affect transference (Madera and Smith 2009), which means they become contagious throughout the organisation, thereby worsening the effects of the crisis.

These emotional repercussions can culminate in a number of other consequences, too, even though they may differ depending on the emotion in question (Lazarus and Cohen-Charash 2001). For example, anger can lead to a greater incidence of illness, a weakened immune system, and a higher risk of
mortality (Suinn 2001), while cynicism can lead to numbness, dehumanisation, alienation and burnout (Abraham 2000).

In contrast, negative emotions can also attract positive outcomes. For instance, a group of employees in a negative affective state can be more cohesive as they collectively confront an imminent threat (Spoor and Kelly 2004). That occurs because the contagion that ensues can serve as a warning signal, thereby alerting other colleagues to the danger. This shared emotion can prompt employees to work synchronously and to communicate articulately. Indeed, Spoor and Kelly credit the rise of the trade union movement to the shared negative affect that in prior decades brought employees together. Further emphasising this relationship are van Knippenberg et al (2010), who found work teams in a negative mood made better decisions than those in a positive mood. This can be explained by the tendency for positive moods to “signal that everything is fine, thus lowering vigilance and action-readiness, whereas negative moods signal that the individual is in a potentially problematic situation that requires attention and potentially action” (pp. 732-333).

In any case, when considering the impact of organisational crises on employees, this section has demonstrated that the literature focuses predominantly on how they are affected emotionally and that leaders can play a role in the development of these emotions. Whilst this scholarly work has been important, the next section of this literature review will suggest that employee engagement may be a more valuable construct and a logical next step in the still-evolving understanding of this phenomenon.

2.3 Employee engagement

To understand the robustness of employee engagement, particularly in relation to emotions, it is important to revert to William Kahn who in 1990 introduced the construct into the management lexicon. In his seminal study, he conceptualised employee engagement in the following way: “in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally
during role performances” (p. 694). This implies that employee engagement is more than just emotions. It also relates to the exertion of physical and cognitive effort, which when combined with the emotional component, compels employees to invest more energy into their work. In contrast, disengagement arises when employees “become physically uninvolved in tasks, cognitively unvigilant, and emotionally disconnected from others” (p. 702). With that as a starting point, this literature review will proceed with a more detailed explication of employee engagement, namely its definition, antecedents, consequences, uniqueness, and its limited scholarly attention thus far in relation to organisational crises.

2.3.1 Defining employee engagement

Whilst numerous scholars have commented that a widely accepted definition of employee engagement is either elusive or disputed (Saks and Gruman 2014), the one by Schaufeli et al (2002) has been cited more than any other (Albrecht, 2010; Breevart et al 2012). Schaufeli and colleagues theorised employee engagement as a combination of vigour, dedication and absorption. More specifically (pp. 74-75), vigour is “characterized by high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in one’s work, and persistence even in the face of difficulties”. Dedication is “characterized by a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge”. Absorption is “characterized by being fully concentrated and deeply engrossed in one’s work, whereby time passes quickly and one has difficulties with detaching oneself from work”. That is also the definition on which the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale is based, which is the most commonly used method of measuring employee engagement in academia (Fletcher and Robinson 2014; Schaufeli 2014). Among practitioners, consultancy-based instruments are preferred, such as the Gallup Q12 (Guest 2014), even though it is not considered an accurate assessment of employee engagement because it neglects the physical exertion of effort (Welch 2011). According to Welch, the instrument developed by Hewitt Associates is a more holistic representation. The problem, however, is that every consultancy uses its own distinct items (Sparrow and
Balain 2010), which calls into question whether they can all legitimately claim
to be accurate measures of employee engagement.

There is a level of inconsistency in the literature in relation to how employee
engagement is referenced. Some scholars, such as Schaufeli et al (2006), refer
to it as ‘work engagement’. Others, such as Rich et al (2010), refer to it as ‘job
popular references include ‘staff engagement’ (e.g. Kalisch et al 2007) and ‘team
engagement’ (e.g. Waldman et al 2013). These terms do not attract distinct
interpretations. They each refer to the same construct. This thesis has opted
for the term ‘employee engagement’ in line with Harter et al (2002) and Macey
and Schneider (2008) because, according to Google Scholar, it seems to be the
most commonly used expression among the academic community.

The inconsistencies identified in the preceding paragraphs indicate that
employee engagement is still an evolving construct and a relatively new area of
research. For example, of all the peer-reviewed articles written on employee
engagement over the past two decades, in excess of 80 per cent have been
published since 2006 (Crawford et al 2014). A further example of the evolving
nature of employee engagement is that it was once perceived as a relatively
stable psychological state (Macey and Schneider 2008). What is now becoming
apparent is that it is rarely stable. Rather, it fluctuates from day to day, hour to
hour, and sometimes even more frequently (Sonnentag 2003; Bakker 2014).
This fluctuation does not detract from the opportunity to measure employee
engagement aggregately (Albrecht 2010) so that scholars and practitioners can
determine the overall or predominant level of employee engagement among a
group of individuals over an extended period of time.

There have been two further significant developments in the short history of the
employee engagement construct that demonstrate the way in which it has
changed over time. One of these is in relation to burnout, which was once
considered to be engagement’s opposite (Maslach and Leiter 2008) such that
the two belonged on either end of a continuum. This meant an employee low in
engagement was burnt out and supposedly vice versa. Whilst this bipolarity is still under debate, there are now more common suggestions that the two are separate constructs that happen to operate interdependently and sometimes even concurrently such that an employee can potentially be both highly engaged and burnt out (Leon et al. 2015). The second evolutionary development is the inclusion of personal resources in the JD-R. Where once only work-related resources were considered relevant, the work by Xanthopoulou et al. (2007) resulted in a shift in understanding employee engagement because it became apparent that even non-work related factors could influence the level of an individual’s engagement at work.

To further define employee engagement, it is important to differentiate it from other better-known constructs. It is to this comparison that this literature review will now turn.

2.3.2 The uniqueness of employee engagement

Some scholars have suggested that employee engagement is indistinguishable from other constructs (e.g. Griffin et al. 2008; Harter and Schmidt 2008; Newman et al. 2010) while other scholars have professed its uniqueness (e.g. Albrecht 2010; Christian et al. 2011; Halbesleben and Wheeler 2008; Hallberg and Schaufeli 2006) and its widespread acceptance as a “distinct positive concept” (Youssef-Morgan and Bockorny 2014, p. 36). The purpose of this section, then, is to distinguish employee engagement from the constructs with which it is most frequently associated. These include organisational commitment, intrinsic motivation, job satisfaction, job involvement, psychological empowerment, and psychological wellbeing.

2.3.2.1 Organisational commitment

There are three forms of organisational commitment (Meyer and Allen 1991). Continuance commitment represents employees who remain loyal out of necessity; they have little choice but to stay. Normative commitment reflects
those who remain with the organisation out of obligation; they may feel guilty for leaving. *Affective commitment*, the one most closely linked to employee engagement (Bakker and Schaufeli 2008), is when employees remain with the organisation because they feel emotionally connected to it. Whilst organisational commitment and employee engagement are related constructs (Hallberg and Schaufeli 2006), they are nonetheless separate (Macey and Schneider 2008). For example, commitment pertains to the organisation whereas employee engagement is associated more with one’s job (Christian et al 2011); commitment is a one-way relationship whereas employee engagement is reciprocal (Saks 2006); and commitment is narrowly focused on an institution whereas employee engagement is more holistic (Christian et al 2011). Commitment, therefore, is an element of employee engagement, or perhaps a consequence of it (Schaufeli 2014), but it is not the same construct.

2.3.2.2 *Intrinsic motivation*

Intrinsic motivation is another construct that is not the same as employee engagement. Intrinsic motivation reflects the behaviours that result from an individual’s innate energies (Deci and Ryan 1985) whereas employee engagement is one of these innate energies, leading to higher levels of motivation (Christian et al 2011; Rich et al 2010). This makes employee engagement an antecedent of motivation. In contrast, several scholars (Chalofsky and Krishna 2009; Crawford et al 2010; Thomas 2009) see employee engagement as a consequence of intrinsic motivation in that highly motivated employees are better equipped with the resources to exert themselves physically, cognitively and emotionally. Irrespective of whether employee engagement is an antecedent or a consequence, it is distinct from motivation. This is illustrated by Bhatnagar (2007) who refers to engagement as the stimulation of heads, hands and hearts with motivation reflecting only the heart.
2.3.2.3 Job satisfaction

Job satisfaction represents the pleasurable emotions that arise when an employee’s values are in alignment with his or her tasks (Locke 1969). It is a related but separate construct from employee engagement (Meyer and Gagné 2008). Both job satisfaction and employee engagement belong under the same psychological umbrella but they are theoretically different (Fletcher and Robinson 2014). This relationship is explained by Macey and Schneider (2008) who attest that satisfaction is attitudinal whereas employee engagement is behavioural. In other words, job satisfaction represents pleasantness and enjoyment, which constitutes an important component of employee engagement, but job satisfaction does not encompass the persistence, proactivity, role expansion and adaptability inherent within engagement. There is evidence, too, to suggest that employee engagement is a predictor of job satisfaction (Giallonardo et al 2010; Saks 2006), which further implies the two are indeed distinct constructs.

2.3.2.4 Job involvement

Job involvement is the construct used to classify employees whose identity and self-esteem are closely associated with their work such that they see their job as a worthwhile and important focus in their life (Lodahl and Kejner 1965). It is a concept quite distinct from employee engagement because job involvement represents the way in which employees perceive themselves whereas engagement reflects the extent to which they utilise their personal resources to perform strongly in the workplace (Saks 2006). Whereas high levels of job involvement essentially mean an employee’s needs have been met, high rates of employee engagement mean employees are investing much of themselves into the role (May 2004), perhaps helping the organisation fulfil more of its needs. If anything, May suggests employee engagement may be job involvement’s antecedent in that engaged employees are more likely to identify themselves with their job. Kahn (1990), from the outset, separated job involvement from employee engagement. The former, he wrote, is distinct from the latter because
it does not incorporate the varying reactions that employees have to the wide range of experiences, situations and phenomena in the workplace.

2.3.2.5 Psychological empowerment

A psychologically empowered employee is one whose cognitive state is “characterised by a sense of perceived control, competence, and goal internalisation” (Menon 2001, p. 161). Thus, the empowered employee, while not necessarily an engaged one, has the potential to reach that state (Macey and Schneider 2008). Macey and Schneider describe this connection by noting that an empowered employee’s self-efficacious tendency towards action is a condition that enables that employee to invest more of himself or herself into their work, thereby eventually attaining a state of engagement. This antecedent relationship was later demonstrated by Stander and Rothmann (2010) who found that psychological empowerment can predict up to 40% of the variance in employee engagement. The antecedent nature of empowerment was also identified by Spence Laschinger et al (2009), which further classifies it as a construct distinct from employee engagement.

2.3.2.6 Psychological wellbeing

Psychological wellbeing comprises six factors: autonomy; environmental mastery; personal growth; positive relations with others; purpose in life; and self-acceptance (Ryff and Keyes 1995). The distinction between psychological wellbeing and employee engagement is what prompted Robertson and Cooper (2010) to suggest the combination of both constructs so that ‘full engagement’ is formed. The scholars’ argument was based on the premise that employee engagement is concerned mostly with commitment and citizenship but at the neglect of psychological health, which can deteriorate when engaged employees extend themselves excessively. By combining the two constructs, the needs of the organisation and the needs of the employee unite. Whilst full engagement does not appear to have captured the widespread interest of many scholars, the difference between employee engagement and psychological wellbeing has
been emphasised in studies such as those by Deci et al (2001) and Koyuncu et al (2006), with the latter identifying wellbeing as a consequence of engagement. Others, meanwhile, such as Harter et al (2002) and Schaufeli et al (2008), regard wellbeing as a broad umbrella under which employee engagement belongs as a standalone concept.

Now that employee engagement has been differentiated from its counterparts, it is timely to revisit the assertion made in the opening paragraph of section 2.3, namely that employee engagement is a more robust construct than employee emotions. To validate this position, the next section will demonstrate how the two differ.

2.3.3 Distinguishing employee engagement from emotions

This thesis is based on the premise that employee engagement is a worthy context through which organisational crises can be better understood. In order to make such a claim, two distinctions must be established. First, it is important to position employee engagement as a unique construct, which is an argument that has been articulated in the preceding section. Second, it is necessary to distinguish employee engagement from emotions because, as discussed in section 2.2.8, the latter has been the inordinate focus of crisis scholarship to date. This section, then, will be dedicated to elaborating on that distinction.

Employees experience a range of emotions at work, many of which are triggered by the events that transpire within the organisation (Brief and Weiss 2002). These emotions are therefore vulnerable during an organisational crisis. In regards to the relationship between emotions and employee engagement, a review of the literature produces three schools of thought, as per Table 2.1:

i. Emotions are a part of employee engagement.
ii. Emotions are an antecedent of employee engagement.
iii. Emotions are a consequence of employee engagement.
Table 2.1. Emotions and employee engagement: three schools of thought

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotions are a part of employee engagement</th>
<th>Kahn (1990)</th>
<th>Employee engagement is the investment of emotional, physical and cognitive effort.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shuck and Wollard (2010)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Employee engagement is emotional, cognitive and behavioural.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saks (2006)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Similar to Shuck and Wollard (2010), employee engagement is emotional, cognitive and behavioural.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crawford et al (2010)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Positive emotions enhance coping mechanisms that then lead to increased levels of employee engagement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schaufeli et al (2009)</td>
<td></td>
<td>A decrease in work-related negative emotions leads to higher rates of employee engagement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweetman and Luthans (2010)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Psychological capital generates positive emotions that then generate greater employee engagement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions are an antecedent of employee engagement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avey et al (2008)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Highly engaged employees may consequently experience positive emotions (or vice versa).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rothbard (2001)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Engagement in one role (e.g. work) leads to positive emotions that then influence engagement in another role (e.g. family).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first school of thought – that emotions are a part of employee engagement – can be seen in Kahn’s (1990) conceptualisation to which the beginning of section 2.3 referred. Valuing only the emotional component neglects the additional value that can be derived from the inclusion of the physical element, which Kahn describes as physical strength and an ability to endure demanding tasks, as well as the cognitive element, which Kahn describes as vigilance and awareness. In a similar vein, Shuck and Wollard’s (2010) depiction of employee engagement comprises a three-part model, one of which is emotions, echoing the view of Saks (2006) who likewise portrayed employee engagement as a combination of three components, one of which again comprised emotions.

The second school of thought – that emotions are an antecedent of employee engagement – is supported by Crawford et al (2010) who found that job demands, to be discussed in section 2.4.2, have an impact on emotions, which subsequently influence employee engagement. Schaufeli et al (2009) similarly
discovered that emotional demands, such as ‘upsetting situations’, lead to lower levels of employee engagement. The antecedent nature of emotions was also identified by Sweetman and Luthans (2010) whose construct of psychological capital – comprising hope, optimism, efficacy and resilience – culminates in positive emotions that then generate employee engagement.

The third school of thought – that emotions are a consequence of employee engagement – is evident in the work of Avey et al (2008). Whilst the authors concede they are uncertain if emotions lead to employee engagement or whether employee engagement leads to positive emotions, they leave open the possibility that either of the two relationships may be legitimate. In a more complex conceptualisation of the two constructs, Rothbard (2001) found a link between the engagement of employees at work with their engagement at home, with emotions representing the link between the two. In other words, when employees are engaged at work, their consequent positive emotions have flow-on effects at home when engaging with family. From a psychological wellbeing perspective, Koyuncu et al (2006) established that employee engagement predicts emotional health, thereby strengthening this third school of thought.

As can be seen from the preceding three paragraphs, there is ambiguity in relation to whether emotions are a component of employee engagement, an antecedent of employee engagement or a consequence of it. Whatever the relationship, this highlights that while the precise nature of the relationship is undetermined, there seems to be agreement that the two are at least different constructs. In the section to follow, this literature review will outline some of the manifestations that make employee engagement an appealing prospect.

2.3.4 Manifestations of employee engagement

When theorising the ways in which employee engagement becomes manifest within organisations, Kahn (1990) referred to self-employment and self-expression. Self-employment includes the exertion of effort, involvement, flow and motivation. Self-expression includes creativity, voice, authenticity,
communication, playfulness and ethics. With such manifestations, it is
reasonable to expect that greater levels of performance will ensue (e.g. Bakker
and Bal 2010; Christian et al 2011; Salanova et al 2005). It is these positivist
organisational outcomes with which this section is concerned. At first, this may
appear odd in a qualitative dissertation but these outcomes are nonetheless
included for two reasons. First, they represent the culmination of valuable
consequence-related research on employee engagement, almost all of which has
been conducted using quantitative methodologies (Truss et al 2014). Second, it
is due to this difference in methodology that one’s holistic understanding of the
phenomenon is further enriched.

Engaged employees are more likely to display higher rates of discretionary
behaviour (Rich et al 2010) as well as lower staff attrition, greater customer
satisfaction, and fewer accidents (Harter et al 2002). They also demonstrate
less workplace deviance (Shantz et al 2016) and are more inclined to embark on
organisational citizenship behaviour (Shantz et al 2013). In addition, Harter et
al (2002) document the positive linkages with productivity and profitability,
although they make the point that these are harder to prove. These types of
business-related benefits prompted Robertson and Cooper (2010) to deem
much of the literature as overly narrow for focusing primarily on the benefits
that employee engagement brings to an organisation. It is better, suggest the
authors, to examine ‘full engagement’ so that the focus is not only on how the
organisation benefits but also on how employees derive an advantage. An
example of that could be the work of Shuck and Reio (2014), which found that
groups characterised by high levels of employee engagement had stronger
psychological wellbeing and a greater sense of personal accomplishment.

The aforementioned outcomes can be explained by the specific behaviours
associated with employee engagement. According to Macey and Schneider
(2008), these include: organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB), proactivity,
role expansion, and adaptation:
• OCB represents the discretionary actions that exceed what is ordinarily expected (Organ 1988). OCB is evident among engaged employees (Babcock-Roberson and Strickland 2010) and is especially strong when they feel supported by their organisation and have a close relationship with their immediate supervisor (Alfes et al 2013).

• Proactivity represents the voluntary actions (Grant and Ashford 2008) of those who seek to change their environment by using their own initiative (Bateman and Crant 1993). Proactive employees are more likely to be engaged because they exercise job crafting (Bakker et al 2012b; Lu et al 2014), which is when they alter their jobs so that greater occupational fulfilment ensues (Wrzesniewski and Dutton 2001).

• Role expansion represents the additional responsibilities that employees undertake even when these responsibilities are not specified on their job description (Morrison 1994). Role expansion is considered an engagement-related behaviour (Gruman and Saks 2011).

• Adaptation represents the individuals who are better equipped to handle stress, solve problems, and deal with uncertainty (Pulakos et al 2000). Adaptation is usually present among engaged employees in the form of optimism, self-efficacy, self-leadership and a willingness to change (Van den Heuvel et al 2010).

In addition to Macey and Schneider's (2008) four behaviours, there is a further manifestation of employee engagement worth noting: the flow-on effects for employees in their personal life (Eldor 2016). As Elder notes, the spillover literature is replete with negative examples of the way in which work can harm employees beyond the workplace. Employee engagement is an opportunity to achieve the opposite, particularly in relation to self-esteem and subjective wellbeing, as well as community involvement and pro-environmental behaviour. Whilst those spillover effects have only been hypothesised by Eldor and have yet to be empirically tested, there are recent studies that lend support
to his propositions. For example, Hakanen and Schaufeli (2012) found that employee engagement has a positive effect on life satisfaction because low levels of burnout diminish depressive symptoms. Similarly, Culbertson et al (2012) found that when employees are engaged, the positive emotions they feel can enhance their affective experiences at home due to the resources they accumulate throughout the day. Likewise, Bakker et al (2005b) have demonstrated that an individual’s engagement can be contagious such that the engagement is transferred at home from one spouse to another.

The principal aim of this section has been to position employee engagement as an important and valuable construct that generates positive outcomes for organisations, employees and even those with whom they interact outside the workplace. With that now articulated, this literature review will progress to a detailed overview of employee engagement’s antecedents.

### 2.3.5 Antecedents of employee engagement

Saks (2006) conducted one of the first empirical examinations of employee engagement’s antecedents. This section will use the six he identified in his conceptualisation (see Figure 2.4) as a starting point from which to explore other antecedents that have since emerged in the literature.

**Figure 2.4: Antecedents and consequences of employee engagement adapted from Saks (2006)**

![Antecedents and consequences of employee engagement](image)

The first antecedent in Saks’s model is *job characteristics*, particularly the five that comprise Hackman and Oldham’s (1975) core dimensions. *Variety* and *feedback*, for example, have since been found to increase employee engagement.
(Salanova and Schaufeli 2008), while task identity and task significance are resources than can achieve the same outcome (Bakker and Demerouti 2007). Similarly, autonomy leads to employee engagement (Bakker and Bal 2008; Salanova et al 2005) and is indeed the most widely researched job characteristic in the employee engagement literature (Crawford et al 2014).

The second antecedent identified by Saks (2006) is perceived organisational support, which strongly influences employee engagement (Crawford et al 2010). Likewise, the third antecedent – perceived supervisor support – is deemed essential for employee engagement (Pati and Kumar 2010), as is the fourth – rewards and recognition – because of its ability to reinforce feelings of fairness and value (Leiter and Maslach 2004). The final two antecedents highlighted by Saks (2006) are procedural justice and distributive justice, which have also been subsequently affirmed in the literature. The former is perceived as a reward to which employees reciprocate with greater levels of engagement (Karatepe 2011); likewise with the latter (Ram and Prabhakar 2011).

In the years since the aforementioned papers were published, scholars have identified additional antecedents of employee engagement. These have included diversity practices and social inclusion (Downey et al 2015); greater learning opportunities (Sarti 2014); person-organisation fit (Biswas and Bhatnagar 2013); and job control, psychological climate and recovery time (Kuhnel et al 2012). All of these studies, however, and the others addressed thus far in this literature review, share one characteristic: they seem to examine employee engagement in stable environments or in contexts where the stability or otherwise of the researched organisation is not specified. This produces a conspicuous gap in the literature and leads to the central premise of this review and the research that follows: that it would be of value to understand the role of employee engagement during periods when an organisation is unstable or, more precisely, when it is in crisis. It appears that only two such studies have been attempted. The next section will detail the nature and findings of these two studies and will explain that, despite the way they have enriched scholarly
knowledge of employee engagement and organisational crises, further research is warranted.

2.3.6 Employee engagement during organisational crises

To the best of this researcher’s knowledge, there are only two journal articles that combine the study of organisational crises with employee engagement. The purpose of this section is to summarise the nature and findings of these studies and to articulate the value they have added to the literature of both constructs. In doing so, this section will also make apparent that both studies, whilst providing a respected springboard from which the present research is based, leave a number of important questions unanswered.

2.3.6.1 The Maslach and Leiter study

The first, and arguably most significant of the two studies, is the one by Maslach and Leiter (2008). In a longitudinal analysis of a university’s administrative personnel, the researchers conducted a survey at one point and then a second survey a year later. The period in between was used to implement a range of initiatives such as recognition programs, staff changes, and leadership training. One of the objectives of the study was to assess whether there was a subsequent change in employee engagement and burnout. During that period, to the surprise of the researchers, a department at the university experienced a “large organizational crisis” (p. 503) because several employees had been dismissed for stealing organisational supplies. This generated an opportunity to further test any differences between the various departments. The researchers discovered that employees of the department in crisis were consequently more likely to experience burnout (and disengagement) than were employees in other departments. The primary reason for this negative shift could be attributed to harsher sentiments in relation to workplace fairness and workload incongruities.
There are three issues associated with the aforementioned study that give rise to the need for further research:

- The first is that the term ‘crisis’ may not aptly describe the department in question. Whilst the theft of supplies and the subsequent termination of employment are certainly problems that have evident consequences, they are nonetheless contextual factors that do not meet the definition of crisis stipulated in section 2.2 by Pearson and Clair (1998, p. 60). It is not apparent, for example, that this situation threatened “the viability of the organization”. This therefore generates the first gap in the combined crisis/engagement literature, which suggests further engagement-related research in regards to a crisis of a severe magnitude may be worthwhile.

- The second concern with the Maslach and Leiter (2008) study is that, unlike a majority of scholars (Roof 2015) who use the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale to measure employee engagement, Maslach and Leiter have instead used the Maslach Burnout Inventory. In other words, rather than testing directly for the existence or otherwise of employee engagement, Maslach and Leiter have tested for the presence or absence of burnout as a way of determining the degree to which employee engagement has been affected. This is an important consideration because there has been substantial debate in academia in relation to burnout and whether it is indeed the opposite of employee engagement (Leon et al 2015). In addition, there are a number of psychometric inconsistencies that bring into question the ability for the Maslach Burnout Inventory to accurately determine employee engagement or disengagement (Demerouti et al 2001).

- The third concern with the Maslach and Leiter study (2008) is that the crisis is focused on a single department. If it is of value to examine employee engagement in the context of a department in crisis, it is also of value to study this construct in the context of an organisation in crisis.
2.3.6.2 *The Van Rooy et al study*

The second study with which this section is concerned is the one by Van Rooy et al (2011). The scholars examined employee engagement in the context of a countrywide financial crisis, in this case the United States of America. They found that employee engagement during the financial crisis decreased overall, with employees less likely to exert discretionary effort in their work. Of particular interest, however, was that approximately 40% of organisations experienced an increase in employee engagement irrespective of the crisis. As the authors note: “This suggests that positive organizational efforts can lead to an engagement increase even amidst a turbulent environment” (p. 148). In their conclusion, Van Rooy et al recommend that employers continue to administer employee surveys even when downturns compel senior leaders to find cost-saving measures. They also claim that, during an organisational crisis, employee engagement could matter more than job satisfaction because employees may be content enough to simply be employed, thereby rendering their desire for a fulfilling job unnecessary, at least in the short term.

There are four issues with Van Rooy et al’s (2011) paper:

- The first is that the analysis is macroeconomic; it examines employee engagement in the context of a financial crisis that has afflicted an entire region and indeed the world. What may be of value is a study that explores employee engagement in a microeconomic context; in other words, during a crisis that afflicts an organisation rather than a nation.

- The second concern is that the paper’s focus is inordinately on practice. In fact, its lead author is a human resources practitioner while its third author is a consultant who specialises in the administration of employee surveys, both of whom are extolling the virtues of employee surveys. For example: “Cutting an employee survey program during a business downturn can be short-sighted and actually the worst time to do so” (p.
147). Putting aside the potential conflict of interest (there is no disclaimer in the article that explains the nature of their relationship), it would be of value to better understand employee engagement during a ‘business downturn’ from a theoretical perspective rather than simply the practitioner lens.

- The third concern is that Van Rooy et al’s work does not make transparent the methodology of their research. It may therefore benefit the study of employee engagement if the construct were to be examined using methods that adhere to empirical rigour.

- The fourth concern is that even though Van Rooy et al articulate the possibility of increasing employee engagement during a crisis, they do not specify precisely how this can be accomplished. They allude, for example, to leadership communication and training opportunities, but they do not elaborate on how they reached these conclusions. It would be instructive for future research to thoroughly explore these antecedents.

2.3.6.3 Related articles

Aside from the Maslach and Leiter (2008) and Van Rooy et al (2011) studies, it has not been possible to find others that examine organisational crises in the context of employee engagement. There is, however, scholarly work that provides some insight even though the word ‘crisis’ is not mentioned explicitly:

- In a self-reported case study based on a series of change initiatives at Johnson & Johnson, Catteeuw et al (2007) developed a model for employee engagement suitable for ‘turbulent times’. The model includes the elements of job satisfaction, valuing people, collaboration, and trust. It is not apparent, however, that the model was designed using empirical research methods and it does not appear as though it has since been tested empirically.
• Boone James et al (2010) found that discretionary leadership behaviours, such as supervisor support and recognition, had a positive impact on employee engagement, “especially in tough economic times” (p. 191). Their study, however, focused on the differences in employee engagement when older workers were compared to younger workers. Further, the economic environment was not a contextual consideration in their study and was simply a casual reference in their concluding paragraph.

• Cartwright and Holmes (2006) emphasised the unprecedented pace of change, which has resulted in feelings of cynicism, mistrust, frustration, disenchantment and fatigue. Even though change can be a symbol of an organisation in crisis (Nystrom and Starbuck 1984), it does not automatically indicate the organisation is in crisis. Cartwright and Holmes’s (2006) theorised solution – to help employees find greater meaning in their work – is a valuable one, particularly if it were to be validated in an organisation enduring a genuine crisis rather than one that is simply going through a period of planned change.

• Avey et al (2008) concluded that psychological capital can protect employees from the disengaging effects of ‘stressful events’. Whilst organisational crises can certainly be stressful events (Halverson et al 2004), it would be worthwhile to demonstrate the veracity of that assertion by studying an actual organisation in crisis.

• Griffin et al (2008) posited that engaged employees may display greater proactive behaviour during uncertainty and unpredictability. While both of those are characteristics of organisations in crisis (e.g. Lerbinger 2012; Seeger et al 2003), there is merit in determining this for certain in an empirical analysis of an organisation in crisis, as per the critique in the preceding two paragraphs.
• An analysis of employee engagement around the world found it is vulnerable in regions deemed to be volatile, such as parts of Africa where a deterioration in safety and resources has resulted in a reduction of employee engagement (Aon Hewitt 2015). Similarly, India is another region known for its volatility, particularly in relation to the economy, which makes the attainment of engagement all the more important (Biswas et al 2013). Even in regions considered less volatile, such as the United Kingdom, the niche market in which an organisation operates may necessitate the pursuit of employee engagement as a buffer from unexpected changes in market conditions (MacLeod and Clarke 2009).

Despite the aforementioned gaps in the literature, the scholarly work completed to date is encouraging. It demonstrates there is interest in combining the employee engagement and organisational crisis constructs in one substantive study. The potential value of such work is evident in the commentary of Richardson and West (2010) who assert that employee engagement may be useful during a crisis because engaged employees would be more likely to collaborate, adapt, and maintain their enthusiasm. Graen (2010, p. 346) makes a similar point, albeit more colourfully, when he urges leaders “to prepare for the sharks that will follow the tsunami to your doors.” The preparation to which he refers is related to building highly engaged employees who are subsequently better equipped to handle emergencies: “When the alarm bells sound, high-engagement teams spring into action to fill the gaps and return to normal conditions” (p. 342). It would be of value for the assertions put forward by Richardson and West (2010) and Graen (2010) to be proven empirically.

In a final attempt at making the case that employee engagement is a construct worthy of study in the context of organisational crises, this literature review will next articulate some of the criticisms it has attracted and the arguments that contradict these criticisms.
2.3.7 Criticisms of employee engagement

It may seem counterintuitive, after spending much of this literature review demonstrating the scholarly relevance of employee engagement, to now dedicate space to four of its most prominent criticisms. These criticisms, however, are essential in developing a more holistic understanding of the construct.

The first criticism is that consistently high levels of employee engagement are unsustainable and that periods of recovery are needed for employees to become reinvigorated and re-engaged (George 2011). This was evidenced in a study by Sonnentag (2003) who found employee engagement levels were higher when employees had enough leisure time to recover from work demands. Meyer and Gagné (2008) similarly question the potential for employee engagement to be mismanaged by supervisors who encourage employees to become increasingly involved to such an extent that physically unhealthy consequences ensue. These criticisms of excessive employee engagement are yet to be refuted in the literature. Regardless, from a practitioner perspective, there are suggestions that high levels of employee engagement can indeed be sustained over a long period of time. This would necessitate trustworthy senior leadership, a work/life balance, an understanding of organisational goals, considerate supervisors, and a well-regarded organisation (Towers Watson 2012).

The second criticism is that employee engagement is merely a fad and that it is either indistinguishable from other constructs – such as job satisfaction – or a combination of several constructs (Griffin et al 2008; Harter and Schmidt 2008; Newman et al 2010; Guest 2014). Whilst this criticism has already been refuted in Section 2.3.2 of this literature review, others such as Youssef-Morgan and Bockorny (2014) and Albrecht (2010) have rejected it more authoritatively. To quote the latter: “The proliferation of published research papers, conference papers, practitioner articles, case studies, survey instruments, and internet commentary provides little support for the contention, as some have suggested, that engagement is a mere fad that will soon disappear” (p. xiv).
The third criticism pertains to the quantitative benefits associated with employee engagement. Sparrow (2014) argues it is unwise for scholars to assert conclusively that employee engagement has a positive impact on organisations, especially in regards to performance and profit. He and his colleague argue such linear outcomes are simplistic (Sparrow and Balain 2010). For example, it is unclear whether employee engagement generates greater performance or whether it is high-performing workplaces that generate greater employee engagement (Langford 2010). Until such connections are definitive, scholars and practitioners are warned to avoid extolling the supposed quantitative outcomes. In contrast, Purcell (2014a, p. 247) questions whether such conclusiveness will ever be possible. He believes “the evidence of positive business outcomes is as strong as you can get it”. Employee engagement should therefore be pursued, he contends, not just because there is a profit motive but also because it enhances people’s lives. In other words, employee engagement should be a moral imperative, not just a financial one. As articulated by Guest (2014, p. 232), “engagement then becomes a kind of insurance policy”.

The fourth criticism is one on which this literature review and its associated research is entirely based. Purcell (2014b, p. 247), in his own review of the literature, reached this conclusion: “there is almost a complete lack of sensitivity to context”. By this he means that research on employee engagement has so far focused on acontextual environments such that it is unclear how the construct operates in environments other than those that seem to be characterised by normalcy. To put it another way, while much research has been conducted that explores the antecedents and consequences of employee engagement (for example, Saks 2006; Rich et al 2010), what appears to be lacking are the contextual distinctions. One of these, noted by Purcell (2014b), is that even though some professions have been the subject of special focus, such as dentists (Hakanen et al 2008), it seems as though each study has concentrated only on full-time employees rather than the diversity of employment arrangements that constitute the modern workforce. Similar sentiments have been expressed by Jenkins and Delbridge (2013) who tried to
rectify this contextual anomaly with their own contrastive study of two alternative organisations, both of which produced different experiences of employee engagement. The authors point out that contextual factors can include the wider economy, market conditions, organisational size, management structures, and industry sectors.

To more fully understand employee engagement, then, it may be worthwhile exploring what has already been established in a wider variety of contexts, one of which could be the organisational crisis. Therefore:

Research Question 1: How does employee engagement relate to the context of organisational crises?

Answering that research question necessitates an explication of the job demands-resources model, to which this literature review will now turn.

2.4 The job demands-resources (JD-R) model

The JD-R, introduced by Demerouti et al (2001), is the most popular model among scholars in explaining the psychology of employee engagement (Albrecht 2010; Schaufeli 2014). The model, as depicted in Figure 2.5 by Bakker (2009), suggests employee engagement is generated when employees perceive there to be greater resources than demands in the workplace.
Job resources are the factors that have a motivating effect on the employee while job demands are those that have an energy-depleting effect. The JD-R’s success can be attributed primarily to its flexibility (Schaufeli and Taris 2014). For example, rather than providing a limited selection of demands and resources to choose from, the JD-R implies the list of potential demands and resources is limitless. This enables its easier application in a wider variety of contextual settings. As Schaufeli and Taris (2014) note, this means many variations of the JD-R have emerged such that there is no longer a need for it to be tested empirically. It exists now as a model that scholars use and adapt in whatever way enables them to better explain a range of phenomena in the job stress literature. The purpose of this section, and indeed the remainder of this literature review, is to more thoroughly explore these factors and their relevance to the employee engagement and organisational crisis literature.

As this section unfolds, it will become apparent that the JD-R has been studied almost exclusively in positivist terms, with language employed throughout each subsection reflecting that trend. While it may seem uncharacteristic for a phenomenological dissertation to be framed in such a way, this is a format that
is supported in the literature. That is because “the positivist paradigm is clearly evident” in phenomenology (Dowling 2004, p. 32), particularly during the data analysis stage (Creswell 2013) that often necessitates the quantitative collation of codes and themes. Indeed, the positivist paradigm can provide guidance to phenomenologists in relation to minimizing bias and reaching conclusions drawn not only from the qualitative data but also from the extant empirical literature (Thompson et al 1989). As Thompson et al note, it is “a categorical mistake to contend that the broad epistemological concerns of one paradigm cannot be relevant to an alternative paradigm” (p. 1.42). Further, in his workbook on how to complete a phenomenological dissertation, Almeida (2012) advises the literature review should be premised on a particular theory “and how that theory is related to your research question” (p. 49). As will be demonstrated in the remainder of this chapter, the theoretical model considered to be directly relevant to the research question is the JD-R. In sum, even though the current study has adopted a social constructivist approach (see section 3.2), the positivist nature of the literature review is nonetheless informative in relation to the findings that follow.

The process will begin with a summary of job resources and job demands before progressing to a detailed account of three types of demands and resources: (i) leadership styles; (ii) work-related factors; and (iii) personal factors. The three aforementioned categories have arisen as a result of this literature review and their relevance to the research that follows.

2.4.1 A summary of job resources

The JD-R is considered to be a nuanced workplace-specific adaptation of Stevan Hobfoll’s conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hakanen et al 2008). For that reason, it is important when explaining the job resources element of the JD-R to begin with a brief summary of COR.

COR is the leading explication for the causes of burnout (Hälbesleben 2006). It reflects the “objects, personal characteristics, conditions or energies” that help
people deal with stress (Hobfoll 1988, p. 26). When individuals have an abundance of resources, they are more resiliently able to manage stress. When resources are either lost or threatened, levels of stress rise. This is why “the basic tenet of COR theory is that individuals strive to obtain, retain, protect, and foster those things that they value” (Hobfoll 2001, p. 341). Of the four resource types identified by Hobfoll:

- **Objects** include shelter and food, which meet a need for survival.
- **Personal characteristics** include mastery and self-esteem, which protect individuals from the adverse consequences of stressful events.
- **Conditions** include marriage and citizenship, which are valued by the individual to such a degree they have a fortifying effect.
- **Energies** include knowledge and money, which can assist in the acquisition of additional resources.

Hobfoll’s (2001) resources amount to a wide-ranging list of 74 items. From a workplace perspective, these include support, stability, strong relationships and safety (Hobfoll 2011), with the latter referring not only to physical safety but also the safety associated with the expression of one’s ideas. That is a concept closely related to psychological safety to which Kahn (1990) referred in his seminal paper on employee engagement. More recently in relation to employee engagement, Gorgievski and Hobfoll (2008) posited that COR theory is of paramount importance. The more resource-rich an employee becomes, the greater his or her level of engagement. These resources and engagement continue to build over time in what Hobfoll (2001) refers to as gain spirals.

The preceding passage provided a brief overview of Hobfoll’s contribution to the extent it explains the foundation on which the JD-R’s job resources element is based. Demerouti et al (2001, p. 501) define job resources as follows: “Those physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job” that assist employees to achieve work goals, reduce job demands (to be discussed in section 2.4.2), and to stimulate personal growth and development. As stated earlier, the number of potential job resources is limitless. Bakker et al (2007)
looked closely at innovativeness, appreciation, organisational climate, supervisor support, and information. Bakker and Demerouti (2007) included feedback, task identity, and task significance. Crawford et al (2014) added job fit, opportunities for development, rewards and recognition, leader-member exchange, organisational justice, job security, and recovery time. These and many others will be addressed in greater detail from section 2.4.3 onwards. For the time being, this literature review will provide a summary of what is meant by job demands, the surplus of which can lead to a greater prevalence of health problems such as headaches and stomach pains (Schaufeli and Bakker 2004).

2.4.2 A summary of job demands

A demand, in the context of the JD-R, refers to “aspects of the job that require sustained physical or mental effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological and psychological costs” (Demerouti et al 2001, p. 501). Physiological costs include exhaustion and a non-ergonomic work environment, which can arise, for example, from tasks that impose a deleterious posture (such as a bent back) for extended periods of time (Bakker et al 2003). Psychological costs include work overload, time pressure, and emotionally taxing interactions. Whereas the job resources element of the JD-R has its origins in Hobfoll’s work, the job demands element originates from the research of Robert Karasek. His contribution to the literature will be briefly explained in this section in order to better understand the JD-R.

In his seminal publication in 1979, Karasek identified job demands as the stressors in the workplace that increase the level of strain endured by employees. Employees in this state were more likely to experience insomnia, depression, nervousness, anxiety, and exhaustion. His research led to the valuable finding that decision-making latitude, which could otherwise be referred to as job control, has the potential to diminish work-related strain. It is at this point that Karasek’s model reaches its limitation and the JD-R becomes increasingly more relevant (Bakker and Demerouti 2007) because the JD-R
accommodates not just job control but an infinite number of resources that could potentially buffer the stressful existence of job demands.

One such demand could arguably be an organisational crisis. To the best of this researcher’s knowledge, the JD-R has yet to be applied in the context of an organisational crisis. In order to make the point, then, that organisational crises are indeed likely to be a job demand, this literature review will return to Hobfoll (1991) who described as traumatic the experience that one confronts when enduring the rapid loss of resources. More specifically, he identified five factors that accelerate this rapid loss during times of trauma:

1. The event attacks the values that people hold dear.
2. The event often occurs unexpectedly.
3. It imposes excessive demands on the individual.
4. The individual does not have sufficient resources to cope.
5. The event has left a mental scar that is difficult to erase.

All five can exist during an organisational crisis. In relation to the first factor, values such as honesty and fairness are jeopardised during times of crisis (Seeger et al 2003). In regards to the second, organisational crises are certainly unexpected events (Carmeli and Schaubroeck 2008). As for the third, there are a number of demands placed on employees during a crisis, including breakdowns in “established routines, relationships, norms, and belief systems” (Seeger et al 2003, p. 8). The fourth factor, too, is evident in organisational crises in relation to the mediating role of tangible and intangible resources (Mano-Negrin and Sheaffer 2004). In terms of the fifth and final factor, victims of an organisational crisis are more vulnerable to psychological breakdowns requiring professional therapy because they can end up perceiving themselves as “weak, helpless, and needy” (Pearson and Clair 1998, p. 63). There is legitimacy, therefore, in depicting organisational crises as job-related demands that attract a range of consequences that could perhaps be mitigated with the right variety and quantity of resources. Some of these resources will begin to be
addressed in the next section as this literature review transitions to the first of the three JD-R categories: leadership demands and resources.

### 2.4.3 Leadership demands and resources

Grant and Mack (2004, p. 410), when describing the type of leadership considered most important during an organisational crisis, utilise the following adjectives: “force of will, influence, personal charisma, experience, and decisiveness, to name just a few”. As will be made evident in this section, there are certain types of leadership characterised by those adjectives, while other types of leadership lack them. Similarly, the role of leadership is inextricably linked to the generation of employee engagement (Macey and Schneider 2008; Shuck and Albornoz 2007) because the frequency and quality of a leader’s interactions can be positively contagious, “even in highly stressful situations” (Hakanen & Roodt 2010, p. 95). The purpose of this section, then, is to explore six varieties of leadership, which appear to be the most prominent in the literature, and to illustrate their potential role as either job demands or job resources in the context of employee engagement during organisational crises. Of the following list, this section will argue (as per Table 2.2) that the first four are likely to be job resources, and would therefore have an engaging effect during an organisational crisis, while the last two are likely to be job demands, and would therefore have a disengaging effect during an organisational crisis:

- Transformational leadership
- Transactional leadership
- Servant leadership
- Authentic leadership
- Laissez-faire leadership
- Autocratic leadership
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership styles in relation to employee engagement</th>
<th>Transformational</th>
<th>Transactional</th>
<th>Servant</th>
<th>Authentic</th>
<th>Laissez-faire</th>
<th>Laissez-faire</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employee engagement is generated by transformational leaders because they inspire optimism, self-efficacy, confidence, a positive work climate, and trust.</td>
<td>Employee engagement is generated by transactional leaders because they provide essential work-related resources.</td>
<td>Employee engagement is generated by servant leaders because they satisfy employee needs, lead by example, make employees feel valued, and build an environment of humility, accountability, and empowerment.</td>
<td>Employee engagement is generated by authentic leaders because they prioritise employee needs, honesty, empowerment, trust, and psychological safety.</td>
<td>Employee engagement is damaged by laissez-faire leaders because they create conflict and stress by virtue of not providing support, coaching, information or inspiration.</td>
<td>Employee engagement is damaged by autocratic leaders because they are micromanagers, deprive employees of autonomy, operate unfairly, harass employees, and do not listen.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>

| Leadership styles in relation to organisational crises | Organisational crises are managed well by transformational leaders because they build trust, increase employee involvement, communicate openly, and inspire perseverance and problem-solving. | Organisational crises are managed well by transactional leaders because they provide clarity, direction, strategies, control, and decisions. | Organisational crises are managed well by servant leaders because they view crises as an opportunity for coaching and learning. | Organisational crises are managed well by authentic leaders because they make sacrifices and behave ethically. | Organisational crises are managed poorly by laissez-faire leaders because they ignore problems, avoid making decisions, are frequently absent, and do not nurture the coping mechanisms and resilience that employees need. | Organisational crises are managed poorly by autocratic leaders because they are insensitive, do not nurture participation, and are often the cause of organisational crises. |
2.4.3.1 Transformational leadership

There is no leadership style studied more frequently in the employee engagement literature than transformational leadership (Carasco-Saul et al 2015). It has also featured prominently in the organisational crisis literature. In both disciplines, it is perceived as a job resource even though such terminology is rarely used in the context of organisational crises. This section will begin by providing an overview of transformational leadership in general terms and will then demonstrate its effect as a job resource in relation to employee engagement and organisational crises.

Transformational leaders are those who focus on the interests of their employees in order to generate superior organisational performance (Bass 1990). Burns (1978), who coined the term, named it as such because it has the potential to transform an organisation’s workforce. Bass (1990) states this is achieved in several ways. Transformational leaders, for example, may use their charisma to inspire employees; they may identify and meet their employees’ emotional needs; and they may seek to stimulate them by providing meaningful and challenging work. The end result is better organisational outcomes (Bass et al 2003; Howell and Avolio 1993) arising from stronger relationships and lower staff turnover (Tse et al 2013); greater creativity (To et al 2015); positive perceptions of leader effectiveness (Hater and Bass 1988); and a more widespread tendency for employees to help their colleagues (Zhu and Akhtar 2014). One reason for this exertion of effort is that transformational leaders inspire employees to aspire for transcendental goals, which means employees are likely to sacrifice self-interest in favour of a compelling vision (Bass 1997).

Bass (1997) categorised transformational leadership into four components:

- **Idealised influence** is closely related to charisma. It inspires pride and loyalty and is present in leaders who display conviction, confidence, purpose, and values-aligned ethics.
• **Inspirational motivation** is associated with leaders who set a bold vision that resonates with employees. These visions are characterised by high expectations, optimism, enthusiasm, and meaning.

• **Intellectual stimulation** is when leaders challenge the status quo in relation to out-dated beliefs, assumptions and traditions. They often conceive new ideas and actively solicit them from employees.

• **Individualised consideration** reflects leaders who treat employees as unique individuals by taking into account each of their needs, abilities, motivators, knowledge gaps, and aspirations.

In regards to employee engagement, Schaufeli and Salanova (2008) were among the first to hypothesise that transformational leaders would be predisposed to generating high levels of employee engagement on account of their ability to inspire optimism, self-efficacy, confidence and a positive work climate. One year later, Zhu et al (2009) were the first to prove this positive relationship. The influence of transformational leadership, particularly charisma, was further cemented by Babcock-Roberson and Strickland (2010) who found an impact not only on employee engagement but also on OCB. Similarly, when transformational leadership is mediated by employee engagement, the subsequent outcomes include extra-role performance (Salanova et al 2011) and organisational knowledge creation (Hoon Song et al 2011). At a more micro level, Tims et al (2011) found that transformational leaders’ inherent optimism had a contagious effect that led to higher levels of employee engagement.

With effects such as these, it becomes evident that the presence of transformational leadership ought to be perceived as a job resource for it meets the ‘social’ aspect of Demerouti et al’s (2001) definition of that which assists in the achievement of goals and in the development of employees. This relationship can be further explained by Macey and Schneider’s (2008) conceptualisation, which depicts transformational leadership as having an influence on employee engagement via the generation of trust. The trust-building nature of
transformational leadership has been affirmed by several scholars who attest it is a means through which significant obstacles can be overcome (Jung and Avolio 2000; Podsakoff et al 1990).

One of those obstacles is the organisational crisis, during which the absence of trust can exacerbate the associated consequences (Probst and Raisch 2005; Rousseau et al 1998). The analysis by Probst and Raisch (2005) demonstrated that a lack of trust during an organisational crisis could deteriorate morale, confidence and communication, while Pillai et al (1999) outlined the ways in which the trust fostered by transformational leaders takes effect in these environments. First, organisational crises often result in the centralisation of decision-making; transformational leaders decentralise decision-making, thereby enhancing employee involvement and trust. Second, organisational crises result in competition for resources, thereby diminishing collaboration. Transformational leaders, however, prioritise collaboration, especially during an organisational crisis, and this, too, builds trust. Third, organisational crises often result in the distortion of communication and information. Transformational leaders are careful to communicate transparently and honestly, which again generates trusting relationships. This explains why Bass (1990) emphasised the importance of transformational leadership during times of turbulence, problems and uncertainty. This can be attributed to the ability of transformational leaders to inspire perseverance, creative problem solving, and a willingness to overcome challenges (Avolio et al 1991), as well as the unconventional strategies needed for organisational renewal (Bass and Riggio 2006).

In more recent research, the power of transformational leadership has been found, again, due to the mediating role of trust, to generate job satisfaction and organisational commitment even during an economic crisis (Pillai et al 2011), perhaps because of the transformational leader’s ability to exercise emotional control and to relate meaningfully with employees (Zhang et al 2012). As a result, the occurrence of organisational crises appears to occur less frequently in organisations populated by transformational leaders (Sheaffer et al 2011).
The culmination of these studies leads to the conclusion that transformational leadership is a valuable resource for employee engagement and organisational crises, and by extrapolation when both constructs are combined. Therefore:

*Research Question 2a: How does transformational leadership relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?*

In the shadow of transformational leadership is transactional leadership, which can also add value (Breevart et al 2014) as a resource in a number of contexts such as those with which this literature review is concerned. Therefore, transactional leadership will be discussed next.

### 2.4.3.2 Transactional leadership

The extent to which transformational leadership is prioritised in the literature, and the language often used to describe it, may give rise to sentiments that transactional leadership is its opposite. This infers that transformational leadership is positive while transactional leadership is inadequate, in line with Burns’s (1978) initial conceptualisation. Burns’s theory, however, has evolved since the 1970s, most notably by Bass (1985), who depicted transformational leadership and transactional leadership as two styles located on the same continuum. This infers, then, that effective leaders are those who have the ability to be both transformational and transactional depending on the situation (Avolio et al 1999), a position somewhat in line with Hersey and Blanchard’s (1993) model of situational leadership, which recommends an adaptive and flexible leadership style. This section will therefore demonstrate the benefits of transactional leadership for both employee engagement and organisational crises, but will first begin with a general overview of the construct.

Transactional leadership involves the utilisation of three components: (i) contingent rewards of a material or psychological nature that are granted to employees in order to generate greater effort; (ii) active management by exception, which necessitates the close monitoring of employees in the vigilant expectation
that any breaking of rules will require prompt intervention; (iii) *passive management by exception*, which refrains from taking corrective action unless a drop in standards becomes manifestly obvious (Bass 1990). It is very much a carrot and stick approach (Bass 1997). When delineating the associated ethical and moral differences, Kanungo (2001) depicts transactional leadership as ‘me’ centric whereas transformational leadership is ‘we’ centric; transactional leadership focuses on independence whereas transformational leadership focuses on interdependence; transactional leadership prioritises pragmatism whereas transformational leadership prioritises idealism; transactional leadership favours utilitarianism whereas transformational leadership favours altruism. Other distinctions are emphasised in Table 2.3.

| Table 2.3. Transformational leadership versus transactional leadership, adapted from Kanungo (2001) |
|-----------------------------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| **Self cognitions**                           | **Transactional** | **Transformational** |
| Relations to others                           | Atomistic (independent) | Organic (interdependent) |
| Rights and obligations                        | Protects individual rights | Meets social obligations |
| Nature of goals                               | Pragmatic         | Idealistic         |
| Evaluation of means and ends                  | Ends justify the means | Means justify the ends |
| Behavioural strategy                          | Utilitarian       | Altruistic         |
| Nature of ethics                              | Emphasis on duty  | Emphasis on purpose |

Bass (1999) further summarises the difference by invoking President John F Kennedy when he states that transactional leadership equates to what your employer can do for you, whereas transformational leadership equates to what you can do for your employer. Despite the aforementioned distinctions, there is some consternation among the scholarly community in regards to the uniqueness of the two leadership styles. For example, there are certain behaviours that are supposedly transactional, such as the provision of recognition, which could also be regarded as transformational (Yukl 1999).

Even though scholars have doubted the engaging potential of transactional leadership due to its lack of inspirational appeal (Bakker et al 2011), in recent years others have begun to demonstrate the inherent value of this leadership style in relation to employee engagement. One of these has been the study of cadets working on a sailing boat, which assessed both transactional and transformational
leadership (Breevart et al. 2014). Whilst Breevart et al found that transformational leadership was a stronger predictor of employee engagement, they nonetheless confirmed the engaging potential of transactional leadership as well, particularly contingent rewards. “Despite their lack of inspirational appeal,” transactional leaders are still able “to influence their followers’ daily work engagement in a positive way” (p. 149). The scholars conclude it is “important to not only focus on transformational leadership but also train leaders how to use transactional leadership behaviours” (p. 151).

It is for this reason that Blomme et al (2015) hypothesise that lower levels of transactional leadership will equate to lower levels of employee engagement. More specifically, transactional leaders prioritise the work-related resources that form an essential component of the daily exchange between leaders and employees. As Blomme et al attest, when the provision of these transactional resources, such as material incentives and other psychological benefits, are missing, employee engagement can suffer. This does not mean that transactional leadership on its own will suffice as a method through which employee engagement is generated, but it does appear to play a vital role in unison with transformational leadership. There is therefore merit in suggesting that transactional leadership can be a job resource depending on the context.

One such context is the organisational crisis, during which transactional leadership can serve a useful purpose (Pillai and Meindl 1998) because during turbulent times “subordinates yearn for any signs of leadership” (p. 659). Indeed, in the Pillai and Meindl study, transactional leadership was found to be almost as strong as charisma in terms of its significance to employees. Despite its flaws, “transactional leadership certainly can provide absolute clarity as to who sets the direction, values and strategies, makes decisions and is in command in a crisis” (Gill et al. 1998, p. 50). Again, this is not to suggest that transactional leadership is the only solution to the complexities associated with this specific context. The limited available research, however, indicates that whether the context is employee engagement, organisational crises, or potentially both, transactional leadership can conceivably be a positive resource. Therefore:
Research Question 2b: How does transactional leadership relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?

A similar argument can be made for servant leadership, which this literature review will address next.

2.4.3.3 Servant leadership

When introducing the concept of servant leadership, Robert Greenleaf (1977) distinguished between those who are servants first and leaders first. The leader-first individual is motivated most by power and materialism while the servant-first individual is driven most by the desire to help others. While he stressed these are both extremes and that there are many different types of leaders in between, he used these two as examples of the ways in which alternative leadership styles become manifest. The purpose of this section is to articulate some of these manifestations in relation to employee engagement and organisational crises but, much like the preceding two sections, the process will begin with a general overview of what it means to be a servant leader.

Servant leaders prioritise the needs of their employees ahead of their own (Greenleaf 1977). This means they consider themselves to be effective leaders only to the extent that they see evidence of their employees becoming “healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants” (p. 13), thereby generating flow-on benefits for society. Several decades later, Greenleaf’s colleague, Larry Spears, expanded the construct by identifying ten characteristics that constitute servant leadership. These are: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualisation, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community (Spears 2010). Servant leadership has also been found to have a positive influence on OCB, in-role performance and organisational commitment (Liden et al 2008), as well as a positive influence on perceptions of trust in both the leader and the organisation.
(Joseph and Winston 2005), which, as stipulated in section 2.4.3.1 is an essential component of both employee engagement and crisis management.

In relation to employee engagement, the study by van Dierendonck et al (2014) is especially instructive. The scholars compared servant leadership and transformational leadership to determine the nature of their relationship to employee engagement. The findings demonstrated that both have a positive effect but in different ways. Whereas transformational leadership’s impact is explained by perceptions of leadership effectiveness, servant leadership’s impact is explained by employee need satisfaction. In other words, once their needs are met, employees reciprocate their leader’s efforts by being more engaged. This extends the findings of a previous study by van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011), which found a correlation between servant leadership and employee engagement because of the empowerment, accountability and humility with which servant leadership is associated. Similarly, in a qualitative study of restaurant employees, Carter and Baghurst (2014) discovered a positive link between employee engagement and servant leadership because employees were more likely to feel as though their opinions were valued and that their leaders led by example. It is reasonable to expect, then, that the presence of servant leadership could constitute a resource.

In regards to organisational crises, Humphreys’ (2005) historical case study found that transformational leadership was “more effective” than servant leadership (p. 1426) but that both can indeed be “extraordinary” (p. 1427). It is important to note, however, that the case study on which Humphreys based his conclusion pertained to military leaders who existed more than 2000 years ago rather than the very different environment that characterises organisations today. When considering, too, that servant leaders during an organisational crisis are more likely to “use crises as opportunities to coach others and collectively learn from mistakes” (McGee-Cooper and Trammell 2002, p. 147), it becomes apparent that, just like with employee engagement, servant leadership is a suitable job resource in the context of organisational crises. Therefore:
Research Question 2c: How does servant leadership relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?

This literature review will now turn to the fourth leadership style – authentic leadership. Of the six leadership styles to be profiled in this review, this is the final one to be considered a resource.

2.4.3.4 Authentic leadership

In their lengthy definition of authentic leadership, Avolio and Luthans (2006, p. 2) make reference to the leader’s “moral perspective”, “greater self-awareness”, “self-regulated positive behaviours”, “continuous, positive self-development”, and several other terms, the combination of which generates greater employee outcomes. This section will make the case that authentic leadership, on account of these characteristics, could be considered an important resource in the context of employee engagement and organisational crises.

In their popular conceptualisation, Luthans et al (2006) state that authentic leadership should not be considered a leadership style on its own. By this they infer that all leaders of whichever style are able to be more or less authentic if they so choose. This means that transformational leaders, for example, can simultaneously be authentic leaders, as can, presumably, autocratic leaders. In a further series of studies by Walumbwa et al (2008), authentic leadership was positively related to OCB, organisational commitment, job satisfaction, job performance, and perceptions of supervisor effectiveness. The work by Walumbwa et al also generated four authentic leadership factors:

- **Self-awareness** reflects the way in which leaders derive meaning and the understanding they have of their own strengths and weaknesses.
- **Relational transparency** reflects the public representation of one’s real self via the use of open communication and information sharing.
- **Balanced processing** reflects the objective analysis of data, a methodical approach to decision-making, and the consideration of others’ views.
• *Internalised moral perspective* reflects the self-regulated decisions and actions undertaken in accordance with one’s values.

In relation to employee engagement, authentic leadership is deemed to be instrumental because of the way in which it prioritises employees’ needs as a goal in and of itself, as opposed to transformational leadership, which has the same employee-focused objective but only insofar as it helps the organisation to achieve its goals (De Clercq et al 2014). As De Clercq et al note, the psychological safety and empowerment cultivated by authentic leaders compel employees to become more engaged. A similar relationship was found by Hsieh and Wang (2015) and Hassan and Ahmed (2010), only in these two cases the mediating factor was employee trust. More specifically, trust is generated because authentic leaders have “high moral standards, integrity and honesty, and their favorable reputation” motivates employees to reciprocate that social exchange with greater engagement (Hsieh and Wang, p. 13). A more direct link between authentic leadership and employee engagement was identified by Giallonardo et al (2010) who also found a subsequent influence on job satisfaction. It is evident, then, that authentic leadership is an engaging resource.

The merit in also classifying authentic leadership as a resource during organisational crises is reflected in the opening line of Avolio and Gardner’s (2005, p. 316) seminal paper: “Leadership has always been more difficult in challenging times, but the unique stressors facing organizations throughout the world today call for a renewed focus.” As articulated throughout section 2.2 of this literature review, organisational crises can be a challenging time and a unique stressor for leaders and employees. Authentic leadership could therefore be suitably placed to help employees “rapidly bounce back from catastrophic events” (Avolio and Gardner 2005, p. 316). George (2007) similarly refers to the pressing need for authentic leadership “as the world becomes more dangerous” (p. xiii). In addition, Klenke (2007) views an organisational crisis as an antecedent of authentic leadership because adversity can serve as a valuable learning experience. However, this growth and development requires self-sacrifice, such as the rejection of certain privileges, which according to Klenke may be beyond the
altruistic interests of some individuals. Further, there are a number of scholars who assert that the moral standards of authentic leaders are the very behaviours that could prevent an organisational crisis from occurring in the first place (George 2003; Peus et al 2012; Woolley et al 2011). Therefore:

Research Question 2d: How does authentic leadership relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?

Now that this literature review has outlined the justification for why four of the six leadership styles could be considered resources in relation to employee engagement and organisational crises, attention will now turn to the remaining two styles. Both of these – laissez-faire leadership and autocratic leadership – will be depicted as demands.

2.4.3.5 Laissez-faire leadership

Laissez-faire leadership is regarded as somewhat of an oxymoron since there is a widespread belief that to lead in a laissez-faire manner is not to lead at all (Hartog et al 1997). This section will argue that such a passive approach, especially during times of organisational crisis, is a demand, which as articulated in section 2.4.2, attracts a number of physiological and psychological costs that deplete employee engagement.

Laissez-faire leaders are characterised by their reticence to communicate (Goodnight 2004), which becomes manifest in their avoidance of interaction and the superficial way in which they reluctantly converse (Hackman and Johnson 2013). This absence, or at best vagueness, serves to widen the metaphorical distance between them and their employees (Bass 2008). Such distance can reasonably be expected to result in minimal opportunities for laissez-faire leaders to influence their team, but this does not seem to be a priority since many show little desire to do so (Deluga 1990). The end result is an alienating, dysfunctional and unaccomplished organisation (Gill et al 1998). There is evidence, too, to suggest that the counterproductive nature of laissez-faire leadership has a greater
negative effect than the positive effect generated by other leadership styles (Skogstad et al 2007) because laissez-faire leadership comes with a dearth of "presence, involvement, feedback, and rewards" (p. 81) and a "lack of supportive leadership" during stressful periods (p. 87).

In terms of its impact on employee engagement, laissez-faire leadership is regarded as "destructive" (Tims et al 2011) because of its contribution to interpersonal conflict and role stress, both of which arise from persistent ambiguity (Skogstad et al 2007). It is therefore seen as incompatible with employee engagement because leaders who practice it do not provide employees with the coaching, assistance and social support they need (Blomme et al 2014). Bakker et al (2011) similarly render laissez-faire leadership as ineffective for the purposes of employee engagement because of its inability to motivate or inspire. The disengaging effect of laissez-faire leadership can also be hypothesised in relation to communication, which laissez-faire leaders avoid (Bass 2008), despite the ample evidence suggesting that communication has a positive influence on employee engagement (Attridge 2009; Karanges et al 2015; Welch 2011). This silence would therefore have a deleterious effect, which validates the positioning of laissez-faire leadership as a demand.

In relation to organisational crises, Barber and Warn (2005) refer to laissez-faire leaders as firefighters. By this they infer that their ignorance of underlying problems and their avoidance in making decisions result in reactively moving from crisis to crisis extinguishing blazes. This has subsequent impacts on employees since laissez-faire leadership is unlikely to sustain the coping mechanisms and resilience employees need to weather the crisis (Harland et al 2005). Another employee need is communication, the absence of which exacerbates the crisis (Barton 2001) by causing employees to focus more on themselves than on the customer (Pearson and Thomas 2004) and by increasing levels of uncertainty (Elving 2005). This exemplifies the point made by Roux-Dufort (2007) that it is not an organisation's weaknesses that render it vulnerable but laissez-faire leaders' ignorance of those weaknesses that poses the greatest risk. This heightened level of risk is also observed by James and Wooten (2004) who note
that many leaders are laissez-faire in nature, which means they neglect the high probability they will confront an organisational crisis in the future. With such risks, the presence of laissez-faire leadership during an organisational crisis is well placed as a demand, especially when taking into account that laissez-faire leaders are often unavailable when an organisational crisis arises (Boehnke et al 2002). Therefore:

*Research Question 2e: How does laissez-faire leadership relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?*

This sub-section has argued that laissez-faire leadership, whether in the context of employee engagement or the context of organisational crises, is a demand, and particularly so when both constructs are combined in the one study as per the intention of this dissertation. This literature review will now address autocratic leadership where a similar conclusion will be drawn.

### 2.4.3.6 Autocratic leadership

In every organisational crisis studied by Nystrom and Starbuck (1984), senior leaders received enough warning from their employees about the impending disaster but chose to disregard it. This uncompromising approach is at the core of autocratic leadership. It is a leadership style characterised by those who dismiss ideas and make authoritative decisions (Dessein 2007) even when it is apparent that listening to ‘alternative truths’ is an integral component of crisis management (Tyler 2005). This section, the final one in this series of leadership styles, will make the case that autocratic leadership is a demand that risks employee engagement and successful recovery from an organisational crisis.

Autocratic leaders are identified by the extent to which they accumulate power, retain control, demand obedience, judge pejoratively, manipulate others and embark on retribution (Bass 2008). Consequently, their work environments are often characterised by high rates of employee turnover (van Vugt et al 2004), perhaps because it is not unusual for them to treat employees harshly (Barron and
Ogle 2014). For example, employees ordinarily perceive autocratic leaders as unfair and fearsome (Janson et al 2008). This autocratic behaviour can be explained by the leaders’ lack of emotional intelligence (Singh et al 2007), which makes it difficult for them to create collaborative and positive work environments, the consequence of which is a strictly hierarchical institution where power and responsibility are limited to those at the top.

When theorising the effect of autocratic leadership on employee engagement, Blomme et al (2015) suggest that autocratic leaders are perceived as micromanagers who offer little support and resources. As Blomme et al explain, this is an impediment to employee engagement because it increases levels of stress, deprives employees of autonomy, and reduces opportunities for personal growth and development. Indeed, the scholars consider autocratic leadership to be a form of harassment. There is further evidence, too, that suggests autocratic leadership could be detrimental to employee engagement. For instance, a lack of workplace fairness is considered disengaging (Freeney and Tiernan 2009) and it is autocratic leaders who are often seen as unfair (Janson et al 2008). In addition, the act of listening is deemed essential for the generation of employee engagement (Macey et al 2009) but autocratic leaders are more inclined towards the opposite (Bass 2008). For these reasons, it seems appropriate to label autocratic leadership a demand in the context of employee engagement.

Some scholars suggest there are occasions when autocratic leaders can be valuable during a crisis because of their ability to enforce important rules (Richardson 1995) and to make prompt decisions during dangerous situations (Goodnight 2011). But the aforementioned scholars nonetheless concede that the negative consequences outweigh the positive, perhaps because it is evident that participative styles of leadership, rather than autocratic styles, are most suitable for the prevention of crises and their ongoing management (Tombs and Smith 1995). Indeed, autocratic leadership is one of the primary causes of organisational crises (Probst and Raisch 2005) because the leaders’ favoured top-down approach prevents the questioning of ideas while their hubris results in over-ambitious plans. Their insensitive nature is also the antithesis of the concern for employee
wellbeing required throughout an organisational crisis (Seeger et al 2003). There appears then to be sufficient evidence that autocratic leadership is a demand in the context of an organisational crisis. This leads to the final research question in this series of leadership styles:

Research Question 2f: How does autocratic leadership relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?

2.4.3.7 Summary comments on leadership styles

In summary, some leadership styles, by virtue of their positive outcomes, can be depicted on the JD-R as job resources. These include transformational leadership, transactional leadership, servant leadership, and authentic leadership. Other styles, by nature of their negative consequences, can be depicted on the JD-R as job demands. These include laissez-faire leadership and autocratic leadership. It is important to note that leaders rarely adhere to just one style. There are regular fluctuations, often multiple times throughout the day (Breevart et al 2014; Tims et al 2011), which generate a range of engagement-related consequences and outcomes. This literature review has thus far demonstrated, for instance, that the same leader can simultaneously embody transformational leadership and transactional leadership, or that authentic leadership can be combined with any leadership style. It may also be that some leaders could ordinarily be proponents of servant leadership but then be compelled into an autocratic mindset at the onset of a crisis (or vice versa). Likewise, employee engagement similarly fluctuates throughout an individual’s workday (Bakker and Bal 2010; Sonnetag 2003; Xanthopoulou et al 2009) and, as has been made evident throughout this literature review, it is often the actions of leaders that determine these daily fluctuations.

It is also the actions of leaders that determine the nature of the work-related resources and demands that can similarly relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises. It is these work-related resources and demands that this literature review will now address.
2.4.4 Work-related demands and resources

Work-related demands and resources are the aspects of the work environment that have an energy-depleting effect (and are therefore demands on the JD-R) or a motivational effect (and are therefore resources on the JD-R). Examples of job demands include physical pressures, such as injury-prone tasks and poor ergonomics, or factors that are more psychological in nature, such as an organisational crisis, as argued in section 2.4.2. In regards to work-related resources, Bakker et al (2007) demonstrated the empirical validity of innovativeness, appreciation, organisational climate, supervisor support, and information. Salanova and Schaufeli (2008) concentrated on the job resources of variety, control and feedback, each of which increased employee engagement. Gorgievski and Hobfoll (2008) listed flexibility, balance, diversity, interdependence, and tolerance for failure since these had not been the focus of engagement scholars previously. Of the limitless work-related resources available (Schaufeli and Taris 2014), this section will concentrate on five. There are three reasons that justify the inclusion of these five over those mentioned above (as well as many others undiscussed thus far in this dissertation). The first justification is that four of these five resources materialised in the present research as important considerations for the participants. The second justification is that, as per Table 2.4, all five resources have been the subject of scholarly attention in both the employee engagement literature and the organisational crisis literature, and are therefore of particular pertinence to the present research. The third justification is that one of these resources raises questions about its potential to be not only a resource but also a demand in the context of employee engagement during organisational crises.

The five resources are: (i) human agency; (ii) employee voice; (iii) social support; (iv) job satisfaction; and (v) challenging work. The absence of these resources would constitute their opposite function as work-related demands.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employee engagement</th>
<th>Human agency</th>
<th>Employee voice</th>
<th>Social support</th>
<th>Job satisfaction</th>
<th>Challenge demands</th>
<th>Hindrance demands</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Human agency generates hope, autonomy, empowerment, and resilience that employees need to be engaged.</td>
<td>Employee voice builds the trust that generates engagement, which then enhances organisational learning, systems improvement, and process adaptation.</td>
<td>Social support aids engagement because it creates a sense of belonging and vital dialogue among stakeholders.</td>
<td>Job satisfaction is both an antecedent and consequence of employee engagement.</td>
<td>Job stressors that are stimulating, meaningful and enjoyable have a positive influence on employee engagement.</td>
<td>Job stressors that are obstructive and threatening have a negative influence on employee engagement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational crises</td>
<td>Employees are empowered to make decisions, respond quickly to crises, share their views, and take control in such a way they are more effectively able to cope.</td>
<td>Employees with voice are able to provide vital information and to identify learning opportunities throughout the crisis.</td>
<td>Social support helps the healing process via the opportunity to connect with others and to be heard.</td>
<td>Employees with particular types of job satisfaction have greater coping mechanisms because of their ability to acquire skills, enrich organisational learning, and take the initiative.</td>
<td>An organisational crisis may be perceived as a challenge demand, in which case it is likely to be perceived as a positive challenge.</td>
<td>An organisational crisis may be perceived as a hindrance demand, in which case it is likely to be perceived as a negative challenge.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.4.4.1 Human agency

Albert Bandura (1989, p. 1175), in explaining human agency, wrote that “the capacity to exercise control over one’s own thought processes, motivation, and action is a distinctively human characteristic”. The presence of such control implies that individuals have a degree of agency; the lack of control implies they do not. This section will explore how this “capacity to exercise control” may relate to the context of employee engagement during an organisational crisis.

There are four components to human agency (Bandura 2001). One of these is intentionality, which means individuals are active contributors to the changes they seek as a result of their own self-interest. The second is forethought, which necessitates the creation of goals, the achievement of which motivates changes to present behaviour. The third is self-reactiveness, which involves the creation and implementation of action plans, enforced in no small part by the need for self-discipline. The fourth is self-reflectiveness, which requires an honest examination of one’s own choices, actions and thoughts. The culmination of this is a degree of responsibility and accountability (Bandura 2006) that creates a more holistic human experience (Rich et al 2010). This has led to calls for the consideration of human agency in organisational strategy and human resource development for the purposes of cultivating OCB, employee performance, organisational commitment, wellbeing and learning (Kuchinke 2013). In order to embrace human agency, however, individuals must first have confidence in their own abilities to do so, otherwise known as self-efficacy (Bandura 1997). Self-efficacy will be discussed in greater depth in section 2.4.5.3.

Employee engagement is an embodiment of human agency because to be engaged is a voluntary act under the individual’s own control (Rich et al 2010). By fostering a capacity for human agency, leaders are able to generate the hope and resilience that employees need to be engaged (Sweetman and Luthans 2010). Autonomy, too, is an important manifestation of human agency (Bandura 1989) because it leads to higher levels of employee engagement (Xanthopoulou et al 2009). This is explained by the way in which autonomy
empowers employees to remove obstacles impeding their performance and engagement (Salanova et al 2005). It is therefore considered an essential job resource that has a spiral effect, which means the presence of autonomy generates greater employee engagement, which in turn generates greater levels of autonomy (Bakker and Bal 2010). It is unambiguous, therefore, that human agency and its manifestation, autonomy, are valuable work-related resources in the context of employee engagement.

During an organisational crisis, autonomy plays a similarly beneficial role. Giving employees autonomy empowers them to make important decisions, especially from a communications and public relations perspective (Marra 1998), and it is a way that organisational learning and creativity can continue to be fostered throughout the crisis (Kim 1998). Autonomy is especially useful prior to an organisational crisis, particularly for crisis management teams (Smits and Ally 2003) because once a crisis emerges employees are then able to respond more quickly than would otherwise have been possible (Penrose 2000). Penrose adds that, while the crisis is in motion, giving employees more autonomy provides leaders with a wider range of viewpoints, thereby generating a greater number of potential solutions. Autonomy also makes employees feel that they have greater control over their environment, which is especially valuable during an organisational crisis because it becomes easier for them to cope with the associated turmoil (Mishra and Spreitzer 1998). Human agency, then, and its subsequent manifestation of autonomy, are evidently of value in an organisational crisis, not only during the event but also before it, and are therefore rightly regarded as work-related resources. This therefore leads to the first of the work-related research questions:

Research Question 3a: How does human agency relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?

As will be seen in the next sub-section, employee voice is another work-related resource that is of value throughout the crisis lifecycle, particularly when its effectiveness is considered in the context of employee engagement.
2.4.4.2 Employee voice

Organisational leaders, by virtue of their behaviour and leadership practices, create either a climate of voice or a climate of silence (Mowbray et al 2015). This section will demonstrate the potency of the former and, by default, the risk associated with the latter, in the context of employee engagement during organisational crises.

In their conceptualisation of voice (see Table 2.5), Dundon et al (2004) depicted its composition as: (i) the expression of an employee’s personal dissatisfaction; (ii) a collective representation of an interest group within the organisation; (iii) the opportunity for employees to be involved in the decision-making process; (iv) the mutual cooperation of individuals as would be expected to occur in workplace committees, councils and working groups. Detert and Burris (2007, p. 869) later defined it as “the discretionary provision of information intended to improve organizational functioning to someone inside an organization with the perceived authority to act”. The degree to which employees display voice behaviour is influenced in part by their leader’s ethical standards (Walumbwa and Schaubroeck 2009) and authenticity (IPA/Tomorrow’s Leader 2012). As Walumbwa and Schaubroeck (2009) explain, ethical leaders engender the psychological safety needed for employees to feel comfortable expressing the information and insights they have accumulated.
Table 2.5. The meaning and articulation of employee voice, adapted from Dundon et al (2004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Voice as:</th>
<th>Purpose and articulation of voice</th>
<th>Mechanisms and practices for voice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Articulation of individual dissatisfaction</td>
<td>To rectify a problem with management or prevent deterioration in relations</td>
<td>Complaint to line manager; grievance procedure; speak-up programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expression of collective organisation</td>
<td>To provide countervailing source of power to management</td>
<td>Union recognition; collective bargaining; industrial action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contribution to management decision-making</td>
<td>To seek improvements in work organisation, quality and productivity</td>
<td>Upward problem-solving; quality circles; suggestion schemes; attitude surveys; self-managed teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstration of mutuality and cooperative relations</td>
<td>To achieve long-term viability for the organisation and its employees</td>
<td>Partnership agreements; joint consultative committees; works councils</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Employee voice is at the core of employee engagement without which disengagement rapidly ensues (Kahn 2010). For example, when employees are prepared to express dissent internally to their leaders, it is often a reflection of their engagement rather than their disengagement, even though they might appear displeased (Kassing et al 2012). As Kahn (2010) colourfully emphasises: “Deaf ears make us mute. We hold our tongue. We nod and do others’ bidding. We disengage (p. 23).” Employee voice is therefore essential, he argues, for organisational learning to occur, for systems to improve, and for processes to adapt. The same sentiments are shared by Beugre (2010) who suggests that employee voice can improve employee engagement, which then improves organisational outcomes, in what essentially becomes a spiralling effect. This is because voice cultivates trust between leaders and employees (Rees et al 2013) in no small part due to the active dialogue it promotes (Ruck and Welch 2012) and the decision-making and innovation it enhances (IPA/Tomorrow’s Company 2012). The problem, however, is that senior leaders frequently assume they are engaging in dialogue when in reality they are not (Purcell 2014a), although this incongruence afflicts line managers as well (IPA/Tomorrow’s Company 2012). Purcell (2014a) explains this is because the mechanisms used, such as social media and company briefings, are usually top-down communication methods. He instead recommends the use of committees and councils so that employees have a genuine opportunity to influence
organisational policies and decisions. It is these opportunities for influence, which employee voice delivers as a first step, that suitably justifies its inclusion in this review as a work-related resource.

Employee voice also has an important role to play in the context of organisational crises. Prior to a crisis, voice is a way through which employees are able to provide the vital information they possess that could prevent an adverse event from occurring (Novak and Sellnow 2009). It is information to which they have unique access by virtue of their closeness to the day-to-day operations of the organisation, thereby warning them that a crisis may be imminent (Simola 2005). Then, during the crisis, and after it, employee voice becomes a valuable opportunity whereby stakeholders can learn from the experience (Rerup 2009). For these reasons, employee voice can be categorised as a work-related resource even though it appears to have been addressed less in the crisis literature than in the employee engagement literature. Therefore:

Research Question 3b: How does employee voice relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?

This review will now turn to the construct of social support, which, unlike employee voice (IPA/Tomorrow’s Company 2012), has been the beneficiary of significant scholarly attention in both disciplines.

2.4.4.3 Social support

In their influential conceptualisation of social support, Cohen and Wills (1985) used the term 'buffering hypothesis' to explain the way in which social support protects people from “the potentially pathogenic influence of stressful events” (p. 310). One of those stressful events, as stipulated by Cohen and Wills, is a crisis of some sort. This section, then, will demonstrate the nature of this relationship and its connection to employee engagement.
To understand the structure of social support, it is instructive to consult some of the items that constitute the widely used Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support by Zimet et al (1988). Whilst the items pertain to family and friends, substituting them for ‘team’ or ‘colleagues’ demonstrates their equivalence from a workplace perspective. For example:

- My family (team) really tries to help me.
- I can count on my friends (colleagues) when things go wrong.
- I can talk about my problems with my family (team).

Social support can become manifest in three forms (Greenglass et al 1996). Emotional support (such as empathy) can buffer stress; informational support (such as a reduction in role ambiguity) can buffer emotional exhaustion; and practical support (such as assistance with a task) can buffer depersonalisation. From a workplace leadership perspective, social support is most frequently referred to as either perceived organisational support (POS) or perceived supervisor support (PSS). POS reflects the extent to which employees feel that the organisation “values their contributions and cares about their wellbeing” (Eisenberger et al 1986, p. 501). PSS is similar except that it pertains to an employee’s immediate supervisor rather than the organisation in general (Kottke and Sharafinski 1988). On account of section 2.4.3 and its associated sub-sections, which focused extensively on leadership resources, this sub-section will instead focus on co-worker social support.

Social support was found by Saks (2006) and Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) to be an antecedent of engagement. In the analysis by Saks (2006), it was identified as important because of the interpersonal exchange inherent in both the construct of social support and the construct of employee engagement. In the study by Schaufeli and Bakker (2004), social support’s influence was explained by the human need to belong. Similar findings linking social support to employee engagement have been reported by Schaufeli et al (2009), Bakker et al (2006), Hakanen and Lindbohm (2008), and Biggs et al (2014). Whilst several scholars, such as Othman and Nasurdin (2013), have found no
relationship between co-worker social support and employee engagement, they seem to be the exception. Social support is therefore included here as a work-related resource because the contradictory evidence of its effectiveness does not necessarily render it counterproductive. In other words, co-worker social support may have a positive effect or a neutral effect on employee engagement, but there is no evidence to suggest it would have a negative effect.

During an organisational crisis, social support is one of the most powerful ways through which healing can begin (Powley and Piderit 2008). As Powley and Cameron (2006) note, it “requires finding spaces for people to connect by listening and being heard, by sharing stories and recounting events, and by receiving the support necessary to deal with difficult emotions caused by the struggle” (pp. 24-25). That also explains why formal social support groups can be of assistance to employees as they try to weather the organisational crisis (Milburn et al 1983). Indeed, it could be argued that providing opportunities for employees to access social support during an organisational crisis is a fundamental aspect of ethical leadership (Seeger and Ulmer 2001). For that reason, it is included here as a work-related resource. Therefore:

Research Question 3c: How does social support relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?

As has been demonstrated in this sub-section, social support is of benefit when employee engagement is the focus. It is also of value when the context is organisational crises. It is reasonable to presume, then, that it would also be an important resource when the two constructs are combined as per the intention of the present research. The same argument can be made in relation to job satisfaction, to which this literature review will now turn.

2.4.4.4 Job satisfaction

In his seminal explication of job satisfaction, Locke (1969) described it as a positive emotional reaction to one’s work. It is encapsulated by the “perceived
relationship between what one wants from one’s job and what one perceives it as offering or entailing” (p. 316). This emotional reaction has already been explored in this literature review, in section 2.2.8, via the consequence of job dissatisfaction in the event of an organisational crisis. It was also explored in section 2.3.2 in the context of its construct uniqueness when compared to employee engagement. In this section, the focus shifts to the way in which job satisfaction can serve as a valuable work-related resource.

In the decades that followed Locke’s work, there was much debate in the literature regarding the quantitative outcomes of job satisfaction, particularly in relation to how it influences job performance (Judge et al 2001). More recently, meta-analyses have indicated the causal relationship is spurious (Bowling 2007), and yet job satisfaction remains a widely researched construct. This may be because, despite its ambiguous link to performance, it is nonetheless an important objective that leaders should pursue because of its impact on a range of other indices (Bowling 2007). These include organisational commitment (Chang 2015), absenteeism (Wegge et al 2007), and organisational citizenship behaviours (Ziegler et al 2012).

Employee engagement can be added to the list. More specifically, a breach of the psychological contract can lead to a deterioration in job satisfaction, which subsequently has flow-on effects on engagement (Rayton and Yalabik 2014). A similar relationship exists in reverse (Saks 2006) whereby the existence of employee engagement can lead to greater feelings of job satisfaction (Giallonardo et al 2010). In either situation, the two constructs influence each other, perhaps because they are both psychologically similar (Fletcher and Robinson 2014). The psychological nature of job satisfaction is further evidenced in research by Lee and Ok (2015), which demonstrates that experiences of job satisfaction are determined in large part by the perceptions of the relationship between leaders and employees. In other words, a strong leader-member exchange generates greater employee engagement, which then leads to enhanced sentiments of job satisfaction. Even though there appears to be substantially more research that positions job satisfaction as an outcome of
employee engagement rather than an antecedent, it is still included here as a work-related resource primarily because of the encouraging work by Rayton and Yalabik (2014), which emphasises its antecedent nature.

During an organisational crisis, job satisfaction is likely to decrease (Begley and Czajka 1993; Langer and Thorup 2006). This can be attributed to the job insecurity with which organisational crises are often associated, the presence of which diminishes job satisfaction (Adkins et al 2001). Even the mere prospect of downsizing is sufficient to deteriorate job satisfaction (Amabile and Conti 1999). Each of those references, however, accords job dissatisfaction as a consequence of an organisational crisis. Of most value to the present research is the way in which the pre-existence of job satisfaction in itself can shelter an employee from the harsh effects of an organisational crisis. The literature does not appear to examine this directly but guidance on this question can be obtained another way. For example, of Hackman and Oldham's (1975) core job dimensions, each of which has a motivating effect on employees, three of the five have been found to make a contribution in the event of an organisational crisis:

- **Variety** during a crisis increases employees’ coping abilities because of the new skills they acquire (Mishra and Spreitzer 1998).
- **Feedback** helps the process of crisis management because of its ability to settle rumours, inform decisions, and enhance organisational learning (Seeger et al 2003).
- **Autonomy** in the event of a crisis is likely to create active participants who take the initiative rather than passive observers who feel victimised (Mishra and Spreitzer 1998).

Job satisfaction is therefore included here as a work-related resource in the context of organisational crises, much like with employee engagement. Therefore:
Research Question 3d: How does job satisfaction relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?

This literature review will now turn to the final work-related resource: challenging work. As will be made evident, depending on the type of challenge, this can be either a resource or a demand.

2.4.4.5 Challenging work

Section 2.4.2 introduced the job demands component of the JD-R by referencing the associated psychological and physical costs. To a certain extent, that was somewhat misleading, because there is one job demand that can actually function as a job resource depending on its nature and the person to whom it is assigned. That demand/resource is ‘challenging work’. This section will demonstrate precisely how challenging work can meet both elements of the JD-R in the context of employee engagement during organisational crises.

Lepine et al (2005), when distinguishing between the varieties of job stressors, placed them into two separate categories. Some of these can be referred to as hindrances while others can be referred to as challenges. Hindrances are the stressors that, on account of their obstructive and threatening nature, have a negative effect on an individual’s satisfaction and commitment. These include role conflict, role ambiguity, and bureaucracy. Challenges, on the other hand, are stressors that have a positive effect on employees because they result in personal growth, resilience, and the generation of other beneficial outcomes. These challenges include complex work and a demanding workload. This scholarly work was later expanded in the context of employee engagement – and the JD-R – when Crawford et al (2010) distinguished between ‘challenge demands’ and ‘hindrance demands’. The scholars argued that not all demands, as depicted by the JD-R, necessarily lead to disengagement. Indeed the opposite can be the case if employees derive meaning and enjoyment from the demands in question. In response, Schaufeli and Taris (2014, p. 56) redefined the meaning of job resources and job demands. In essence, a job resource became
that which is “positively valued” while a job demand became that which is “negatively valued”. This then renders challenge demands as resources rather than demands by virtue of the fact they are perceived in a positive manner.

The allure of challenge demands and employee engagement is what prompts some employees to engage in job crafting as a way of increasing what they perceive to be job resources (Tims and Bakker 2010). This, in effect, makes their work more interesting (Halbesleben et al 2009). Leaders can also achieve a similar outcome on behalf of their employees when they empower them, perhaps by the delegation of responsibilities they perceive as challenge demands, which subsequently have a positive effect on employee engagement (Tuckey et al 2012). While Tadic et al (2015) and Albrecht (2015) likewise found a positive link between challenge demands and employee engagement, they also identified a relationship between hindrance demands and employee disengagement, thereby verifying the contrasting nature of challenges depending on the context.

The subjective interpretation of challenges and hindrances is perhaps what makes employee engagement so important, particularly during an organisational crisis. For example, Salanova et al (2010, p. 126) state that even though engaged employees may “have to deal with threats or demands in the work environment, they are more likely to perceive these as challenges”. In other words, positively. Organisational crises are indeed such a threat but whether they are perceived as a demand or a resource may be determined by the degree to which employees are engaged. Section 2.4.2, for example, depicted organisational crises as a job demand in light of the overwhelming evidence that the effect on employees is usually negative. Could it be, though, that for some employees, the existence of an organisational crisis could be a challenge demand (as opposed to a hindrance demand) and therefore a catalyst for engagement? Whilst this is a possibility, there is not enough support for such a position when reviewing the scholarly work presented in sections 2.2.2, 2.2.7 and 2.2.8. Organisational crises, therefore, will remain a job demand for
the purpose of this literature review, but will be revised should the phenomenological research to follow suggest otherwise. Therefore:

\[ \text{Research Question 3e: How does challenging work relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?} \]

2.4.4.6 Summary comments on work-related demands and resources

To conclude this section, and the related sub-sections that preceded it, there are a number of work-related resources and demands that could relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises. Of the five that have been presented, four of these – human agency, employee voice, social support, and job satisfaction – are well placed as resources on the JD-R. The fifth – challenging work – can be either a demand or a resource depending on the expectations attached to the work and the person to whom it is assigned. It is also the case that these work-related resources can relate to each other. For example, a case study of an American retail chain found the establishment of regular leadership forums strengthened employee engagement because of the simultaneous opportunities for voice and social support (Mirvis 2012). Likewise, the combination of job satisfaction and challenging work can be seen in the manifestation of job crafting, which has positive correlations with employee engagement (Bakker 2011). These subjectivities become even more intricate when personal traits and resources are taken into account. It is these that this literature review will address next.

2.4.5 Personal demands and resources

Some employees, by virtue of their character or circumstance, amass a number of personal resources that can increase their resilience and diminish their exhaustion (Xanthopoulou et al 2007). These resources are an antecedent of employee engagement because their presence enhances the capacity that employees have for goal attainment (Bakker and Demerouti 2008; Karatepe and
Olubade (2009). This is in line with Macey and Schneider’s (2008) conceptualisation, which depicts employee engagement as a process that begins with trait engagement. This infers that employee engagement is initially dispositional. In other words, some employees are more easily engaged because they have personal resources that compel them into a motivational state. Others, who may not be as well equipped, could be regarded as having personal demands – aspects of themselves that prevent them from reaching a state of engagement. Some personal resources are malleable – they are “open to change and development” (Luthans and Youssef 2007, p. 326) – whereas others are relatively stable and are therefore more difficult to change. This section, as summarised in Table 2.6, will make the case that there are a number of personal resources that could be expected to relate to the context of employee engagement during times of organisational crisis. Much like the previous section on work-related resources, the eight to be profiled in this section have been selected for two reasons. First, several arose spontaneously in the phenomenological interviews that formed the present research. Second, many of these personal resources appear prominently in both the employee engagement literature and the organisational crisis literature. These personal resources are: hope; resilience; self-efficacy; positive affect; proactivity; focus of attention; conscientiousness; and autotelic personality / flow.

Much like the preceding sections on leadership-related and work-related resources, each of the resources in this section, too, will begin with a general overview of the resource in question followed by its application in the context of employee engagement and organisational crises.
Table 2.6. The influence of personal resources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employee engagement</th>
<th>Hope</th>
<th>Resilience</th>
<th>Self-efficacy</th>
<th>Positive affect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hopeful employees are more engaged because they have greater energy, perseverance, and dedication.</td>
<td>Resilient employees are more engaged because they are able to maintain control, exert influence, cope more effectively and adapt more easily to changing situations.</td>
<td>Self-efficacious employees proactively seek and create their own job resources, thereby fuelling engagement and protecting themselves from other work demands.</td>
<td>Employees high in positive affect are more engaged because they have greater stores of excitement and interest.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational crises</td>
<td>Hopeful employees cope with organisational crises better because they have more confidence, motivation, and faster response rates.</td>
<td>Resilient employees are more likely to recover quickly from organisational crises and are less likely to react negatively to bad news.</td>
<td>Self-efficacious employees are more likely to take risks, adjust to change, innovate, and see organisational crises as opportunities rather than threats.</td>
<td>Employees high in positive affect are more likely to collaborate, communicate, and build essential social networks during organisational crises.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proactivity</td>
<td>Focus of attention</td>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>Autotelic personality / flow</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee engagement</td>
<td>Proactive employees are more likely to intentionally select work environments in which they can be engaged, and then embark on job crafting to further strengthen their levels of engagement.</td>
<td>Focused employees concentrate their energies on tasks rather than anxieties, thereby increasing levels of engagement.</td>
<td>Conscientious employees are better equipped to turn their engagement into greater performance, job involvement, and extra-role behaviour.</td>
<td>Autotelic employees, or those in flow, are more likely to embrace the challenges that could lead to engagement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational crises</td>
<td>Proactive employees seek learning opportunities that arise from organisational crises and are more likely to innovate.</td>
<td>Focused employees may be able to weather an organisational crisis more resiliently if their focus is directed at the right areas.</td>
<td>Conscientious employees are valuable during organisational crises because of their analytical skills and problem solving abilities.</td>
<td>Autotelic personalities, or those in flow, can view organisational crises as intellectual challenges and as meaning-related experiences, while flow itself can be a buffer from the consequences arising from the crisis.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.4.5.1 Hope

Hope is defined as the “the sum of perceived capabilities to produce routes to desired goals, along with the perceived motivation to use those routes” (Snyder 2000, p. 8). More specifically, hope comprises three main elements: (i) valuable objectives, the attainment of which involves a particular amount of uncertainty; (ii) a pathway that could result in the achievement of those objectives; and (iii) willpower and agency that compel an individual to set out on that pathway in pursuit of those goals. Organisations high in hope are characterised by a number of attributes: little fear of management; equality in opportunity; respectful treatment of stakeholders; shared responsibility; and two-way communication (Adams et al 2003). For a hopeful environment to materialise, effective leadership is essential (Helland and Winston 2005).

Hope is a personal resource deemed essential for the generation of employee engagement (Sweetman and Luthans 2010). It is an antecedent that often arises as a result of positive emotions experienced the previous day (Ouweneel et al 2012). As Ouweneel et al note, an employee’s positive emotions at the end of Day 1 result in a sense of hope at the beginning of Day 2. When employees arrive at work feeling hopeful of achieving their objectives, higher levels of engagement ensue because they embark on their tasks with greater energy and dedication. When impediments arise, they are less likely to see them as reasons to give up, and are more likely to view them as reasons to persevere (Sweetman and Luthans 2010). It is for these factors that hope has been empirically linked not only to employee engagement but also to performance, job satisfaction and organisational commitment (Youssef and Luthans 2007).

In regards to organisational crises, whilst it is true that negative emotions are most common, hope is a positive consequence that can still materialise (Maitlis and Sonenshein 2010). Hope’s beneficial effect can be explained by the tendency for hopeful employees to more-confidently navigate the unpredictable nature of such turbulent periods (Avey et al 2008) while simultaneously
generating positive emotions and motivation (Shamir and Howell 1999). Shamir and Howell further state that leaders who instil hope among their employees are subsequently able to get them to respond faster to the rapid changes that ensue.

Hope, then, is evidently of benefit in relation to employee engagement, and there is some indication that it is similarly of benefit during organisational crises. The combination of both constructs, then, can be expected to result in a positive relationship. Therefore:

Research Question 4a: How does hope relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?

Hope is also the catalyst for a range of other personal resources, such as self-efficacy and resilience (Sweetman and Luthans 2010). It is the latter to which this literature review will now turn.

2.4.5.2 Resilience

Of the myriad personal resources available, resilience is said to be the most important in the context of stressful workplaces and turbulent organisations (Avey et al 2009). It is defined as the “capacity to rebound or bounce back from adversity, conflict, failure” and a range of other setbacks (Luthans 2002, p. 702). Whilst some individuals are inherently resilient, resilience is nonetheless a resource that can be developed, especially via the use of human resource policies (Lengnick-Hall et al 2011). One such policy is the training intervention, which can cognitively reframe an adverse event in such a way that participants can more-confidently confront it in future (Avey et al 2009). Other solutions include social support, employee assistance programs, flexible work practices, diversity management (Bardoel 2014), and transformational leadership (Harland et al 2005; Sommer et al 2015). Resilience is both a proactive and a reactive resource (Youssef and Luthans 2007). From a proactive perspective, resilient individuals perceive setbacks as opportunities for growth. From a
reactive perspective, individuals recognise the potentially devastating impact of a setback, and so they compel themselves into a state of resilience in an attempt to quickly recover.

Resilience appears frequently in the employee engagement literature because it is a core plank of the seminal work by Schaufeli et al (2002). As explained in section 2.3, employee engagement comprises vigour, dedication, and absorption. Resilience is a key element of the ‘vigour’ component, which means its measurement is included in the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale, the most popular scholarly instrument for measuring engagement (Fletcher and Robinson 2014; Schaufeli 2014). The key question pertaining to resilience is: “At my job, I am very resilient, mentally” (Schaufeli et al 2002, p. 89). That question, however, was part of the original extended version of the UWES. In the shortened version developed four years later, the question pertaining to resilience was deemed less reflective of engagement and was subsequently removed (Schaufeli et al 2006). Nevertheless, the relationship between resilience and employee engagement can be explained by the way in which resilience empowers employees to maintain control, exert influence, cope more effectively and adapt more easily to changing situations (Bakker and Demerouti 2008). It is also important to note that, despite its removal from the shortened version of the UWES, resilience still remains a core element in definitions of employee engagement. As Daugherty Biddison et al (2016, p. 32) note: “Engagement reflects relatively high reserves of emotional energy and capacity for mental resilience.”

As can be expected, resilience has also received significant attention in the crisis literature in two respects. The first, and most prominent, is in relation to resilient organisations, which comprises the processes, systems and controls that strengthen an organisation during times of adversity (Sutcliffe and Vogus 2003). This type of resilience helps explain why some organisations survive irrespective of a crisis while others fail (Lee et al 2013). It has been found, for example, that leaders can foster resilience during the crisis-planning phase (Somers 2009). Somers infers that, rather than developing a step-by-step crisis
management plan, leaders may be better served building organisations that are inherently more resilient so that they adapt more easily when an unexpected crisis hits. The learning that then occurs from surviving a crisis is a further way through which organisational resilience can be built, thereby fortifying the organisation from future crises (Lalonde 2007).

The second type of crisis-related resilience, which appears to have been studied less frequently, is that which pertains to employees. There is evidence, for example, to suggest that resilient individuals are likely to recover from a crisis sooner than others (Powley 2009). This can be facilitated by the cultivation of social connections and interactions. As Powley explains, the social nature of organisations can result in greater resilience because close workplace relationships lead to perceptions of safety, compassion and healing. This is particularly important during the later stages of an organisational crisis (Wooten and James 2008) when employees may be feeling burnt out. This is crucial not only for employees but also for leaders, since their ability to cultivate positivity among their workforce is attributed in part to their own resilience (French and Holden 2012). As French and Holden add, resilient teams are less likely to react negatively to bad news.

Resilience, therefore, is a personal resource that, by virtue of its ability to help individuals recover from setbacks (Smith et al 2010), is related to both employee engagement and organisational crises. Therefore:

Research Question 4b: How does resilience relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?

If research were to discover that employee engagement can remain high irrespective of an organisational crisis, or that high rates of employee engagement can help the organisation recover more speedily from a crisis, resilience may prove to be the resource that explains those effects. A similar explanation could perhaps also apply to the personal resource of self-efficacy, which this literature review will now address.
2.4.5.3 Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is the personal conviction that one’s behaviour will result in a desired outcome (Bandura 1977). Bandura’s seminal theory conceptualised self-efficacy as comprising four dimensions. The first is *performance accomplishments*, such as prior successes that instil a sense of confidence in an individual. The second is *vicarious experience*, which comes from the inspiration generated from observing the behaviour and accomplishments of others. The third is *verbal persuasion*, which necessitates the use of motivating language to convince individuals of their potential. The fourth is *emotional arousal*, which includes coping mechanisms that help individuals overcome their fears. In a meta-analysis spanning 20 years, self-efficacy was found to be a consistently strong predictor of work performance (Stajkovic and Luthans 1998). In addition to the aforementioned dimensions, a recent explanation of this relationship placed the credit on transformational leadership. Transformational leaders are able to build the self-efficacy of employees such that employees are consequently capable of generating greater performance (Hannah et al 2015). In other words, when employees are led to believe they have the ability to perform well, they are subsequently better equipped with the resources to do so.

A similar relationship exists in relation to employee engagement. Transformational leaders, particularly those who use vicarious experience and verbal persuasion, are able to generate self-efficacy in their employees, which then stimulates levels of employee engagement (Salanova et al 2011). Other resources, too, such as social support, can increase self-efficacy first and then employee engagement second (Xanthopoulou et al 2007), with subsequent flow-on effects on work performance (Xanthopoulou et al 2008). In addition, self-efficacious employees can proactively seek and create job resources for themselves, thereby further fuelling their own engagement (Xanthopoulou et al 2009). This reciprocal effect of self-efficacy influencing employee engagement and of employee engagement influencing self-efficacy has been shown to be true.
even in longitudinal studies extending over a period of eight months (Simbula et al. 2011). That this occurs can be attributed partly to the ability of self-efficacy to mitigate the negative consequences associated with emotional workplace demands, thereby protecting employees from the factors that may otherwise diminish their engagement (Heuven et al. 2006). Importantly, self-efficacy extends beyond employees to also encompass their leaders (Luthans and Peterson 2002). In other words, the more self-efficacious the leader, the more likely that employees will be engaged.

This type of leadership self-efficacy is similarly evident in the crisis literature, which seems to contain more references to the self-efficacy of leaders than of employees. Most notably, Paglis and Green (2002) found that self-efficacious leaders operating in crisis environments were more inclined to take risks and to embark on change initiatives. This makes them more likely to view organisational crises as opportunities rather than threats (Brockner and James 2008). In addition, leaders characterised by self-efficacy can be expected to invest in the resources needed to stimulate innovation even when their organisations are in decline (Mone et al. 1998) and to subsequently make better decisions (Sayegh et al. 2004). From an employee perspective, leaders – particularly those who are charismatic – can increase their employees’ self-efficacy during organisational crises by openly expressing their confidence in their employees’ abilities (Shamir and Howell 1999). This is especially important during times of situational uncertainty because self-efficacious employees are equipped with the coping resources required to adjust to the impending changes (Terry and Callan 2000).

There is evidence, then, to indicate that self-efficacy’s relationship to employee engagement and its relevance during crisis environments may be informative when both constructs are studied in unison. This is substantiated by a recent longitudinal study by Delahaij et al. (2016). While not an organisational crisis, but not too dissimilar from one either, Delahaij and colleagues examined the influence of self-efficacy on soldiers while they were involved in threatening military situations. The scholars discovered that the existence of self-efficacy
resulted in higher rates of engagement because of its ability to buffer the negative effects arising from the environmental threats. Therefore:

*Research Question 4c: How does self-efficacy relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?*

The buffering of negative effects can likewise be achieved by the personality trait of positive affect (Folkman and Moskowitz 2000). It is to this personal resource that this literature review will now turn.

2.4.5.4 Positive affect

An individual high in positive affect is enthusiastic, alert, active, focused, and pleasant (Watson et al 1988). Lyubomirsky et al (2005) go further to include confidence, optimism, likeability, energy, flexibility, physical wellbeing and coping. Lyubomirsky et al also detail some of the associated benefits. From the perspective of employees, these include greater employability, superior performance evaluations, higher productivity, lower rates of burnout, and enhanced job satisfaction. From the perspective of employers, the benefits include lower absenteeism and lower staff turnover. Even though positive affect is usually considered a trait, in contrast with the temporary state of positive mood (George 1991), there is evidence to suggest positive affect can still be cultivated among employees, particularly by authentic leaders (Rego et al 2014).

Positive affect and employee engagement are linked (Bakker and Bal 2010), especially via the engagement component of vigour, which Shirom (2004) describes as physical power, energy and liveliness. Both employee engagement and positive affect have a motivational influence, with engagement considered to be both an antecedent and a consequence of positive affect (Salanova et al 2010). This dual relationship is articulated by Sonnentag and colleagues in two separate analyses. From an antecedent perspective, engaged employees are more likely to display high rates of positive affect, especially when they are
given an opportunity to temporarily detach from their work (Sonnentag et al 2008). In reverse, positive affect is a personal resource that excites employees and stimulates their interest, thereby increasing levels of engagement (Sonnentag et al 2010). This is substantiated by Macey and Schneider (2008) and Christian et al (2011) who demonstrate that an individual high in positive affect is subsequently more likely to be engaged.

As can be expected, positive affect among employees is diminished during an organisational crisis (Damen et al 2008). This often occurs due to the violation of the psychological contract (Fediuk et al 2010). In contrast, when employees’ expectations during an organisational crisis are exceeded, positive affect ensues. Damen et al (2008) go further, however, to suggest that leaders should consider displaying negative affect in crisis environments more so than positive affect. That is because a mismatch in emotions between leaders and employees can detract from job performance. An explanation for this effect can be seen in experimental research by Madera and Smith (2009), who found that leaders who displayed anger and sadness during a crisis were positively viewed by employees because their emotions were interpreted as strong and sympathetic. What is of most value to the present research, however, is not so much the congruence or incongruence of leaders’ emotions with those of their employees, but more so the two-way influence of organisational crises and positive affect. For example, the existence of positive affect among employees may result in greater collaboration and communication because of the friendships and social networks that arise when individuals share a traumatic event in common (Powley 2009). In this respect, it seems the presence of positive affect may be a valuable commodity during times of organisational crisis. This value, presumably, can be facilitated by employee engagement. Therefore:

*Research Question 4d: How does positive affect relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?*

As discussed in this section, positive affect can be both an antecedent and a consequence of employee engagement. Its presence during an organisational
crisis, then, may be one way through which the crisis can be endured more resiliently. A similar relationship exists in relation to proactivity, which this literature review will address next.

2.4.5.5 Proactivity

An individual with a proactive personality, as defined by Bateman and Crant (1993), is someone who does not see his or her situation as fixed. Rather, the proactive person feels confident taking action to change environmental circumstances by showing initiative, identifying opportunities, and then acting on those opportunities. Having a proactive personality is positively related to job performance and organisational citizenship behaviours (Spitzmuller et al 2015), job search success (Brown et al 2006), and enhanced job satisfaction and leader-member exchange (Li et al 2010). Whilst proactive personality is considered a trait, its state-like manifestation is proactive behaviour (Crant 2000), the existence of which is reciprocally facilitated by job control (Li et al 2014). This means that proactive employees obtain greater control, the generation of which in turn stimulates greater proactivity. Similarly, there are a number of antecedents of proactive behaviour. These include job autonomy, co-worker trust, and flexible role orientation (Parker et al 2006), driven by empowering leaders high in emotional intelligence (Erkutlu and Chafra 2012).

There are times, however, when such leaders are unavailable, in which case a proactive personality becomes important in terms of employee engagement (Bakker et al 2012b). This is in line with Macey and Schneider’s (2008) conceptual framework, which situated proactive personality as a trait that can stimulate engagement because proactive employees are more likely to select and create work environments in which engagement is possible. Proactive employees, for example, are inclined to exercise job crafting, which means they mould their job into one aligned with their abilities, thereby also generating greater performance (Bakker et al 2012b). The influence of a proactive personality on employee engagement was further substantiated by Christian et al (2011) who concluded that employers should hire people with such a
disposition since their tendency to immerse themselves in work could lead to enhanced rates of engagement. One explanation for this relationship is illustrated by Sonnentag (2003), who demonstrated that rested employees experienced higher rates of engagement, which then led to proactive behaviours such as personal initiative and the pursuit of learning opportunities. A similar mediating relationship was found by Salanova and Schaufeli (2008). In their study, the presence of job resources such as feedback and variety increased employee engagement, which then had flow-on effects on proactive behaviour.

The value of proactivity also becomes evident during an organisational crisis, particularly in relation to learning. More specifically, there are two types of crisis-led learning: reactive and proactive (Prochaska et al 2001). The former relates to that which occurs as soon as a crisis arises, and necessitates immediate learning strategies in order to quickly recover. The latter – proactive learning – is anticipatory. It reflects the learning that occurs in preparation for a potential crisis. This includes understanding systems, obtaining knowledge, sharing information, and being open to change. Such a proactive approach to crisis management means that organisational crises are more easily detected and managed (Mitroff et al 1988). It is a process characterised by quick decisions and innovative initiatives that subsequently turn organisational crises into opportunities (Carbonara and Caiazza 2010). The virtues of proactive crisis planning have also been demonstrated by Barton (2001), Ritchie (2004), Wang et al (2009), Wilson and Eilertsen (2010), and many others.

The crisis literature, however, appears to focus almost exclusively on the proactivity of managers in anticipation of an organisational crisis. Whilst this is certainly valuable, and has given rise to much of the recent research on crisis management (Jaques 2010), it would also be of value to understand the role of employee proactivity, not so much prior to a crisis but during it. It could be, for example, that employee engagement may be affected – either positively or negatively – by the extent to which employees are prepared to embark on proactive behaviour, thereby aiding or hindering the recovery. Therefore:
Research Question 4e: How does proactivity relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?

As will be discussed in the next section, the same conundrum applies in regards to focus of attention.

2.4.5.6 Focus of attention

Focus of attention at work reflects the targets towards which employees direct their cognitive orientation (Gardner et al 1987), thereby representing what “an employee thinks about, concentrates on, and cognitively attends to while at work” (p. 352). Whilst the targets of employees’ focus of attention vary, Gardner et al note that they generally comprise three categories. The first is job factors, such as the type of activities and the feedback one receives; the second is work unit factors, such as the number of colleagues in one’s team and the extent to which they are interdependent; and the third is off-the-job factors, such as hobbies and volunteering. Consequently, an employee’s reaction to change in the workplace is influenced by the extent to which their focus of attention is impacted (Gardner et al 1989). For example, if an employee’s focus of attention is directed at a job factor such as autonomy but an organisational change only has an impact on a work-unit factor such as a corporate restructure, the employee is unlikely to be affected unless it seems that the focus of attention – in this case, autonomy – is at risk. Even though focus of attention is considered a trait (Gardner et al 1987), which infers that the areas on which employees choose to concentrate remain relatively stable, there is evidence to suggest that focus of attention can nonetheless shift – and indeed be shifted. Organisational support programs, job redesign, the utilisation of employees’ strengths, and the identification of more-constructive areas on which to focus are some of the methods through which leaders can facilitate shifts in focus of attention (Gardner and Pierce 2013).

Focus of attention and employee engagement are two separate constructs (Gardner and Pierce 2013). The distinction is that focus of attention is
concerned simply with the area on which an employee chooses to concentrate. Employee engagement, in contrast, is concerned with the emotion associated with that area of concentration. Empirical studies examining focus of attention with employee engagement are lacking, hence why Gardner and Pierce have called for future research in this area. Kahn’s (1990) conceptual work, however, considers attention to be a core determinant of employee engagement by stating that engaged employees are those who maintain “a focus on tasks rather than anxieties” (p. 716). A similar connection is made by Rothbard (2001) who asserts that focus of attention has a motivating influence and is therefore inseparable from psychological presence, which Kahn (1990) utilised as his defining explanation of what constitutes employee engagement. In addition, if it is accepted that engagement comprises the exertion of cognitive, emotional and physical effort, there is evidence to suggest that focus of attention comprises the cognitive component, thereby stimulating engagement (Ho et al 2011).

The limited references to focus of attention in the organisational crisis literature appear inconsistent with the definition by Gardner et al (1987). For example, D'Aveni and MacMillan (1990) found that leaders of failing firms direct their focus of attention on areas that are not of relevance to the crisis, while Christensen and Kohls (2003) assert that decision-makers shift their focus of attention inwards during times of crisis, thereby neglecting stakeholder needs. In both the aforementioned cases, the focus of attention to which the scholars refer is that of leaders. Whilst these are important contributions to the study of organisational crises, they do not align with Gardner et al's (1987) construct, which is concerned with employees’ focus of attention. This gap in the literature generates a potentially valuable field of research, whereby scholars could explore how focus of attention relates to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises. It could be, for instance, that an employee’s focus on job security could make the experience of an organisational crisis worse since the existence of the crisis may jeopardise that security. Alternatively, an employee’s focus of attention on a supervisor’s actions may enhance feelings of engagement if that supervisor, during the crisis,
demonstrates behaviours in line with the positive leadership styles identified throughout section 2.4.3. Therefore:

Research Question 4f: How does focus of attention relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?

The purpose of this section has been to argue that focus of attention – either as a trait or a state – can be a personal resource, which during times of organisational crisis may relate to the context of employee engagement when it is directed towards constructive areas. Focus of attention could also be considered a benign personal demand. This infers that an employee’s focus of attention may have neither a positive nor a negative effect in the absence of an organisational crisis, but that the manifestation of a crisis may trigger the disposition’s negative side effects. The same cannot be said for conscientiousness, which, as will be demonstrated in the next section, is a trait that is unambiguous in terms of its positive role in relation to both employee engagement and organisational crises.

2.4.5.7 Conscientiousness

Conscientiousness is composed of two main elements: dynamism and control (Rolland 2002). The dynamism element comprises an orientation towards success and task completion while the control element comprises “organization, perseverance, thoroughness, respect for standards and procedures” (p. 8). Conscientious employees are therefore more likely to autonomously set goals and to stay committed to those goals (Barrick et al 1993), thereby generating greater performance than other personality traits (Dudley et al 2006). Some of the additional benefits include dependability, hard work, orderliness, competence, dutifulness and discipline (Costa et al 1991). Even though there are downsides associated with this trait, such as excessive cautiousness (Costa et al 1991), inflexibility (George and Zhou 2001) and prolonged decision-making (Le Pine et al 2000), the positives appear to be more common. As will
be demonstrated in this section, this is certainly the case in relation to employee engagement and organisational crises.

Conscientiousness is one explanation for the positive relationship between employee engagement and job performance (Bakker et al 2012a). As Bakker et al found, the deliberate and well-planned behaviour associated with conscientious employees enables them to transform their engagement into high-quality performance. They are also more likely to embark on active learning. The scholars conclude that engagement, therefore, is not enough. It needs to be moderated by other factors, with conscientiousness being one such factor. It is for this reason that Christian et al (2011) recommend that employers recruit individuals high in conscientiousness, since the personal responsibility associated with conscientious employees means they are more likely to be involved and invested in their work. Similarly, the engagement generated by conscientious employees can culminate in a greater frequency of extra-role behaviours (Sulea et al 2012) and lower rates of cynicism and exhaustion (Mostert and Rothmann 2006). When compared to other personality traits, particularly the remaining four within the Big Five taxonomy (extraversion, agreeableness, neuroticism, and openness), conscientiousness is evidently the most powerful influencer of engagement (Kim et al 2009) because conscientious employees are “more likely to drive their energy into work, complete the job, and ultimately feel a strong sense of professional efficacy” (p. 102).

The conscientious act of thorough analysis situates conscientiousness as an important trait during organisational crises (Smits and Ally 2003) since it is one way through which complex problems may be more-effectively solved. Further, when an organisation is perceived by its employees as being conscientious throughout a crisis, positive benefits ensue such as employee loyalty, emotional attachment, and perceived job security (Chun 2001). This indicates, then, that conscientiousness has a potentially valuable role to play during such turbulent times, even though it appears to have received less attention in the crisis literature than the other resources discussed thus far in this review.
The combined evidence depicted above indicates that, in the context of organisational crises, the trait of conscientiousness could have a beneficial impact on employee engagement. Therefore:

*Research Question 4g: How does conscientiousness relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?*

Incidentally, conscientiousness is also a predictor of flow (Ross and Keiser 2014), which is a manifestation of autotelic personality (Csikszentmihalyi 1975). It is to this final personal resource that this literature review will now turn.

2.4.5.8 *Autotelic personality and flow*

An autotelic individual is “one who does things for their own sake, rather than in order to achieve some external goal” (Asakawa 2004, p. 126). The behavioural manifestation of autotelic personality is what Csikszentmihalyi (1975) refers to as flow. Flow is most likely to occur while individuals are at work (Engeser and Baumann 2016) in jobs that they perceive as exciting and fulfilling. As a result, there are a number of positive consequences, not only at one’s workplace but also in one’s life (Csikszentmihalyi 1989). These include resilient coping strategies, higher rates of self-esteem, lower levels of anxiety, and a stronger sense of fulfilment (Asakawa 2010). In the workplace, flow appears to be experienced most frequently by those in leadership positions (Csikszentmihalyi 1990) and comprises three dimensions: absorption, work enjoyment, and intrinsic work motivation (Bakker 2008).

Flow shares with employee engagement a sense of immersion in one’s work but with a key distinction: whereas flow relates primarily to cognitive stimulation, engagement comprises not just cognition but also physical and emotional stimulation (May et al 2004). A further point of differentiation is that, whilst the two constructs are similar, flow is generally a short-term experience whereas
employee engagement is usually more persistent (Schaufeli and Bakker 2004). Youssef-Morgan and Bockorny (2014) theorise that the relationship between the two constructs could be that flow is an intermediate state that resides between job resources and employee engagement. In other words, the availability of job resources can generate experiences of flow, which then lead to greater levels of engagement. In Macey and Schneider’s (2008) conceptualisation of engagement, autotelic personality is included as an essential component. The scholars assert that the autotelic personality trait and its state manifestation of flow result in employees that are more willing to embrace challenges and are therefore more easily engaged.

Flow is also a method through which an organisational crisis may be resiliently endured. More specifically, leaders can cultivate flow among employees by framing the crisis as an intellectual challenge that needs to be resolved by the entire team (Rajah and Arvey 2013). As Rajah and Arvey note, this adds meaning to the adverse experience and empowers employees such that they feel less like victims and more like influencers. Even though the organisational crisis literature lacks substantive references to either autotelic personality or flow, apart from the one just mentioned, both concepts materialise in related ways. For example, “it seems clear that flow serves as a buffer against adversity” (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 2009, p. 201); that “even the worst conditions will yield enjoyable experiences if one performs the right kind of cognitive restructuring” (Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi 1988, p. 90); and that “one characteristic of individuals who manage to survive situations of prolonged hardship ... is that they arrange their environment and their actions so as to create the elements of flow” (Logan 1988, p. 173). The key words in those references – such as adversity and hardship – appear frequently in the crisis literature, as evidenced, for instance, in DuBrin’s (2013a) *Handbook of Research on Crisis Leadership in Organizations*.

It seems, therefore, that autotelic personality, by virtue of its potential to influence employee engagement (Young and Steelman 2016), may have a role to
play during organisational crises. This leads to the final research question arising from this literature review:

*Research Question 4h: How does autotelic personality relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises?*

### 2.4.5.9 Summary comments on personal resources

This section has detailed eight personal resources that could result in an engaging effect at times of organisational crisis: hope, resilience, self-efficacy, positive affect, proactivity, focus of attention, conscientiousness, and autotelic personality. Some of these have interdependent relationships. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the psychological capital construct, which comprises three of the aforementioned personal resources – hope, resilience, and self-efficacy – as well as optimism (Luthans et al 2007), and has been found to be associated with high levels of employee engagement (Simons and Buitendach 2013). That aside, the JD-R provides the foundation that explains the way in which personal resources result in advantageous outcomes. In essence, if an employee’s personal resources outweigh the demands imposed by the organisational crisis, that employee could reasonably be expected to maintain his or her levels of engagement. Indeed, should those personal resources also be supported by additional resources – such as those of a leadership nature as articulated in section 2.4.3, or those of a work-related nature as articulated in section 2.4.4 – engagement would be strengthened further. Importantly, the absence of those resources, or the presence of demands that go beyond the organisational crisis, could instead result in disengagement. This relationship will be illustrated via a crisis-specific adaptation of the JD-R, which will be presented in the next section of this literature review: the conclusion.
2.5 Conclusion

There has been a single premise underlying this literature review: that organisational crises and employee engagement are better understood by exploring the way in which they relate to each other. The one theoretical model underpinning this review has been the JD-R. Among the myriad resources and demands that could be expected to relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises, three categories have been identified: (i) leadership demands and resources; (ii) work-related demands and resources; and (iii) personal demands and resources. In the absence of empirical work examining the two constructs in unison, this literature review has demonstrated that future research in this field is warranted and that the current study in particular is justified. The critical nature of organisational crises (e.g. Carmeli and Schaubroeck 2008; Seeger et al 2003) and the performance-related benefits arising from employee engagement (e.g. Harter et al 2002; Salanova et al 2005) lend themselves to such a study.

From a conceptual perspective, the primary outcome of this literature review is the development of a crisis-specific adaptation of the JD-R based on a model first developed by Bakker and Demerouti (2008). As can be seen in Figure 2.6, this crisis-specific model incorporates a number of components:
• The first is that employees, when equipped with resources of a work-related nature (agency, voice, social support, job satisfaction, and challenging work), and of a personal nature (hope, resilience, self-efficacy, positive affect, proactivity, focus of attention, conscientiousness, and autotelic personality), may be fortified from future organisational crises. The crisis itself may be considered a demand.

• The effect of the crisis may be accentuated by the leadership style of the employees’ leaders. Some of these styles (laissez-faire and autocratic) may be considered a demand for the negative effect they might impose, while others (transformational, transactional, servant, and authentic) may be considered resources on account of their positive effect.

• A surplus of resources may generate engagement irrespective of the organisational crisis, thereby leading to greater levels of performance. In contrast, a surplus of demands may see disengagement ensue and, with that, the risk of deviant behaviour.
It is not the intention of the present research to prove or disprove the crisis-specific adaptation of the JD-R. Neither is it this researcher’s intention to answer all the research questions that have arisen as a result of this literature review. As will be explicated in the next section, a phenomenological methodology will be adopted since the aim of the present research is to understand rather than explain. It is therefore hoped this qualitative and exploratory approach will spontaneously identify which of the aforementioned demands and resources are perceived to relate to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises based on the lived experience of those who have experienced the phenomenon.
Chapter 3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The present research used phenomenology to explore the problem statement introduced in section 1.3: To understand employee engagement during organisational crises. In justifying why phenomenology was the most appropriate method, this chapter will relate it to the research paradigm underpinning the current study before progressing to a detailed account of the sampling strategy, the way in which the data was collected and analysed, and the ethical considerations that ensured high levels of validity and reliability.

3.2 Research paradigms

A paradigm is a set of values that guide an individual to take certain actions in their work and their life (Guba 1990). A research paradigm, therefore, influences a researcher via the values and beliefs they hold. There are two main research paradigms: positivist and interpretive. Positivism assumes observations in research can be made neutrally and that conclusions can be drawn without bias (Duberley et al 2012). It is a deductive process suitable for quantitative methods (Rubin and Rubin 2012). In contrast, the interpretive view reflects the subjectivity of the human experience and the value derived from methods that rely on words and sensations (Willis 2007). The interpretive paradigm is usually an inductive process (Rowlands 2005), which accepts that multiple realities and perspectives exist (Rubin and Rubin 2012). Both paradigms serve a valuable purpose by exploring research problems via different vantage points. That is why, for some problems, the two are useful in combination as a mixed methods approach (Creswell 2015). Nevertheless, for reasons to be explained throughout this section, the most suitable paradigm for the present research was interpretive, particularly that of social constructivism.
Social constructivism reflects the search to understand a particular experience to which an individual has attached subjective meanings (Creswell 2013). Those underlined terms are linked to the objective of the current study, which sought to understand the experience of an organisational crisis via the subjectivity of each individual’s engagement. Such an inquiry is important to social constructivists because it challenges the notion that one reality exists since an individual’s perspective of what is real may be very different to another individual’s perspective (Guba 1990). As Husserl (1975) argued, “the world is nothing other than what [people are] aware of and what appears valid” for them (p. 8). The mere notion of reality implies an inevitable truth that social constructivists therefore seek to disprove by demonstrating that reality is multi-faceted and open to interpretation (Hacking 1999).

Generally, every research paradigm is characterised by its relation to the philosophical assumptions of ontology, epistemology, and methodology. Ontology seeks to discover whether an experience or a phenomenon is real or imagined (Duberley et al 2012). Epistemology refers to theories of knowledge (Barbour 2008). In other words, it is an understanding of how we know what we know and how this knowledge can be verified. Methodology relates to the process and language employed in research (Creswell 2013). The following tables specify how each of these philosophical assumptions relates to social constructivism and their subsequent application in the current study.
<table>
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<th><strong>Ontology in social constructivism:</strong></th>
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<td>The default position of social constructivists is <em>relativism</em>. This is due to the numerous interpretations of reality and the impossibility of proving that any one interpretation is the only truth (Guba 1990). Realities are seen to be self-created (Guba and Lincoln 1985) based upon the experiences and societal interactions of each individual (Lincoln et al 2011).</td>
<td>The adoption of relativism meant a cause-and-effect objective was unsuitable for the present research. As has been established in section 2.2, organisational crises affect people in a variety of subjective ways, each of which is worthy of exploration. The objective of the current study, therefore, was to understand rather than explain.</td>
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<th><strong>Epistemology in social constructivism:</strong></th>
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<td>The default position of social constructivists is <em>subjectivism</em> because it accesses the constructions residing in, and created by, an individual’s own mind (Guba 1990). This means the researcher needs to work closely with the researched since the two are linked (Guba and Lincoln 1994) such that their interactions will influence the findings (Lincoln et al 2011).</td>
<td>The careful crafting of questions was critical because it was important to not only understand but also to reconstruct the perceived reality of each participant. The present research also prioritised the building of rapport such that honesty and openness were elicited in the retelling of what were sensitive and emotional experiences. This necessitated the bracketing of this researcher’s own experiences and biases (to be expanded upon in section 3.9).</td>
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### Table 3.3: Methodology in social constructivism and the present research

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<th>Methodology in social constructivism:</th>
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<td>According to Guba (1990), social constructivism adopts a hermeneutic/dialectic approach. The hermeneutic element encapsulates each individual reality, while the dialectic uses those realities to find areas of commonality. Such an approach is suited to qualitative methods that incorporate dialogue between the researcher and the researched (Angen 2000).</td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews were adopted as the primary method of data collection. Whilst the lived experience of each of the 30 participants was deemed valid in its own right, the dialectic approach of the current study generated numerous areas of commonality, each of which will be described in the next chapter.</td>
</tr>
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This section has made the case that the interpretive paradigm of social constructivism was most appropriate for the current study as directed by the objectives of the problem statement. Of the qualitative methods available for social constructivists, the present research opted for phenomenology, which is to be explained and justified in the next section.

### 3.3 Phenomenology as a research method

Social constructivism is closely related to phenomenology (Alvesson and Skoldlberg 2009), which is why it appears so frequently in phenomenological studies (Moustakas 1994). That is because phenomenology, much like social constructivism, is interpretive, inductive and subjective, in that it seeks to understand the perceived commonalities among people who experienced a similar phenomenon (Creswell 2013). This section will explain, however, why phenomenology was selected over other qualitative methods that could just as easily have fitted the social constructivist paradigm.
In arguing for the importance of phenomenology for organisational researchers, Gill (2014) makes a number of instructive comparisons with other qualitative research methods. These are displayed in Table 3.4.

*Table 3.4. Phenomenology and narrative analysis, ethnography and autoethnography*

| **Narrative analysis** | Narrative analyses are primarily concerned with the story being told by the participants and the meaning that subsequently arises from those stories. In contrast, phenomenology concentrates on the shared experience of the participants and the connections that become apparent. The present research lends itself to phenomenological inquiry because it has sought to understand the shared experience of individuals who have experienced a recent phenomenon. |
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suited to phenomenological research (Collingridge and Gantt 2008), while the
shared experience was the organisational crisis. The combination of both has
resulted in a collection of stories, metaphors and quotations, which culminate in
findings, as per Chapter 4, that capture participants’ interpretations of their
own understanding of themselves and their relationship with others in the
context of an organisational crisis. These interpretations are at the core of
phenomenology because “there are no such things as facts ... All facts [are]
selected from a universal context by the activities of our mind. They are,
therefore, always interpreted facts” (Schutz 1953, p. 2).

The preceding paragraph referenced the word ‘essence’ on two occasions. It is
worthwhile noting, then, its significance in relation to phenomenology. Van
Manen (1990) writes that “phenomenological research is the study of essences”
(p. 10). What he means is that the researcher, in analysing the data, seeks to
identify the universal meaning that captures the lived experience of participants
who have a specific phenomenon in common, thereby leading to a description of
“the lived quality and significance of the experience in a fuller or deeper
manner” (p. 10). This leads to the problem of essentialism. Some
phenomenological scholars do not accept that essences exist since every
individual perceives his or her experience via a unique worldview. Others see
essentialism as phenomenology’s one chance to be regarded as a science
because of its ability to discover a unifying essence (Mohanty 1997). The
intention of the present research has indeed been to identify that essence – or
essences – in the context of employee engagement during organisational crises.

As per Husserl’s (1970) direction, this methodological approach results in rich
offers similar counsel when he writes that phenomenology is a method suited to
answering questions of what individuals have experienced rather than the
identification of causal relationships. Such inquiry generates a level of
awareness that is less common in quantitative research because
phenomenology can more-descriptively account for sensibilities,
understandings and meanings, particularly in the context of leadership (Küpers
2013). As Küpers notes, it is a level of comprehension that can result in more-effective methods through which leadership can be practiced, especially in “dilemmatic” situations (p. 348), which is the purview of the present research. Of course, this should not discount the potential value of positivist inquiry, which as explicated in section 6.3, would be a logical next step arising from the findings of the current study.

In the meantime, it is important to note that the use of phenomenology leads to a number of methodological implications, one of which is the sampling strategy. It is this strategy that this dissertation will now address.

### 3.4 Sampling strategy

Creswell (2013) suggests that, unlike other qualitative research methods, phenomenology is limited in terms of the sampling methods available to it, and that the purposive method of criterion sampling usually works best. Criterion sampling is when a researcher selects participants based on a specific phenomenon they share in common, which explains why it is an important and common phenomenological sampling method (Collingridge and Gantt 2008). This section will explain in greater detail the ways in which this sampling strategy has been employed in the present research.

When selecting participants for phenomenological research, Englander (2012) states it is not possible to seek representativeness of the general population. Instead, he advises researchers to ask themselves a question such as: *Has this participant experienced the phenomenon I am studying?* If the answer is in the affirmative, that individual may be considered suitable. For the current study, it was essential that the participants experienced an organisational crisis of the severity stipulated by Pearson and Clair’s (1998, p.60) popular definition. As mentioned earlier in this dissertation, that definition is of a crisis that can be described as a “low-probability, high impact event that threatens the viability of the organization”. It is also important to keep in mind the position of Coombs (2012a), who asserts that a crisis is perceptual. By this he means that if an
individual thinks the organisation is in crisis, that perception should be accepted as true, even if it is not supported by tangible evidence.

Of greater import is the recency of the crisis. Van Manen (1990) argues experiences are transitory, which poses a challenge for phenomenological researchers who need to reconstruct a participant’s experience as accurately as possible. This means the experience needs to be recent (Van Kaam 1966) because recent memories are more vivid, coherent, accessible and clearer than distant memories (Sutin and Robins 2007). For the present research, a 12-month period was enforced, which infers that each of the participants experienced their organisational crisis at some stage during the preceding year.

There were a number of other variables and conditions that were also considered during the selection process. These included:

- **Location**: Participants were limited to those based in Australia so that the findings could be localised.

- **Job level**: Participants were grouped into three categories – frontline employees, supervisors, and middle managers – in order to understand whether the experience of the phenomenon was different when hierarchy was taken into account.

- **Type of crisis**: While the definition of an organisational crisis by Pearson and Clair (1998) is narrow enough, there are nonetheless a variety of different crises that comprise this definition. These include product recalls, security breaches, and environment spills. The present research, however, focused only on those of an economic or financial nature because these crises are the most common in organisations and most frequently linked to issues of leadership (Probst and Raisch 2005).

- **Industry**: Likewise, a variety of sectors were sought for the present research, such as manufacturing, media and aviation, as well as many
government departments, both federal and state. The diversity of sectors precluded an analysis of their differences due to the low sample size of each sector. This diversity, however, enriched the findings because, as will be illustrated in the next chapter, almost all of the participants were united in their engagement-related experience of the crisis.

The empirical literature on an adequate sample size is mixed. Creswell (1998) recommends between five and 25 participants, although in a later edition (Creswell 2013) he mentions respected phenomenological studies have been conducted with as few as one participant and as many as 325. An overview by Marshall et al (2013) found the average tends to be between six and ten. An analysis by Guest et al (2006) looked at saturation as a key determinant. Saturation is represented by the point at which additional data ceases to provide new insights. Guest et al’s (2006) findings demonstrated that 73% of final codes are present in the first six interviews and that 92% of the codes are evident in the first 12. Whilst Guest et al caution their findings are not necessarily generalisable, they suggest they potentially can be when interviews are structured such that all participants are asked similar questions, as in the current study. Further, they state their saturation level can be transferrable to other research where groups are homogeneous. In the present research, for example, two have been identified – employees as one group; supervisors and middle managers as another – which would therefore make it 12 participants per homogeneous group.

The sample size for the present research was 30 participants, although saturation was reached after the 17th. Data saturation was determined via the following process, which is a combination of the insights generated by Francis et al's (2010) and Walker's (2012) analyses:

i. First, an ideal sample size was set based on a variety of factors, such as the extant literature, diversity of participants, and complexity of questions. Whilst the questions were simple and straightforward, it was
expected the participants would be somewhat diverse and so the ideal sample size was selected based on what exceeded ordinary sample sizes in the literature, hence why a total of 30 became the target.

ii. Second, the ‘stopping criterion’ was determined, which is the term that Francis et al (2010) use to describe, once data saturation has been achieved, the point at which the researcher continues to interview participants before ceasing. In regards to the current study, the stopping criterion was not a specific set of additional interviews but the reaching of a pre-determined target, in this case 30. Had data saturation not occurred by the 28th interview, the target would have been revised.

iii. Third, field notes and coding were used in such a way that saturation was deemed to have occurred when new themes no longer emerged. This is in line with Walker’s (2012) review of the literature, which found that saturation is reached “in phenomenology when experiences of a phenomenon start to become repetitive” (p. 40). That repetition was identified via the recordings of each interview, which were played privately immediately afterwards, during which this researcher would document each theme as it appeared in the recordings. By the time of the 17th interview, no additional themes had arisen. This was a trend that remained until the 30th interview, which was a limit that was pursued because it was felt it would generate a more-comprehensive exploration of the research problem.

The final point to be made in relation to the sampling strategy is the site. In the current study, the 30 participants were not selected from a single location. This ensured that a multitude of experiences were solicited from a variety of industries, locations and demographics. This is known as a multisite study, which strengthens the chances of generalisability (Herriott and Firestone 1983), particularly when sites are heterogeneous (Schofield 2002) as per the present research. An alternative way of looking at sites is not via location but via context. In this case, the context is the organisational crisis, which similarly
makes this a multisite study because there is heterogeneity in the variety of crises studied. It is what Schofield (2002, p. 184) refers to as an ‘ex post facto’ method of conducting qualitative research because it is reflective of studies that comprise numerous sites but that, only after the data has been collected, are the heterogeneous themes obvious. As an example, for some participants in the current study, the crisis was a mass outsourcing exercise affecting 95% of the workforce while for others it was corporate bankruptcy or the very real threat of it. This then leads to the matter of sourcing. There are two avenues through which participants were sourced:

- **Newsletter**: This researcher’s personal database comprised in excess of 10,000 Australian managers who voluntarily subscribed to a fortnightly newsletter. Each of these subscribers received an email requesting their participation in the current study.

- **Columnist**: This researcher is a nationally syndicated business columnist with the Fairfax group of news sites, such as smh.com.au and theage.com.au. Written under the penname of James Adonis, it attracts between 50,000 and 100,000 visitors per week. The footnote of two articles invited readers to participate in the present research.

The aforementioned sourcing strategy may be interpreted as convenience sampling. That, however, was not the case in the current study. Convenience sampling, as asserted by Marshall (1996), lacks rigour and credibility. Indeed, many studies commence with purposive sampling but then violate those principles by resorting to convenient methods (Teddlie and Yu 2007). As Teddlie and Yu note, this often occurs due to a failure in proper recruitment practices. The present research took care to maintain the integrity of purposive sampling by reinforcing criterion-based selection guidelines throughout the recruitment process. For example, prior to expressing their interest, participants were provided with Pearson and Clair’s (1998) explicit definition of an organisational crisis, as well as the mandatory timing of the crisis and the country in which it must have occurred. These criteria were further
emphasised in the Plain Language Statement and at the beginning of each interview. As a result, of the 126 individuals who expressed interest in participating, only 20 were deemed appropriate for selection. The remaining 10 were the colleagues of those who were initially selected. The selection of those remaining 10 participants was a form of snowball sampling, which occurs when “the researcher accesses informants through contact information that is provided by other informants” (Noy 2008, p. 330). Participants in the present research, on signing the Plain Language Statement, were then asked if they were comfortable inviting colleagues to participant in the study. Of the 20 initial participants, seven referred between one and two colleagues to this researcher, thereby reaching the target of 30.

A greater risk for the present research was that the use of personal networks, such as the newsletter, could give rise to issues of bias. Biases, however, are often inevitable in phenomenological research. As Moustakas (1994, p. 59) notes, phenomenology can be autobiographical because “the researcher is intimately connected” not only with the phenomenon but also, in some cases, with the participants. Indeed, Moustakas suggests that selecting participants from one’s own network may sometimes be beneficial since the researcher is able to select those, based on personal experience, who are more likely to be open and articulate about the phenomenon. Still, this researcher prefers the view propounded by Groenewald (2004) who states that researchers should actively prevent their biases from influencing the research. For this reason, this researcher’s biases, as well as the associated mitigation controls, will be declared in section 3.9.

In explaining the sampling strategy of the current study, this section expanded on the application of criterion sampling, sample size, saturation, multisite selection, and recruitment methods. Once these fundamental research methods were finalised, the present research proceeded to the collection of data. It is these underlying data collection practices that this dissertation will now address.
3.5 Data collection

Polkinghorne (1989) states that phenomenological researchers have three options available to them. One is to document their own experiences and observations. A second option is to rely on external sources, such as artists and novelists, who have already recorded their perceptions. The third, which Moustakas (1994) posits is the most typical form of phenomenological research, is to directly interview other people who can give a personal account of what they experienced. Interviews or, more specifically, semi-structured interviews, were the method used for the current study. As will be elaborated throughout this section, this generates some unique data collection considerations, which means an assessment of their validity should not be conducted via the lens of empiricism but via the lens of phenomenological theory (Englander 2012).

In phenomenology, interviews are usually held in person (Polkinghorne 1989) because the researcher is effectively the research instrument (Starks and Brown Trinidad 2012) and is therefore best served being present (Almeida 2012). This researcher-as-instrument role arises because it is the researcher who “makes all the judgments about coding, categorizing, decontextualizing, and recontextualizing the data” (Starks and Brown Trinidad 2012, p. 1376) in contrast to positivist research that may instead utilise, for example, a survey. In the current study, all interviews were therefore held face to face, which meant this researcher travelled to five states and numerous cities and regional areas. This format enabled the observation of not only what the participants were saying but also what they were not saying. Kvale (1983) lists some of these non-verbal cues as facial expressions, body language and vocal tones, which in the current study prompted the asking of further questions. These questions were open-ended lines of inquiry because they are more likely to elicit extensive responses (Giorgi 1997). Polkinghorne (1989) states interviews ordinarily last between 30 minutes and one hour. In the present research, the average duration of the 30 interviews was 41 minutes.
Interviews as a data collection method have certain strengths and weaknesses. One potential strength is that, if conducted well, an interview can be an enriching experience for participants because it is uncommon for them to be of such focused and prolonged interest (Kvale 1983). Interviews are also an opportunity to explore issues in depth such that meaning, understanding and context are more thoroughly understood (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004). For example, researchers are able to ask probing questions and to incorporate non-verbal language into the analysis (Taylor 2005). There are weaknesses, too. These include the risk that the interviews are rambling and disorganised (Giorgi 1997) and ambiguous and contradictory (Kvale 1983). Interviews can also be seen as unscientific by those who value positivism (Kvale 1983), and can also be quite time consuming (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004). Those weaknesses, however, can be overcome. For example, any disorientation in phenomenological interviews needs to be managed carefully because signs of judgement or disapproval can prevent the participants’ full disclosure (Miner-Romanoff 2012). Miner-Romanoff instead recommends that researchers paraphrase, express understanding and ask probing questions, with the latter representing a characteristic of semi-structured interviews, which will be described in greater detail in the next paragraph. In the meantime, it is also important to note that rambling in an interview may signify complexity in the participants’ lived experience, which is why phenomenologists should attempt to capture and explore that complexity rather than dismiss it as mere disorientation, thereby further emphasising the vital role of the researcher as the primary research instrument (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

Englander (2012) recommends the first question in the interview to be a general one that gets the participants to describe the phenomenon in detail. From this point onwards, the questions can take one of two forms: unstructured or semi-structured. Unstructured questions are unprepared, which means the questions are determined by the preceding answers. The direction of the interview is therefore unpredictable and spontaneous. Semi-structured interviews still allow for spontaneity, but the researcher has a limited set of questions prepared in advance for when the nature of the research
problem necessitates the pursuit of specific lines of inquiry. Additional ad-hoc questions can still be asked, but the participants are directed towards particular areas of interest. No matter the type of questions, what they must seek to unearth is a description of the participant’s lived experience, not of the participant’s opinion (Kvale 1983). Semi-structured interviews were therefore used in the present research so that the focus of the interviews remained on the specific factors that related to the context of the participants’ engagement throughout the organisational crisis.

The existence of an interview guide may seem antithetical to a phenomenological study since the structure of such research ordinarily necessitates the use of one broad opening question and nothing further (Thompson et al 1989). That was partly the case in the present research since the opening question succinctly asked the participants to describe the organisational crisis they had experienced or were experiencing. The question was neutral in its composition such that it did not insinuate that the organisational crisis was good or bad. It simply asked the participants to describe the crisis and how it had affected them. The challenge with employee engagement, however, is that it is a construct open to misinterpretation and variances in definition. This is evident via the way in which it has been subjected to “fixing, shrinking, stretching and bending” over the years (Truss et al 2013, p. 2660) by scholars and practitioners who have challenged its meaning, narrowed its focus, extended its focus, and manipulated its relevance. For the purpose of consistency, then, the interviews included a second question that comprised Schaufeli et al’s (2002) popular definition of employee engagement. This is in line with Thompson et al (1989) who state that “the ideal interview format occurs when the interviewer’s short descriptive questions and/or clarifying statements provide an opening for a respondent’s lengthier and detailed descriptions” (p. 139). Likewise, Lowse and Prowse (2001) advise that some structure is important in phenomenological interviews because participants welcome “guidance on what to talk about”, thereby generating data that more-thoroughly answers the research questions and
makes “the best use of resources such as participant and researcher time” (p. 475). The interview questions were therefore as follows:

**Question 1:** Describe, in as much detail as you can, the crisis that affected your organisation or department.

**Question 2a:** I’m going to hand you a popular definition of engagement. Read this definition, reflect on it, and then I’ll ask you a few questions about it when you’re ready. Take your time. You’re welcome to ask me any questions if there are parts of that definition you’d like clarified.

*Engagement is a combination of vigour, dedication and absorption (Schaufeli et al 2002, pp. 74-75). Vigour is “characterized by high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in one’s work, and persistence even in the face of difficulties”. Dedication is “characterized by a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge”. Absorption is “characterized by being fully concentrated and deeply engrossed in one’s work, whereby time passes quickly and one has difficulties with detaching oneself from work”.*

**Question 2b:** Based upon that definition of engagement, how often did you feel that way during the crisis?

**Question 2c:** I’d like you to think back to the moments when you felt that type of engagement during the crisis. Describe what that felt like.

**Question 2d:** Now describe what those moments of engagement looked like – the actions, behaviours and attitudes you experienced.

**Question 2e:** In hindsight, what do you think made you feel so engaged?
**Question 3a:** Now, I’d like you to read that definition again, but this time reflect on the times during the crisis when you did not feel that way. Describe what that felt like for you.

**Question 3b:** Now describe what those moments of disengagement looked like – the actions, behaviours and attitudes you experienced.

**Question 3c:** In hindsight, what do you think made you feel so disengaged during those moments?

*The following set of questions will be asked if the participant does not raise the issue of leadership:*

**Statement:** The next set of questions relates to your experience of your supervisor or senior leaders in relation to your engagement during the crisis.

**Question 4a:** During the times that you felt engaged in the crisis, think about the behaviour of your supervisor and senior leaders. In what ways did their leadership style help you to feel engaged?

**Question 4b:** During the times that you felt disengaged (or some other feeling other than engagement) during the crisis, think about the behaviour of your supervisor and senior leaders. In what ways did their leadership style lead you to feel disengaged (or some other feeling you stated earlier)?

To support the data collection process, the following tools were employed:

- *Interview guide:* A paper-based interview guide was used for each participant.
• **Recording equipment:** Each interview was recorded on two separate devices. One was a digital recorder and the other, as a backup, was Vocaroo, an online program that converts recordings into MP3 files.

This section has made the case for why semi-structured interviews were used in the current study as the primary method of data collection. This data collection process is summarised in Table 3.6. The collection of data naturally leads to its analysis, which this dissertation will next address.

**Table 3.6. Data collection procedure**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 1</strong></td>
<td>An article with a call for participants was published on Fairfax news sites nationally, along with a similar request via email to an extensive database. Potential participants were able to express their interest via a phone call or an email to this researcher. All participants, however, made contact via email.</td>
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</table>
| **Step 2** | This researcher organised a time and date for a face-to-face interview with each of the confirmed participants. They were given a range of options for the location: their home, their place of work, or a Regus serviced office. The participants were also informed that:  
  • The interview would last approximately 60 minutes.  
  • They would receive two cinema tickets for their participation.  
  • They would be emailed a Plain Language Statement, which they would need to sign and return to verify their agreement. |
<p>| <strong>Step 3</strong> | Once consent had been obtained, the participants received an email to confirm the time, date and location of their interview. |
| <strong>Step 4</strong> | One week prior to the interview, each participant received a reminder email regarding the upcoming appointment. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 5</th>
<th>On the morning of the interview, a separate interview guide was printed for each participant.</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 6</td>
<td>At the beginning of the interview, time was spent building rapport via a ‘social conversation’ (Moustakas 1994), so that trust and comfort were generated. The movie tickets were provided at the start.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 7</td>
<td>The interviews were transcribed using a professional transcription service. Participants received a copy of their transcript via email. They were given seven days to review the transcript and to reply with any comments they wanted changed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 8</td>
<td>As soon as the participants confirmed the transcript was an accurate reflection of their experience, the transcripts were analysed and coded.</td>
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### 3.6 Data analysis

One of the challenges of phenomenological research is that there are a number of different types available. *Transcendental phenomenology* focuses on structures and objects in the external world and the way in which individuals react to them; *existential phenomenology* focuses on the concept of 'being' and the interconnectedness between individuals' consciousness and the world they inhabit; and *heuristic phenomenology* actively involves the researcher in the study as meanings and essences are identified (Grbich 2013). While each of these types can be similar in relation to data collection, there are some differences in regards to data analysis. This analysis stage is complicated by the fact that “overlapping is common” and that “some of the originators appear in more than one strand” (p. 97). This section, then, in presenting the way that data was analysed for the present research, will refer to the work of Clark Moustakas as a guiding set of principles. That is because Moustakas's work...
seems to span across phenomenological types (Gribich 2013) and is the basis on which Creswell (2013) derived his interpretation of this research method.

The data analysis stage began with the use of transcripts. Transcription is an essential corollary to interviews because reading a transcript is easier and faster than repeatedly listening to an audio recording (Shopes 2011). For the current study, however, every interview was analysed using both formats. After each interview, on the same day, this researcher listened to the recordings, taking note of the themes that were emerging. Once the transcripts were available, the data was coded, thereby enabling the categorisation of the data (Wertz 2005). Coding can be made more efficient with the use of specialised computer software, which makes it easier to locate material, retrieve memos, and organise files (Creswell 2013). For the present research, NVivo was used because a weeklong training course on the software was available at the Australian Consortium for Social and Political Research. The coding process validated the broad themes that emerged when the recordings were first heard but, with the detail arising from the transcripts, greater depth and elaboration was derived.

Creswell (2013), based on the work of Moustakas (1994), provides a guide for phenomenological data analysis and coding. The following passages outline the way in which they were incorporated in the current study.

1. **Personal bracketing:** This relates to the researcher’s personal experiences with the phenomenon that may influence the results. For instance, this researcher once worked for an organisation that was in crisis but was able to remain engaged despite the chaos that ensued. It is important, therefore, for this experience (and others) to be declared for the purposes of transparency so that findings are generated “in as unprejudiced a way as possible” (Kupers 2013). This will occur in section 3.9.
2. *Development of significant statements:* These were sourced directly from the interviews with the aim of seeking commonalities among what the participants experienced. Section 4.1.2 will provide examples of the way in which significant statements were identified and the process that led to their inclusion in the Findings chapter.

3. *Grouping of statements into meaning units:* Themes were then generated. In line with Moustakas (1994, pp. 97-100), these were achieved via ‘imaginative variation’, which involves “approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives”. As the literature review in Chapter 2 demonstrated, these perspectives were determined by the JD-R: leadership demands and resources; work-related demands and resources; and personal demands and resources. Other than issues relating to leadership, participants were not asked specifically about work-related or personal demands and resources. Those arose in the interviews spontaneously in what can be described as a true phenomenological manner (Thompson et al 1989). Arising from these perspectives, then, were the meaning units to which Moustakas (1994) refers. In the current study, for example, a meaning unit derived from the leadership perspective was the disengaging effect of laissez-faire leadership. Similarly, employee voice has been identified as a work-related meaning unit, and focus of attention as a meaning unit in the personal category.

4. *Textual descriptions:* These are descriptions of what the participants experienced during the crisis and will be presented extensively in the next chapter. These descriptions include the major themes that emerged from the present research, references to the extant literature in what is a form of triangulation and, most vividly, the participants’ own quotes in what is essentially a literal illustration of how the crisis affected them.

5. *Structural descriptions:* These necessitate the inclusion of information regarding the setting and context of the participants. In regards to the
present research, this will include the differences that emerged when the experience of employees was compared to the experience of supervisors and middle managers, and when the experience of mostly engaged participants was compared to the experience of mostly disengaged participants.

6. **Composite description:** This is a combination of the previous two points, thereby resulting in a story that depicts as accurately as possible the areas of commonality among the participants.

On completion of the aforementioned steps, the FMA model by Checkland (1985) will be used to link the results to the research questions as well as to the existing literature. Checkland's model suggests the culmination of research produces a *framework of ideas*, which are applied *methodologically* to an *area of application*. In the present research, the framework of ideas will be the adaptations made to the JD-R. The methodology will be a list of recommendations for practitioners, especially those in leadership positions. The area of application will be the preservation of employee engagement during organisational crises. These will be explicated in greater detail throughout Chapter 5. In the meantime, this chapter will turn to the ethical considerations associated with the current study.

### 3.7 Ethical considerations

The nature of phenomenological research is such that ethical implications are heightened because there is sensitivity associated with the retelling of a participant's lived experience (Walker 2007). This means care must be taken when determining consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and authenticity. This section will elaborate on these factors by referring to the six processes of qualitative research that Creswell (2013) suggests are at particular risk of ethical breaches. These processes and their ethical implications in the current study are displayed in Table 3.7.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process</th>
<th>Ethical considerations in the current study</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prior to the study</td>
<td>Ethics training was completed via the Deakin University online course, and approval from the ethics board was obtained prior to the commencement of the study. Written permission was also obtained from each of the participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beginning of the study</td>
<td>Participants were informed of the study’s purpose. This occurred in the original invitation, on the Plain Language Statement, and at the interview. The participants were not pressured to sign any consent forms and were provided with information on how the data would be used. They were also given an explanation of how their anonymity would be guaranteed, such as the use of pseudonyms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collecting data</td>
<td>Participants were not deceived in terms of the time commitment required. They were provided with realistic expectations of how long the interview would take. For example, they were each told that one hour of their time would be required. None of the interviews exceeded this limit. In addition, the interviews did not comprise leading questions or personal opinions. The participants were also provided with two movie tickets for their participation, which was a gesture big enough to be of value but small enough to not overtake the true motivation for their participation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Analysing data</strong></td>
<td>As mentioned earlier in this table, the privacy of the participants was maintained via the use of pseudonyms. They were also given the opportunity to correct the transcripts prior to the analysis. The transcripts were saved at four locations to ensure the incorruptibility of the data: a laptop, a USB stick, the NVivo software, and Deakin University’s secure online server, all of which were password protected. Once the interviews were successfully analysed, they were deleted from all but Deakin University’s server.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reporting data</strong></td>
<td>The findings were reported honestly and without exaggeration or plagiarism. Great care was taken to avoid the inclusion of information that may betray the anonymity of the participants. For example, as will be seen in the next chapter, the specific details of the types of organisations have been omitted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Publishing the study</strong></td>
<td>Participants will be provided with a link to the online version of the dissertation as well as any articles that arise from the publication of these findings.</td>
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It is hoped the protections outlined in Table 3.7 were sufficient to promote the participants’ “dignity, rights, safety and wellbeing” (Walker 2007, p. 36). Barring one participant who withdrew her participation under the pretence that her safety and wellbeing would be at risk were she to be identified by her leaders, it does not appear that any of the other participants had similar regrets. Indeed, emails have since been received from several participants to thank this researcher for the positive emotions they felt after the interview. On each occasion, these positive emotions were associated with the opportunity to
finally give voice to their experiences. As will be disclosed in Chapter 4, the perceived absence of voice was indeed a disengaging factor for many participants throughout their organisational crisis. For now, this chapter will proceed to an explication of the conditions that strengthened the validity and reliability of the present research.

3.8 Validity and reliability

Validity and reliability are terms most commonly associated with positivist inquiry but, as Galofshani (2003) explains, these concepts are just as applicable in qualitative methodologies because their inclusion enhances the trustworthiness and quality of the research. This section will therefore demonstrate the way in which the current study is both valid and reliable.

Validity signifies whether the findings and implications arising from the research are rigorous enough to be acted upon by others (Lincoln et al 2011). In phenomenology, validity is somewhat difficult to determine because phenomenology is dependent on subjective experiences (Giorgi 2002). Creswell and Miller (2000) list a variety of methods that phenomenologists can nonetheless adopt to ensure the validity, or credibility, of their findings. In regards to the present research, this included ‘researcher reflexivity’, which is evident in the declaration of past experiences and biases; ‘member checking’, which was the commitment to allow the participants to edit their own transcripts; and ‘triangulation’, which occurs when the findings are converged with other sources, such as the use of multiple participants, established theoretical models, and extant literature.

Reliability is the degree to which separate researchers, on collecting the same data, lead to the same conclusions (Silverman 2005). Silverman offers two recommendations on how to achieve such consistency. The first is fieldnote conventions and the second is an inter-coder agreement. Quality fieldnotes can be obtained via the recording and transcribing of interviews, and with the use of computer programs such as NVivo, as per the present research. An inter-coder
agreement is when multiple observers code a transcript independently. If the codes are similar, a high level of inter-coder agreement is deemed to exist and the analysis can continue. But if the codes are dissimilar, the researcher needs to begin again with more clearly defined codes. In the present research, an inter-coder agreement was conducted between this researcher and his supervisor who reviewed several transcripts and their associated codes to ensure consistency. More information on this process and the outcomes can be found in section 4.1.2. This inter-coder agreement, however, should be considered in the context of divergent opinions on its usefulness. The qualitative research community is divided on whether inter-coder agreements are necessary for the purposes of reliability or whether the subjectivity associated with interpreting interview data renders inter-coder agreements redundant (Armstrong et al 1997). Similar arguments can be made for the use of software such as that which has been utilised in the current study. The risk is that researchers may abandon reflexivity in favour of programmatic analysis and become less familiar with the data since the handling of it is delegated to a computer (Morison and Moir 1998). That risk has been minimised in the current study because the first round of coding was completed without the use of software.

Since validity and reliability are inherently positivist criteria, it is worthwhile also articulating the interpretivist criteria that pertain to research of this kind. As stipulated by Lincoln and Guba (1985), there are four criteria important to qualitative researchers: credibility; transferability; dependability; and confirmability. In line with Shenton’s (2004) recommendations:

- The criterion of credibility was met in the present research via *triangulation*, which will be evident in the next chapter as the findings are reported in concert with the extant positivist literature; an *honest interviewing environment*, which was achieved by building rapport with the participants, giving them the option to withdraw, and providing an opportunity to edit their transcript; *frequent debriefing sessions*, which occurred between this researcher and his primary supervisor, thereby
resulting in many modifications to the methodology and this thesis; and a *thick description of the phenomenon*, which can be seen in the length of Chapter 4, which exceeds 22,000 words.

- The criterion of transferability, which reflects the extent to which the findings can be transferred to other contexts, has been met via the explicit setting of context in the current study. Doing so is important because, as Shenton (2004) notes, the primary way through which a future researcher can attempt to replicate a qualitative study is by first understanding, in as much detail as possible, the context in which it was run. This means information on the participants and the data collection methods must be comprehensive, which is believed to have been the case in the present research, particularly throughout this chapter.

- The criterion of dependability requires specific processes to be recorded, thereby enabling future researchers to replicate the research even though their unique context might produce dissimilar results. It is felt the way in which this chapter has documented the research design, the subsequent implementation, and the procedures for data collection and analysis culminates in a study that can be regarded as dependable.

- The criterion of confirmability is enforced by ensuring the researcher’s biases are declared and controlled (as per the next section) and that the research is free from human influence as much as is reasonably possible (as per the computerised coding on the NVivo software and the independent transcription).

Whilst the aforementioned controls strengthened the quality of the current study, it is important to note they did not ensure generalisability. This is ordinarily the purview of quantitative research. Qualitative research, in contrast, prioritises understanding over generalisability (Labuschagne 2003), the subjectivity of which gives rise to potential issues of bias (Goladshani 2003). It is these biases that this chapter will next address.
3.9 Researcher biases

Researcher biases are an important consideration in qualitative research because the methodology is less controlled than in quantitative analyses (Johnson 1997). Johnson advises that qualitative researchers should critically analyse their predispositions and the ways in which these influence the research. By doing so, the potentially negative consequences of the biases can be controlled and the integrity of the research strengthened (Maxwell 2013). This is known as bracketing, which is a phenomenological instruction that requires “the act of suspending one’s beliefs ... in order to study the essential structures of the world” (Van Manen 1990, p. 175). This is a challenge for phenomenologists because the interpretation of data can be influenced by their assumptions (Creswell 2013). One way that these biases and assumptions can be controlled is by declaring them transparently (Groenewald 2014). This section will focus on two types of bias: personal and professional. For the purposes of readability, the two subsections will be written in the first person.

3.9.1 Personal biases

- I have an inherent bias towards qualitative research. I understand it and enjoy it better than quantitative methods. There is a risk I have selected my methodology based on what I know and like rather than what is most appropriate for the research problem. I liaised closely with my supervisors to ensure no misalignment existed but, as the research progressed, I was open to the possibility that an unexpected turn of events would necessitate the incorporation of quantitative methods.

- I agree with the view put forward by Macey and Schneider (2008) that some people, on account of their personality traits, are more likely to be engaged. This was an important bias to keep in mind throughout the interviews because it may have unduly influenced my body language and the types of questions I asked. I tried to mitigate this bias by embracing the spirit of phenomenology, which infers that one individual’s perceived
reality is just as valid as that held by another. This bias was also mitigated by the fact I placed the views of Coombs (2012a) at the core of the selection process. Coombs's view is that crises are perceptual, which means that if an individual thinks a crisis exists, it exists.

3.9.2 Professional biases

- I have experienced high levels of engagement during an organisational crisis. This occurred in a financial services call centre at which I was a frontline employee. The organisation had made a series of major errors, repeatedly sending incorrect statements to clients while simultaneously managing their funds poorly such that the majority of clients were making capital losses. This meant there were continuously 50 clients in the queue waiting in excess of 45 minutes to speak to employees like me. Yet despite almost every call being one that involved clients venting their anger, I remained highly engaged. In relation to the current study, I expected some of the participants to have had a similar experience of remaining engaged despite the crisis to which they were subjected. To mitigate this bias, which is inherently an unfair and perhaps unrealistic assumption, the present research was instead premised on the belief that engagement fluctuates in individuals, oftentimes daily (Bakker 2014). It is these fluctuations that became the focus of the interviews.

- My professional work over the past decade has comprised hundreds of speaking, training and consulting engagements, teaching leaders how they can more effectively engage their employees. There is a bias here in that I believe the right leadership behaviours can create high levels of employee engagement irrespective of the situation. This was an important bias to control, especially in relation to my body language. For example, I needed to be careful that my facial expressions did not communicate disapproval in the event the participants who were supervisors or middle managers happened to share information that was the antithesis of engagement-related behaviour.
Acknowledging biases to one’s self is an important first step but recording them in writing and assigning a mitigation strategy, as per the preceding passages, helps to design a research methodology that disempowers each bias (Maxwell 2013). No methodology, however, is perfect, which is why it is necessary to declare the associated limitations. There are five that are of particular pertinence to the present research, each of which will be detailed in section 6.2. In the meantime, this chapter will proceed to some final methodology-related comments that will conclude this chapter.

3.10 Conclusion

Moustakas (1994, p. 58) describes phenomenology as the study of “wholeness, with examining entities from many sides, angles, and perspectives” until a unified “essence” of the experience has been established. That is what the methodology of the present research has attempted to achieve. The study of wholeness can be seen in the inclusion of all three categorisations of demands and resources, all of which were explored in an inductive and interpretive manner. The sides, angles, and perspectives to which Moustakas refers can be seen in the inclusion of employees and leaders, and of engaged participants and disengaged participants, all of whom were interviewed in safe environments, with their consent, and via the utilisation of processes that were consistent, valid, and reliable. All that remains now is to identify the essence, which will be articulated in considerable detail as the findings of the present research are revealed in the next chapter.
Chapter 4. Findings

4.1 Introduction

Phenomenology is the study of the lived experience that a group of individuals have in common, the culmination of which is translated “into a textual expression of its essence” (Van Manen 1990, p. 36). The purpose of this chapter is to textually express this engagement-related essence as per the organisational crises experienced by the 30 participants. Six themes emerged, each of which will be briefly outlined in section 4.1.2 and described in more detail throughout this chapter. This introductory section, however, will first present a profile of each of the participants followed by a review of the coding procedure.

4.1.1 Participants’ profiles

Sound phenomenological publications necessitate the inclusion of basic demographic data, known as ‘situating the sample’ (Elliott et al 1999). In the present research, the 30 participants were characterised by the following demographics:

- 50% were female and 50% were male.
- 53% were in frontline employee positions; 23.5% were supervisors; and 23.5% were middle managers. There were no apparent differences in the aggregate experiences between frontline supervisors and middle managers. For example, six of the seven supervisors and six of the seven middle managers attributed their higher levels of engagement to the voice inherent in their position. These two demographics have therefore been combined into the one for the purpose of reporting distinct differences between employees and those higher in the hierarchy.
- 47% were from the government sector; 53% were from the private sector.
• 40% were from Victoria; 30% from New South Wales; 16% from Queensland; 7% from the Australian Capital Territory; and 7% from Western Australia.

• 70% of the organisational crises were in motion at the time of the interview while 30% had been experienced within the preceding 12 months.

Table 4.1 outlines, for each participant, further detail of their demographic data, all of which was collected during the interview. For example, the column titled ‘Engagement’ states whether the participant was mostly engaged, mostly disengaged, or equally engaged and disengaged. This information was determined by asking each participant to indicate which of the three options best encapsulated their level of engagement throughout the crisis.

Table 4.1 Participants’ profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identifier</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Engagement</th>
<th>Crisis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 1 Andrew</td>
<td>Middle manager</td>
<td>Disability services</td>
<td>Mostly engaged</td>
<td>The financial viability of this organisation is under threat due to the introduction of new government regulations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 2 Bill</td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>Security services</td>
<td>Mostly engaged</td>
<td>The government terminated the contract, thereby making the entire unit redundant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 3 Charles</td>
<td>Employee</td>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>Mostly engaged</td>
<td>A hostile takeover was launched, thereby threatening the survival of the factory.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 4 Diane</td>
<td>Middle manager</td>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>Equally engaged and disengaged</td>
<td>(The same organisation as Participant 3.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 5 Evelyn</td>
<td>Employee</td>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>Mostly engaged</td>
<td>(The same organisation as Participants 3 and 4.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 6</td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>Property management</td>
<td>Equally engaged and disengaged</td>
<td>The loss of a major contract resulted in the termination of an entire unit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 7 Gina</td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>Government department</td>
<td>Mostly engaged</td>
<td>Almost the entire department is being outsourced to the private sector.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 8 Holly</td>
<td>Employee</td>
<td>Government department</td>
<td>Mostly disengaged</td>
<td>(The same organisation as Participant 7.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 9 Irene</td>
<td>Middle manager</td>
<td>Government department</td>
<td>Mostly engaged</td>
<td>(The same organisation as Participants 7 and 8.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 10 Jackie</td>
<td>Middle manager</td>
<td>Aviation</td>
<td>Mostly engaged</td>
<td>The organisation had posted a record loss of $200 million and was in the process of mass redundancies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 11 Kelly</td>
<td>Employee</td>
<td>Health</td>
<td>Mostly disengaged</td>
<td>The outsourcing of an entire business unit to a competitor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 12 Lance</td>
<td>Employee</td>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>Mostly disengaged</td>
<td>An ever-worsening loss year by year leading to a risk of imminent insolvency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 13 Michael</td>
<td>Middle manager</td>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>Equally engaged and disengaged</td>
<td>(The same organisation as Participant 12.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 14 Nora</td>
<td>Employee</td>
<td>Law</td>
<td>Mostly disengaged</td>
<td>A merger with an incompatible partner leading to mass layoffs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 15 Oliver</td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>Government department</td>
<td>Equally engaged and disengaged</td>
<td>Recent mass retrenchments and a current corporate review threatening more of the same.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 16 Paula</td>
<td>Employee</td>
<td>Media</td>
<td>Mostly disengaged</td>
<td>A major operating loss year on year leading to mass layoffs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 17</td>
<td>Employee</td>
<td>Government department</td>
<td>Mostly disengaged</td>
<td>Almost the entire department is being outsourced to the private sector.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
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<td>------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhonda</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 18</td>
<td>Employee</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Equally engaged and disengaged</td>
<td>Two rounds of mass layoffs with another on the way due to offshoring practices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 19</td>
<td>Employee</td>
<td>Pharmaceutical</td>
<td>Mostly engaged</td>
<td>An unsustainable operating loss leading to mass layoffs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 20</td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>Media</td>
<td>Mostly engaged</td>
<td>A major loss of government funding leading to mass layoffs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ursula</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 21</td>
<td>Employee</td>
<td>Government department</td>
<td>Equally engaged and disengaged</td>
<td>The entire department is being outsourced to the private sector.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vince</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 22</td>
<td>Employee</td>
<td>Government department</td>
<td>Mostly disengaged</td>
<td>(The same organisation as Participant 21.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 23</td>
<td>Middle manager</td>
<td>Media</td>
<td>Mostly disengaged</td>
<td>An unsustainable loss led to the demise of this company.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 24</td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>Government department</td>
<td>Mostly engaged</td>
<td>A loss of government funding has led to mass layoffs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belinda</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 25</td>
<td>Employee</td>
<td>Government department</td>
<td>Mostly disengaged</td>
<td>(The same organisation as Participant 24.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 26</td>
<td>Employee</td>
<td>Government department</td>
<td>Equally engaged and disengaged</td>
<td>A significant restructure led to a series of mass layoffs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiona</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 27</td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>Government department</td>
<td>Equally engaged and disengaged</td>
<td>(The same organisation as Participant 26.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 28</td>
<td>Employee</td>
<td>Government department</td>
<td>Mostly disengaged</td>
<td>(The same organisation as Participant 17.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 29</td>
<td>Middle manager</td>
<td>Government department</td>
<td>Mostly engaged</td>
<td>(The same organisation as Participants 21 and 22.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaac</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 30</td>
<td>Employee</td>
<td>Disability services</td>
<td>Equally engaged and disengaged</td>
<td>The financial viability of this organisation is under threat due to the introduction of new government regulations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4.1.2 Review of the coding procedure

Chapter 3, and in particular sections 3.6 and 3.8, detailed the evaluation process essential to phenomenological research. The purpose of this section is to elaborate on how this methodology led to these findings by focusing on:

- The pilot study
- The remaining interviews
- The selection of the major themes

**Pilot study:** On 12\textsuperscript{th} December 2014, approval to proceed was confirmed by Deakin University’s Human Ethics Advisory Group. The sourcing strategy detailed in section 3.4 resulted in five initial interviews, which were conducted in the final week of 2014. These were considered to be a pilot study. There were two reasons for this pilot. The first was to ensure the semi-structured interview questions were capable of generating responses that directly answered the research problem. It was ascertained after the fifth interview, by this researcher and the supervisor, that the interview guide was serving its purpose well; however, one minor change was required, which was that two questions were combined into one since the answer to one generated the answer to the other. Combining the questions removed unnecessary duplication. The second reason was that the pilot offered an early opportunity to establish an inter-coder agreement, which enhances the reliability of qualitative research (Silverman 2005). This researcher, on listening to the recording of the interviews, developed a series of codes. These codes and
recordings were made available to the supervisor whose own interpretation did not result in any discrepancies. While such consensus is generally uncommon in inter-coder agreements, it was possible in this case since the codes from the interviews were nominal level variables (Lombard et al 2002), which implies they were straightforward, unambiguous and in line with the literature. As a result of the aforementioned process, the five pilot interviews were included in the final sample of 30 because the changes were of an insignificant nature.

The remaining interviews: The remaining interviews were conducted between January 2015 and March 2015. Immediately following each interview, this researcher listened to the recording while noting in a Microsoft Word document any new codes that materialised. As more and more codes were added to the list, certain themes became apparent. For example, when participants mentioned personal feelings of anger, sorrow, fear and dozens of other similar sentiments, these codes were grouped under a theme titled ‘Negative Emotions’. Likewise, when participants referred to their resilience, optimism, confidence and other similar attributes, these were grouped under a theme titled ‘Traits’. Data saturation, which reflects the point at which additional data does not generate any new themes (Glaser and Strauss 2012), occurred after the 17th interview. Nonetheless, interviews continued until the 30th had been conducted to ensure the robustness of the study. For the purpose of validity, transcripts were forwarded to each participant for the opportunity to make edits. Of 30 participants, eight returned an edited transcript while one asked to be removed from the study due to concerns about confidentiality. An additional interview was subsequently conducted so that the target of 30 was still reached. This researcher then uploaded each transcript to NVivo 10.2 and proceeded with the process of formally coding each one. This resulted in 14 primary themes comprising 200 nodes. A detailed list of the nodes can be found in Appendix 1.

Selection of the major themes: To justify the selection of the six major themes to be discussed in this chapter, a separate table will be presented in each subsection displaying the number of references for each thematic statement and the proportion of participants who shared that experience. In accordance with
the data analysis process outlined in section 3.6, as per the work of Moustakas (1994), each of the sub-sections arose as a result of the following procedure. (Some of the data contained in section 4.2.1 has been replicated here in order to demonstrate the application of this process.)

- First, significant statements that participants had in common were identified. For example, a lack of information was one thematic statement that was referred to by more than 50% of participants.
- Second, these statements were then grouped into meaning units. For example, certain references to a lack of information inferred dishonesty on the part of senior leadership while others demonstrated the consequences on customer service and performance.
- Third, textural descriptions were formed containing direct quotations. For instance: “There’s too many secrets” and “Why is there silence?”
- Fourth, this led to structural descriptions that comprised contextual factors. One such example is the illustration of Sally’s place of work where offshoring was handled inconsiderately by senior leadership.
- Finally, this was combined to tell a story which, when contrasted with references to extant literature, is a form of triangulation critical to qualitative analysis (Creswell and Miller 2000).

As a result of the aforementioned procedure, six major themes were selected.

- The first major theme was the disengaging nature of laissez-faire leadership. This was the most prominent of all the findings, and will be discussed in more detail in section 4.2.
- The second major theme was the disengaging nature of autocratic leadership, to be discussed further in section 4.3.
- The third theme was that leaders were more likely than employees to express high rates of engagement. The reasons for this will be addressed in section 4.4.
• The fourth theme, to be detailed in section 4.5, pertained to deviant behaviours that participants adopted in retaliation for how the crisis affected them.

• The fifth theme relates to the most popular methods of self-engagement. This will be articulated in section 4.6.

• The sixth theme is not so much a theme as it is a collection of other findings of relevance. Most notably, these include the engaging role of social support and job satisfaction, as well as the predominance of negative emotions, which appears prolifically in the literature and is replicated here in section 4.7.

It is believed each of the aforementioned themes adds to the theoretical and practical study of employee engagement and organisational crises. These implications will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5. For now, the next section will address the primary finding of the present research: the perception of laissez-faire leadership among senior leaders. As this and the subsequent sections unfold, the reader will notice the inclusion of in-text citations. Their inclusion is not to distract from the description of the participants’ lived experience but to serve as a form of triangulation. This is in line with Almeida’s (2012) guidelines, which specify that phenomenological findings must be “substantiated by citations” and that the research is made “more robust by making connections with other areas of inquiry” (p. 161).

4.2 Laissez-faire leadership among senior leaders

This section will address the most frequently cited factor of disengagement in the present research, that of laissez-faire leadership among senior leaders. Even though none of the participants explicitly mentioned the term ‘laissez-faire’, the eight thematic statements that underpin this theme are aligned to Bass’s (2008, pp. 142-149) explication of this leadership style. Whilst Bass does not offer specific categories or a typology of laissez-faire leadership, he does use descriptive terms such as “communication apprehension”, which in the present research is evident in the reported lack of communication. Likewise, when Bass
writes of leaders who “stay away from their subordinates”, it is apparent in the present research in the form of ‘distance’. Table 4.2 displays the frequency of these eight thematic statements, with each one explored in more detail in the sub-sections to follow.

Table 4.2 Laissez-faire leadership among senior leaders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thematic statement</th>
<th>Number of passages</th>
<th>Percentage of employee participants</th>
<th>Percentage of leadership participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of information</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insufficient communication</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passivity</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naïveté</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indecision</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vagueness</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>101</strong></td>
<td><strong>94%</strong></td>
<td><strong>71%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.2.1 Lack of information

One way by which laissez-faire leadership can be defined is via the gap between the information employees desire and the information they eventually receive. This lack of information, as a result of laissez-faire leadership, has been found to result in role conflict because of the ensuing ambiguity (Skogstad et al 2007). A similarly negative consequence, in the form of work disengagement, has been established in prior research (Bakker et al 2007), and is likewise evident in the present study in the context of organisational crises. Often, participants interpreted this perceived absence of information from their senior leaders as intentional dishonesty, which can subsequently diminish trust (Dirks and Ferrin 2002). Examples of participants’ comments on this thematic statement include:

“I wanted them to talk to us, be honest with us and just tell us exactly what’s going on.” – Jackie, middle manager

“I think there’s too many secrets. We’re not told everything.” – Kelly, employee

“Suddenly we’re getting nothing. You go, why is there silence?” – Gina, supervisor

“Because [information] wasn’t given to us, it sort of made us feel like, should we trust [the senior leaders]? Sometimes we couldn’t see the forest for the trees and didn’t understand why there was a little bit of distance and how they were dealing with it. But it just led to us going, oh, they’re not telling us something. We’d sit around the table, as managers – and mature managers good at what we do – bitching about the national team not giving us more. Not so much about the business but our futures and how our packages were going to look at the end and what we had to do for them and all those types of things. It just engendered a bit of mistrust.” – Bill, supervisor
“We’re not kept informed as much as we would like. We’re hearing information from other [sources]. So nothing’s concrete at all, everything seems to be secretive and we’re just hearing bits from other people instead of from the right sources from above. Staff find that very challenging because we just don’t know what’s happening. I don’t think it’s management at this level, it’s at a higher level with the secrecy. Even the unions can’t get much information.” – Holly, employee

“There’s anxiety about why there isn’t any information. If things are going so well why aren’t we hearing about it?” – Irene, middle manager

This dearth of information is unfortunate since it appears senior leaders are indeed a reliable source of information during organisational crises (Carmeli and Schaubroek 2008). That they do not share this information may be attributed to a lack of awareness of the benefits in doing so or, more maliciously, a desire to retain power, thereby disabling the organisation’s success (Goh 2002). Similar performance-related threats were reported in the current study with participants expressing concern at their inability to perform at the level required for the organisational crisis to be overcome. Occasionally, the consequences negatively affected the provision of customer service. Examples of participants’ comments include:

“[The hostile takeover announcement] had just come out and we were expected to tell [clients] about what was going on and what it meant, and we didn’t have any information; didn’t have any pre-warning...I felt disengaged in that regard.” – Evelyn, employee

“I know at a local level we were a close knit unit as a leadership team but nationally it seemed so separated and they were the ones who were dealing with the customer face-to-face...It felt sometimes that there was a lot of distance between what we knew and what we didn’t know and that was pretty hard. That, I guess, summed up the uncertainty for us. I
guess I just wanted to, every day, have more information.” – *Bill, supervisor*

“There’s been no update. There’s nothing. There’s actual silence. I can’t comprehend that intellectually. I can’t comprehend that logically. There’s got to have been progress. Progress, if anything, is tacked on to iterations of new change, where it’s not clear whether we’re catching up or not.” – *Rhonda, employee*

A perceived lack of information persisted even when significant structural changes, implemented as a result of the crisis, were imminent. In the absence of such information, the success of large-scale change can be deleteriously affected (Proctor and Doukakis 2003). For example, when employees are not kept informed, havoc is likely to ensue as they become inordinately inward-focused rather than customer-focused (Pearson and Thomas 2004), as per the following participant:

“This is happening in the next month or two but nobody even knows what’s going on...Will we need to lose our staff or will whatever they bring in increase our workload and so we’ll need more? We don’t know. We don’t even know what’s coming – you find out when it’s happened is the way it goes. That will affect our business. We just don’t know what’s happening.” – *Kelly, employee*

In Sally’s place of work, it was not uncommon throughout the organisational crisis for entire teams to be outsourced to foreign companies. The remaining employees, however, were not notified of these personnel departures and replacements, thereby leaving them surprised at inopportune moments. The following is a case in point.

“We’re having trouble finding out when a team leaves who our contacts are if we have problems in that area. Then one day we’ll get a call and they’ll start talking about some problem they have, and we’ll go who are
you? What do you do? Why are you calling me? They’ll explain they are some company that does this job now. Well, sorry, but nobody has informed us, who you are or what you do. How did you even get this number?” – Sally, employee

She adds:

“Not letting us know the people who are left, how we will function, just doesn’t seem right. It’s sort of like removing a cog in a machine and expecting it still to work as it did before. It might still turn, but it might hiccup every now and again. [Senior leaders] don’t seem concerned over that.” – Sally, employee

In addition to the difficulties in meeting performance expectations, the lack of information seemed to deteriorate employee engagement because the uncertainty was exacerbated. Since uncertainty is often a direct result of a shortage of information (Milliken 1987), it is logical to assume the provision of information would be the most appropriate antidote to such situations (Daft and Lengel 1984). One key manifestation of this was evident among participants when the crisis resulted in retrenchments. Without details of who was going to be retained and who was going to be made redundant, employees were left to navigate the unpredictable terrain alone, for example:

“[The general manager] wouldn’t tell us who was going. He wouldn’t tell us when. He just said, just be careful when talking to [co-workers]. Well hang on, how are you meant to be careful if you don’t know who’s going? It just makes things really difficult.” – Sally, employee

“Saying that something was going to happen but then not actually giving any information about what that was, built this sense of anticipation in staff, which was really what got people nervous and what got people talking amongst themselves. About, oh my God, what’s going to happen?
Who is going to lose their job? It just fed that fire of not knowing, which was what was really scary for people.” – Colin, employee

“There’s no information coming out of [the office to be outsourced] ... There is absolutely no communication happening. It’s almost like they have a gag order.” – Irene, middle manager

In an attempt to overcome some of these barriers, the braver and more outspoken participants endeavoured to seek answers directly from their senior leaders. This is regarded as information-seeking behaviour, which occurs in organisations especially during times of anxiety and uncertainty (Morrison 2002). On every occasion related by participants in the present study, these attempts at obtaining information were unsuccessful. It can be expected, then, that such rebuttals would eventually damage the relationship between leaders and subordinates (Sias 2005). The following examples from participants are cases in point:

“We were constantly asking our leaders or managers what’s going on...Senior management was just like, anything, nothing...I became a bit more distant from them because it felt like no one was answering anyone’s questions or they were dodging them.” – Paula, employee

“Oh, look, we spoke at our business unit reviews once a month and it was just maintaining the rage – trying to hold [senior leaders] accountable above us, so we had to force answers out of them sometimes. A lot of the time they were uncommitted to giving us answers and I’m not sure why that was.” – Bill, supervisor

Faced with a perceived absence of information from their leaders, participants sought information from other sources. In accordance with the extant literature, these sources included colleagues and documents (Sias and Wyers 2001). When deciding on which source to approach, employees ordinarily consider the accessibility of that source, its credibility, and its supportiveness.
(Morrison 2002). In the present research, several participants resorted to sources such as colleagues via word-of-mouth, and romantic partners via their privileged position in the organisation. More common than those, however, were the external sources, primarily from media outlets. For example:

“Because I had a lot of down time during the day, I would look at other news websites to see what’s being written about [the organisation] or any sort of hint of what could be the future of [the organisation], what would it be. Because we learnt very quickly that [senior leaders] won’t tell us but it would be reported in the news or the media so that’s the only way you can find out...It’s like through The Age...It was quite common that they were slow to notify the staff, their own staff, of any sort of major changes. In fact, we find out our own change within the organisation through reading the media. And I’m like, hang on, what? You don’t care about your staff to tell us before anyone else of this big change that’s happening.” – Paula, employee

“I, for one, like to have The Age on all day. I had the page open ready to see. Then, sure enough, the news item [about the organisational crisis] popped up. It led for maybe a couple of hours, but nothing too significant to the rest of the world. But to those of us, that news item came up and you learned about that, in its first instance, through a media outlet. I found that just extraordinary.” – Rhonda, employee

“Honestly, I think everybody spent far more of their time reading the newspaper, seeing if anything else had happened, and speculating. Even my boss, and he gets paid heaps.” – Diane, middle manager

So what kind of information was desired? For some participants, it was simply a need to know what was happening. Others wanted a deeper understanding of the causes of the organisational crisis and the decisions that had been made by senior leaders. For some participants, the anticipated information pertained to
the benefits they would receive were they to be made redundant. The following examples illustrate these points:

“Give us some reasons behind your decisions so that we understand it a little bit better. Give us information.” – Jackie, middle manager

“Do we keep our same rate of pay? Do we keep our superannuation? Do we get a job? There are a whole lot of things that we still don’t know and they aren’t telling us...They’re not saying that you won’t have a job but what they’re doing is more or less indicating that we won’t have a job.” – Gina, supervisor

“If you’re going to front a crowd of people who are realistically worried about the longevity of their jobs, surely you would try and come to them with something more reassuring than, ‘we don’t know what we’re going to be doing, but we’re doing something at some point’. But that was not what happened. So I think realistically the idea that the people who are responsible for change management would come to a group of people who are worried about change management and say nothing, I hold them responsible for not making a better effort to actually get the point across.” – Colin, employee

“I think the change in reporting relationships. Probably that’s the biggest thing. Not knowing what’s happening. Change for what appears to be for the sake of change. So not really being clear about what our future is and what that will mean. What that will mean for me and what that will mean for the staff here.” – Irene, middle manager

From a phenomenological perspective, the findings of the present research indicate that a perceived lack of information from senior leaders diminishes employee engagement during an organisational crisis. This occurred because, according to the participants, laissez-faire leadership was associated with secrecy and dishonesty. Even on those rare occasions when trust was
unaffected, the perceived absence of information apparently inhibited the potential for staff to perform well and to collaborate effectively with each other. Information, however, is just one aspect of communication, the dearth of which was another significant finding in the current study. It is to this issue that this chapter will now turn.

### 4.2.2 Insufficient communication

Communication by laissez-faire leaders is relatively non-existent (Goodnight 2004). Laissez-faire leaders avoid interaction and discussion and, on those rare occasions when conversations are unavoidable, they often engage with their interlocutor in a non-committal and superficial manner (Hackman and Johnson 2013). Such descriptions were employed by the participants in this research to describe the communication style of their senior leaders during the organisational crisis, such as:

“I don't know. It's so hard to work out what [senior leaders] are thinking because they're not telling us anything.” – Sally, employee

“Then it's suddenly silence and suddenly [senior leaders] won't tell you anything and you go 'why aren't you telling us what's happening now?'” – Gina, supervisor

For many participants, the perceived absence of communication was particularly disengaging because it exacerbated the effects of the crisis, thereby making it more difficult to overcome. This relationship can be explained by the fact effective communication is an avenue through which employee engagement is strengthened (Attridge 2009) but when that communication is lacking, the crisis can be prolonged and the consequences made worse (Barton 2001). In the participants’ own words:
“If any organisation is in a crisis, it doesn’t matter what it is, the first thing that you really, in my opinion, you need to do is you need to be able to openly discuss what the issues are and openly discuss without people taking offence or being defensive or all this emotional carryon and politics. We might not have all the skillsets here but if we can discuss the issues openly I think there’s a much higher probability of finding a solution.” – Michael, middle manager

“We have had to learn to manage ourselves to compensate for the difficulties we’ve all experienced. This isn’t how it should be – we should be getting clear and reassuring messages from the management and feeling supported by them to do our jobs.” – John, employee

“I would have more communication with the client during this period than I would with my own company.” – Frank, supervisor

“The way that our leaders in senior leadership have communicated has been pretty poor, I think largely due to the fact that half of them were moving on, or knew they were moving on, and had made their decision based on the political environment...So a lot of those balls which were being juggled and kept in the air, all of a sudden weren’t any more. So the cracks started to show. So I think that was the problem, because there wasn’t anyone to pick up the slack anymore. I guess even at that level, they weren’t engaged enough to do those extra activities which the job requires.” – Henry, employee

When a leader communicates in such a way that employees are informed and feel as though they are part of a community, their feelings of uncertainty can be mitigated (Elving 2005). However, leaders often think they are communicating well but the reality is they are not. This is because, during times of uncertainty, one-way communication is rarely sufficient and, in the absence of such dialogue, employees are more likely to engage in informal communication methods such as rumour and gossip (Bordia et al 2004). Of particular consternation in the
present research, then, and a subsequent cause of disengagement, was that the perceived lack of communication made an already uncertain environment even more uncertain, as participants explain in these examples:

“[The senior leader] has gone from sending monthly emails out to the company, to going silent. See, that’s one of the signs where I knew that something was wrong, because I got used to getting emails from him every month...That vanished. That was all gone.” – Tom, employee

“I don’t like the fact that there’s almost zero communication through the factory. So the factory workers I don’t think have been told that we’re making a loss. So I think it raises a huge uncertainty with everyone.” – Lance, employee

“It’s more the [lack of] communication, the [lack of] information flowing onto staff, what’s going on – once again it comes from a higher level and we’re not getting that. It’s all pretty much secretive...So uncertain of what’s happening.” – Holly, employee

For some participants, the disengaging factor associated with communication had less to do with its insufficiency and more to do with its perceived inadequacy. Reilly (1993) suggests that adequate crisis communication includes admitting there is a problem; demonstrating proactive leadership; being specific; emphasising the positives; and also being honest about the worst-case scenario. More recently, there are indications organisations are realising the importance of such communication during times of crisis and are therefore incorporating internal communication strategies in their crisis management plans (Johansen et al 2012). That approach, however, does not seem to have been embraced by senior leaders in the present research. The following comments from participants illustrate these points:

“I have found a little bit of the messaging to be disingenuous, and I think that there’s been a really high demand for us to contribute more and
more vigour and energy for the purposes of saving the workplace.” – Rhonda, employee

“There was also a time when the business, I thought, hadn’t been as supportive as it could have been when we were asking for more feedback. The feedback was just, I guess, periodic via email rather than personalised.” – Bill, supervisor

“There wasn’t even talk about, ‘well, what can we do?’ There was just kind of like, ‘stuff is happening and eventually you’ll know what’s going to happen and it will be fine’. But no clear answers were ever given, no real reassurance was given. It was all very hypothetical, ‘oh you know, everything will be fine; just, we’re working on it and we’ll give you more answers when we can’. But the answers never came. It was just continual, ‘oh when we know more we can let you know more’. It’s like, well, this has been going on for 12 months now, surely you know more at this point than you did 12 months ago. Don’t you have something to show for this?” – Colin, employee

Most of the participants in the current study were not made redundant even though that was the fate that befell many of their colleagues. This did not seem to result in survivor guilt, which is when those who survive mass layoffs are remorseful that they are still employed when their former colleagues are not (Brockner et al 1985). Instead, some of the participants could best be classified as ‘reluctant survivors’, which is the envy that characterises those who, with a newly increased workload, become envious of their retrenched colleagues (Sahdev 2004). In other words, in the present research, many of the organisational crises had a sudden impact on staffing levels but not necessarily on the work that still needed to be performed. The perceived lack of communication in this regard led to further staff disengagement at a time when employees were already mourning the loss of their colleagues, as indicated in the following participant comments:
“No attempt is being made to tell us what we're going to do with those people gone...So those who are left behind are feeling, not as bad as those who have left, but definitely in the lurch because who’s going to do his job? I go to him for all these things. Nothing's being told to you.” – Sally, employee

“There was no talk about how [the retrenchments] would affect the staff at the lower levels.” – Colin, employee

“I think somewhere between seven and 20 people were made [redundant]. That’s just through word of mouth, with people that have suddenly disappeared.” – Belinda, supervisor

In Belinda’s case, just noted, when employees were made redundant, they were asked to leave immediately, and yet no announcement was made to notify surviving employees of their departure. It was only when queries were raised by team members about why certain desks were now vacant that leaders spoke up and admitted that the recent retrenchments had occurred. This was an example of an event that ought to have been communicated but was not. Even in cases where the events were not so obvious, employees yearned for something to be communicated. This was evident in the similar statements made by some of the participants who expressed a desire to receive updates from leaders even when those leaders had nothing of substance to communicate:

“Communication is everything. Even if it's bad news, it is everything. If [senior leaders] had communicated – even if they didn't know something, like ‘we don't know what's going to happen with our processes and procedures, but I'd ask you to bear with us’...Any communication is better than none and I think this whole thing that the company went through is just exactly that example of how important it is...Just communicate with the staff, that's all...It just would have alleviated a lot of stress.” – Nora, employee
“So, for me, I feel that [the crisis] is still tenuous. The silence, to me, is quite political, in that if there’s no news to report, well, c’est la vie. But perhaps just to check in with people and say, ‘Do you know what? There’s no news to report. This is what we know.’ Be frank. Be evident. It just doesn’t appear to be there. I believe I’m correct in saying that there has been, in my immediate work area, the highest staff turnover that’s been visible for some time.” – Rhonda, employee

The aforementioned quotations demonstrate the ways in which laissez-faire leadership, by virtue of its communication deficiencies, negatively influenced employee engagement during each participant’s organisational crisis. Rather than feeling relieved they had not been retrenched, the participants instead felt overwhelmed as they struggled to see how the organisation would survive. By refraining from communication, senior leaders generated gaps in knowledge and reassurance – gaps that were subsequently filled with anxiety and fear. These concerns could have been alleviated if senior leaders had interacted and conversed with their workforce, but as will be illustrated in the next sub-section, the reality was the converse: in the context of an organisational crisis, the leaders in the current study were more likely to be distant.

4.2.3 Distance

Laissez-faire leaders are usually absent, inactive, and reticent to interact with their employees (Bass 2008). In other words, distant. Senior leaders, by virtue of their position in the hierarchy, are at an automatic disadvantage when it comes to the social distance between them and their employees (Waldman and Yammarino 1999). As Waldman and Yammarino note, this can be remedied by walking around, making contact, and delivering speeches. That, however, did not seem to be the preferred method of senior leadership in the present study. For example, when Jackie, a middle manager, described her senior leaders as secretive, this researcher asked her what she wanted from them that she currently was not receiving. Her initial one-word answer was “visibility”.
Likewise, when Sally, an employee, was asked to talk about her senior leaders during the crisis, she replied: “Hardly ever see them. Don’t talk to us.” Others felt the same way:

“There’s a definite disconnect and distance there now that gets in the way of trust and effective communication.” – *John, employee*

“I don’t know how well supported [supervisors] were during [the crisis]. It looked like the [senior leader] was happy just to be in his office and just let the [other managers] deal with everything.” – *Paula, employee*

“We never saw [our senior leader]. He never said a word. The whole time that they were talking about the restructure and people were losing their jobs and getting demoted and everything, we never heard a word out of him. He never went for a walk around the floor like he used to, nothing. All of a sudden we never saw him; you didn’t hear from him. Everyone kept saying, where’s [the senior leader] in all this?” – *Fiona, employee*

“We hear of things a bit late sometimes, and it’s been three or four days before you hear some team is gone.” – *Sally, employee*

“I think I interpreted [the senior leader’s response to the crisis] as a bit of a ‘let’s just deny it, and if we deny it and we stay focussed it’ll go away’... but for such a substantial and for such a public announcement, I think it warrants something.” – *Rhonda, employee*

The distance for some leaders was explained by the perception that they, too, were as disengaged as their workforce. In order to deal with their own disengagement, they were perceived to have withdrawn emotionally and behaviourally. The inherent risk of leaders behaving in this way is that of contagion, which means their emotions and behaviours may subsequently be imitated by their employees (Johnson 2008), particularly during times of
burnout when cynicism and anxiety are prevalent (Bakker et al 2006).
Participant comments included:

“The personality of the managing partner is just not that charismatic...
He’s a private person and standing up in front of people and even doing
videos to send out to staff and stuff is something he always hated doing.
He needed to be really pushed, so when he was disengaged [during the
crisis], he didn’t want to be doing any of those things.” – Nora, employee

“We even think that they forgot about us unless we did something wrong
or they really needed something and they kind of came grovelling
because it’s so – it’s always last minute.” – Paula, employee

In Bill’s case, there were personal reputational consequences associated with
the metaphorical distance of his senior leaders. As a supervisor, Bill had
employees who expected him to keep them informed, but the distance between
Bill and his senior leaders meant he was frequently unable to provide his
employees with the information and reassurance they desired. It is what
McConville and Holden (1999) refer to as the ‘piggy-in-the-middle’ syndrome,
which implies some leaders are stuck between the demands of their employees
and the distance of their own leaders. This often results in role dissonance
because of the competing tensions and ambiguity (McConville 2006). This
frustrated and disengaged Bill as well as his team:

“We wanted to know what was really happening nationally. We didn’t
get fed as much as we should have. We would go back to staff and say,
‘we don’t have anything, it's business as usual, we don’t have anything to
report’. We felt as though there could have been a lot more coming back
in to say, ‘we sat down on this day, we haven’t discussed this, we’ve done
that’...It just felt like – the distance there, that there was something not
being told to us. It may not have been the case but that was the feeling it
gave us, because we weren’t getting told anything.” – Bill, supervisor
Amy was in a near identical predicament. As a middle manager ordinarily involved in executive meetings, her employees and other stakeholders relied on her as a source of information. This became a challenge when her access to the CEO suddenly ceased:

“All of our regular meetings just dropped off and there were things like that where you were just like, ‘oh, he doesn’t even want to – he doesn’t want us to be part of that solution anymore’.” – Amy, middle manager

The perceived distance – both physical and metaphorical – of laissez-faire leaders appears to have a negative effect on employee engagement during an organisational crisis. As has been illustrated in the preceding passages, this can be attributed to three factors. The first is the mistrust and cynicism that ensue as a result of the senior leaders’ perceived invisibility. The second is that this invisibility generates perceptions that senior leaders are disengaged, which subsequently has a contagious effect throughout the organisation. The third is that supervisors and middle managers are rendered ineffectual because, despite wanting to help their teams retain their engagement, they are prevented from doing so due to the disconnected behaviour of those higher up in the hierarchy. A similar situation plays out with passivity, the next theme to be discussed.

4.2.4 Passivity

Laissez-faire leadership is characterised by a non-interventionist disposition. That is because such leaders care little for influencing the behaviour of their employees and are reluctant to provide direction and instruction (Deluga 1990). Skogstad et al (2007, p. 80) refer to this style of leadership as “passive and indirect”. Since this passivity is “always an inappropriate way to lead”, an argument can be made that it should not actually be regarded as leadership (Den Hartog et al 1997, p. 21). It became apparent in the present research that when this inactiveness is perceived to be present during organisational crises, the key consequence is work disengagement. Participant comments included:
“[Senior leaders were] unresponsive and unconcerned to investigate things.” – Gary, supervisor

“Everyone could see what the problems were and yet they weren’t being addressed.” – Henry, employee

“I was absolutely disgusted by that sort of behaviour. Yes, I just couldn’t believe that [the senior leader] would just be so nonchalant about it.” – Tom, employee

One reason for this disengaging effect can be attributed to the way in which employees interpreted the passivity. For several participants, they saw it as senior leaders’ lack of care for the stress being felt by staff members. Since employee engagement drops when employees feel as though the organisation does not care and support them (Saks 2006), it makes sense that a similar disengaging effect was found in the present research. It is also important to note that uncaring leadership has more consequences than disengagement; it is also an unethical practice that could result in counterproductive behaviour among employees (Den Hartog and Belschak 2012). Participants commented:

“It’s very sad, the behaviour that gets overlooked. Like I realised earlier on that management knew all about people, what people think and stuff but they don’t do anything about it. They don’t really sort of address how to shift the culture of the workplace to be a bit more, ‘okay we’re all in a bit of strife so let’s work together to be able to move forward and produce something great’.” – Paula, employee

“Passive as in when [the senior leader] did get dragged into one of these meetings where my team was vilified, he just sat back. Didn’t contribute. Didn’t offer any support to either side. He just sat there.” – Tom, employee
“While I was listened to and I was told that ‘yes, we’ll try and do something and yes, there’s definitely a gap there and yes, happy you brought it to our attention, and yes, we can see that’, nothing was done. Zero was done. When I came back and I spoke to my colleagues and said, ‘well what changed and what was done’, nothing was done. So it’s just disappointing that you bring these things to your management and you would hope that there would be something done and just nothing gets done. So why would you go to them in the future if the past is anything to go on? You just don’t have any confidence in bringing these things to them knowing that they probably won’t do anything.” – *Vince, employee*

“It’s just not handled at my work at all really. The organisation has taken a duck-and-cover, head-in-the-sand approach or when pushed to do so, done the absolute bare minimum required. This makes a mockery of their HR policies in this area. I don’t think it’s a good enough excuse to blame limited resources. After much pushing and prodding, we had an organisational psychologist out for a couple of sessions with a group of people from our department. She took us through an exercise and gave everybody a chance to say how they feel...which basically boiled down to feeling betrayed by management and having to work with a manager who was struggling and didn’t want to engage with her staff or recognise their needs.” – *John, employee*

In Vince’s case, just noted, the perceived passivity was exacerbated by the many vacant positions throughout the organisation. These positions were left unfilled, thereby resulting in heavier workloads and, most pointedly in relation to engagement, this gave employees like Vince even less hope for the future. This effect occurs because hope is an antecedent of employee engagement (Ouweneel et al 2012) and a core component of psychological capital (Luthans et al 2004). As Vince describes:

“Because we know we’re being outsourced, I don’t think there is that urgency to fill those gaps. If we weren’t being outsourced I think our
management would have dealt with that and addressed that a long time ago and then it would also probably provide some progression for staff members that if someone is away that they can act in a position that’s above them...But none of that’s been available in the last six months or even six to nine months.” – Vince, employee

What Vince’s comment demonstrates is that it is may be the existence of an organisational crisis that compels senior leaders to adopt a position of passivity. Had the crisis not been in motion, leaders may have adopted an approach more in line with engagement – that of vigour and dedication. This provides a neat summary for the laissez-faire trait of passivity. Its disengaging effect is explained by the sense that employees take it as a personal affront. If their leaders are so nonchalant about their workforce during such a stressful time, it can only mean they have very little concern for their employees’ welfare. While that last statement may be an exaggeration, it nonetheless highlights an important phenomenological truism: the ‘lived experience’ of the crisis is up for personal interpretation, sometimes negatively. The same can be said for the laissez-faire traits of naïveté, avoidance, indecision, and vagueness, all of which will be discussed next.

4.2.5 Other laissez-faire characteristics

This final sub-section on laissez-faire leadership will address four additional characteristics relevant to these findings. Most notably, these are perceptions of naïveté, avoidance, indecision, and vagueness.

In relation to naïveté, laissez-faire leaders can lack confidence in their abilities (Bass 2008), which in the present research was a disengaging factor. This became manifest in two ways. The first was that, in some cases, senior leaders were seen as being too easily manipulated by more-assertive individuals. Michael’s experience is a case in point. Several of his colleagues, who he described as being more intimidating in disposition, would demand that the CEO take a particular action. The CEO would invariably decide in their favour.
That is one example of upward influence, which can be enacted by subordinates using either soft tactics or hard tactics (Farmer et al 1997). The manipulation to which Michael refers belongs in the hard tactic category:

“The other thing I’ve found is that people who aggressively push the general manager in a certain direction, he will then sometimes acquiesce. Not necessarily go in that direction but certainly acquiesce in addressing those problems much quicker than if you acted in a professional interaction.” – Michael, middle manager

The second manifestation of naïveté was evident in the senior leaders who, despite the chaos and uncertainty that dominated their working environment, still acted as though there was nothing to be concerned about. This disposition was incongruent with the fear and anxiety felt by their employees, thereby resulting in heightened levels of cynicism. This is known as affective congruence, or rather, affective incongruence, in that one individual’s emotions do not match those required of the situation. In the workplace, employees think less favourably of leaders who behave in this way (Newcombe and Ashkanasy 2002). The following participant comments emphasise this:

“[The senior leader] became definitely what I describe as head-in-the-sand approach to the plan, to the truth, and part of that was him not coming to terms with [the crisis] himself, not just necessarily him hiding information, but I think he was in that mindset of ‘things will get better, things will get better’, when everyone around just kind of started to see that that wasn’t the case. So definitely that traditional approach around, yeah, him just losing touch with reality, I think more than anything. So that was a big concern of mine towards the end.” – Amy, middle manager

“I think that’s a bit of naïveté on the senior management’s behalf, to think that staff will be happy with these messages that these people are coming out with, rather than tangible information. So yeah, I think that it was naïveté more than anything else.” – Colin, employee
Another disengaging factor associated with laissez-faire leadership is perceived avoidance, which often results in perceptions of ineffectiveness (Avolio et al 1999), and was evident in the current study. More specifically, this pertained to the perceived avoidance of conflict, such as in Michael’s case. In order to avoid dealing with conflict, his senior leader would apparently succumb to the demands of the most assertive people, even when they were his subordinates. This approach neglects that conflict can actually result in positive outcomes for an organisation when it is managed constructively (Tjosvold 2008). The following comments from participants illustrate this:

“That’s probably the general manager’s personality. Conflict avoidance...There are certain people who are maybe slightly aggressive...That conflict is avoided. That’s let to go on.” – Michael, middle manager

“There were leaders who couldn’t deal with conflict. So when I was going through bullying, I was told [by the senior leader]: ‘Look, [the bully] is just a grump. Just work hard, keep your head down.’ That was all I was told...When I mentioned it to somebody else they said ‘yeah, [the senior leader] doesn't like dealing with conflict and he doesn't like to ruffle feathers and getting HR involved because that just blows up to a lot of things and then it’s more paperwork for him to fill out and more responsibilities’.” – Paula, employee

Laissez-faire leaders can also be indecisive, which can subsequently diminish performance during a crisis (Boehnke et al 2002). This indecisiveness can be attributed to excessive caution and a reticence to take risks, the combination of which is a dimension of leadership incompetence (Hogan and Kaiser 2005). That kind of indecisiveness was reflected in the present research by participant comments such as:
“I think basically almost no decisions have been made. If you’ve got a lot of people who all have their own self-interest you end up not really making any decisions and you just go on month by month doing small things, but not the big picture.” – Lance, employee

“It took [senior leaders] a while because it feels like management takes a long time to action anything...I understand it takes time for things to be confirmed but, man, they took a long time and in that space of time, it created a lot more uncertainty. People were looking for other work.” – Paula, employee

Finally, vagueness, too, is reflective of laissez-faire leaders, particularly in terms of the messages they convey, many of which lack clarity (Bass 2008). Whilst leadership clarity can be an important source of team effectiveness (Hu and Liden 2011), in the present research the participants interpreted vagueness not as a performance issue but as indolent behaviour, such as in Colin’s comment:

“I think the parroting [of the corporate rhetoric] was simply because it was easy. It was easy to use the same language that was being supplied, because you were able to say something without actually saying something and offering a solution, and not having to think about a solution. So I don't think it was malicious as such. I think it was just, in a way, laziness. It was an easy thing to do.” – Colin, employee

Whilst perceptions of naïveté, passivity, indecision and vagueness were the least frequently mentioned laissez-faire attributes, they still fall under the same umbrella with which a lack of information, insufficient communication, distance, and passivity are associated. In whatever manifestation they appear during an organisational crisis, at least in the current study, the result seems to be disengagement. As will be seen in the next section, a similar principle applies with autocratic leadership.
4.3 Autocratic leadership among senior leaders

Autocratic leadership is the term used to describe leaders who are “controlling, power-oriented, coercive, punitive, and closed-minded” (Bass 2008, p. 440). It is a style of leadership often judged pejoratively because of its demanding nature and expectations of obedience. As a result, social experiments have found group members are more likely to resign from autocratic leadership than from laissez-faire leadership (van Vugt et al 2004). As Bass notes (2008), whilst there is some evidence to suggest autocratic leadership can occasionally engender respect, it is more common for its dark side to materialise. That was certainly the case in the present research where it emerged as the second-most disengaging factor during an organisational crisis. In comparison to laissez-faire leadership, however, it was mentioned only half as frequently. Nevertheless, there are six ways through which autocratic leadership became manifest in the lived experiences of these participants: (i) dismissiveness; (ii) maltreatment; (iii) lack of emotional intelligence; (iv) excessive scrutiny; (v) unfairness; and (vi) self-serving behaviour. Table 4.3 displays each of these thematic statements as well as their frequency. The sub-sections to follow will explore each one in greater depth.

Table 4.3 Autocratic leadership among senior leaders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thematic statement</th>
<th>Number of passages</th>
<th>Percentage of employee participants</th>
<th>Percentage of leadership participants</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Dismissiveness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maltreatment</td>
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<td>19%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of emotional intelligence</td>
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<td>21%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Excessive scrutiny</td>
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<td>----------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unfairness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-serving behaviour</td>
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### 4.3.1 Dismissiveness

Autocratic leaders make decisions authoritatively, which means they are often dismissive of others’ ideas (Dessein 2007). As Dessein notes, this culminates in a preference to stick steadfastly to their own proposals and a reticence to engage in constructive dialogue. This is despite dialogue being one of the most organic ways through which organisational learning occurs (Mazutis and Slawinski 2008), which is arguably of critical importance during a crisis (Nystrom and Starbuck 1984). Such dismissiveness was mentioned in the present research almost twice as frequently as the remaining autocratic behaviours, as per the following examples:

“The level of vitriol that any dissenting voice in any team meeting started to attract from the senior manager was fairly difficult to swallow on a lot of occasions.” – Henry, employee

“[Senior leaders] just look disinterested or they're dismissive of what you say. They cut you off. If you request more transparency, they provide less.” – John, employee

“There were two very good staff members in that call centre who constantly highlighted the issues...but management didn’t listen, didn’t seem to want to listen and didn’t seem to want to help even though they said, ‘yes, we understand the issues and we know what needs to be done’, but never did actually anything to fix it.” – Vince, employee
A comparative pattern of selective listening was present at Fiona's place of work. Selective listening occurs when leaders, usually as a result of being overwhelmed with too much information, pay attention only to a limited number of problems (DuBrin 2013b). Neglecting to hear, consider and learn from this information can damage the organisation (James and Wooten 2005). However, as James and Wooten attest, that tends to be the common trend among leaders during times of crisis. This behaviour became manifest in Fiona’s workplace where senior leaders encouraged employees to submit their suggestions on how the restructure could be improved. On realising they had been given a seemingly unmanageable amount of feedback, senior leaders were perceived to have promptly disregarded it:

“They just vetoed everything. The restructure happened just the way upper management wanted. Exactly the way they expressed in the original email. So people's input didn't seem to matter much at all.” – Fiona, employee

Similar dismissiveness was perceived to be present among Isaac’s senior leaders. However, rather than seeking feedback via electronic means, they instead organised briefing sessions at which it was not unusual for questioners to be “cut off”. Isaac elaborates:

“Well they said we don't have any time now [for questions]...They probably didn't want to answer in case they put their foot in it...So I guess people were asking questions that were quite pointed and quite specific and I guess they didn't think that was the forum for it. So yeah. But again that does not give people a good feeling, does it, when they can't even answer some of those questions.” – Isaac, middle manager

The aforementioned instances of perceived dismissiveness were in relation to the disregard for employee feedback. In some cases, this extended to a perceived disregard for their wellbeing, too. This is in stark contrast to the
approach recommended for organisational crises when leaders should be concerned about the psychological and physical wellbeing of their employees (Seeger et al 2003). This is a curious omission insofar that leaders who prioritise their subordinates’ wellbeing can also derive additional benefits such as productivity gains and organisational effectiveness (Baptiste 2008). One participant commented:

“People are already tired. Instead of quantifying that, there’s a sense that they’re dismissive of that rather than acknowledging it and then asking for vigour, engagement, energy, all of these things. I just feel, from time to time, it’s just too dismissive...In constantly painting the rosy picture, I feel it’s dismissive of things that I was interested in hearing. Anecdotally, I hear that people have been advised that [employees] are coming across and presenting as negative. So there’s been this concept of not being allowed to be negative.” – Rhonda, employee

A similar situation occurred at Amy’s workplace where the senior leader, on being presented with evidence his actions were causing emotional harm to his employees, would dismiss those emotions as irrational:

“I would turn to [the senior leader] once I had all the information and say, ‘look, I’m aware that this happened, what’s the situation’, and would find ways to politely say to him ‘you can’t be yelling at staff, this person's upset’. He would reply, ‘Oh, I don’t understand why they’re upset, what are you talking about?’ ... When I was actually presenting him with facts, he would deny stuff or his take of it was that it wasn’t that bad.” – Amy, middle manager

The autocratic leadership trait of dismissiveness was therefore disengaging on two levels: the cognitive and the affective. The cognitive impact can be seen in the perceived rejection of comments and suggestions put forward by employees. The affective impact can be seen in the perceived indifference shown towards employees’ emotions and wellbeing. This lack of concern,
especially during an already tenuous organisational crisis, exacerbated sensitivities even though they may have been simply a matter of perception. As will be demonstrated in the next sub-section, this is particularly the case among employees who are directly targeted for maltreatment.

4.3.2 Maltreatment

Autocratic leaders are more inclined to engage in the maltreatment of their staff, primarily due to the power imbalances in their favour (Barron and Ogle 2014). Such authoritarian approaches were described in the present research by participants who experienced disengagement as a result of either witnessing, or being the direct recipient of, abusive behaviour during the organisational crisis. Indeed, simply being a witness to the mistreatment of a colleague can have a contagious effect throughout the organisation, thereby deleteriously impacting the culture and ethical climate (Skrarlicki and Kulik 2004). In none of the participants was this more pronounced than in Paula’s experience:

“[The senior leader] called one of the [employees] into the office and shut the door, and she’d tell him off, but you could hear it outside. It’s like, how is that good management when you know that your office is not sound proof and you’re putting on a show? Everyone else, including the [other managers], who are in senior leadership roles, they just either ignore it or they sort of chuckle and go ‘well, I’m glad I’m not that person’.” – Paula, employee

Paula blamed the organisational crisis as the provocation for such behaviour:

“With that crisis, it’s kind of a trickledown effect of what was happening. I guess because the management were under pressure to perform well and to make something out of no budget. So that pressure I guess sort of filtered down onto the rest of the team. It was very easy for the managers to snap because of the pressure...Every now and then [the
senior leader] would sort of stomp out of his office and yell abuse across the other side of the room.” – Paula, employee

The aforementioned events, in combination with what Paula perceived as being a proliferation of racist and sexist jokes, eventually became intolerable for Paula and so she mentioned the risk of this maltreatment coming to the attention of a human resources representative. Paula believes her senior leader interpreted this as a threat, which is often a precursor to downward mobbing (Duffy 2009), a form of bullying. The distinction between mobbing and bullying can be seen in the repercussions for her career. The leader, according to Paula, recruited Paula’s colleagues as allies, all of whom subsequently gave Paula the permanent ‘silent treatment’, which is characteristic of mobbing (Hecker 2007).

“From then on, [the senior leader] goes, ‘I get to say whatever I want here. You have a problem, get out’. And then pretty much, it’s like he’s told everyone in the [office] who was there to not engage with me at all. Just freeze me out.” – Paula, employee

Amy was a similar witness of maltreatment. She noticed, and was often the mediator for, her senior leader’s maltreatment of employees, which included yelling, blame, and conflict. Unlike Paula, she did not suffer personal repercussions for speaking up but, much like Paula, she saw the organisational crisis as the trigger for this behaviour. In addition to this kind of verbal abuse, organisational crises can be the trigger for other types of deviant behaviours such as sabotage, theft, gossip, and harassment (Crandall et al 2010). Amy suggested the senior leaders’ deviant behaviours were a direct result of the stress they were experiencing. Her assumption is supported by the literature, most notably Penney and Spector (2005), who found stress exacerbates counterproductive work behaviour when individuals are already high in negative affect, which seems to be the case with Amy’s leaders.

“Definitely [the maltreatment] was led from managerial and ownership level down. It wasn’t the staff who started those sorts of things, so it was
very, very much top down...The fact that they were lashing out obviously was bigger stress factors that were getting to the point where they were just snapping...[The senior leader] would seek someone out and have a go at them...So I just think as the pressure mounted the number of incidents started to increase.” – Amy, middle manager

In Rhonda’s case, the maltreatment was reflected in the perceived disregard for employees who had invested decades working for the organisation only to be made redundant in a manner deemed to be insensitive. Such actions sacrificed trust for the purpose of expediency. As Bartlett and Ghoshal (1998, p. 38) note: “Decades of investment in trust can be destroyed overnight if the decisions about emotionally sensitive issues such as plant closings or layoffs are viewed as insensitive.” Folger and Skarlicki (1998) refer to this as managerial distancing. Their study indicated leaders engage in an emotionally disconnected way when they are concerned they will be personally blamed for the layoffs. Whilst it was out of scope for this research to determine the fear of blame as the motivator for Rhonda’s leaders, their perceived insensitivity is nonetheless apparent in the following comment:

“They were, effectively, crying as they were pushed out the door; people that have had 30 odd years and more service. They didn't have the opportunity to say goodbye to their peers. There was no ‘we wish you well’. It was just an announcement on email. The first one, when it happened, there was a literal visceral reaction around me. I recall it quite distinctly. An email went out on a Friday afternoon at 4 pm: ‘Mrs so-and-so will be taking her retirement effective da, da, da, da, immediately, we wish her well’. There was no opportunity for her peers and her colleagues to create a moment to see her out.” – Rhonda, employee

The accounts from Paula, Amy, and Rhonda demonstrate that an individual does not necessarily have to be the recipient of maltreatment to be disengaged by it. The mere witnessing of inappropriate behaviour, even when explained by the
existence of an organisational crisis, has a deleterious effect on players and bystanders alike. Underpinning this authoritarianism could be a perceived lack of emotional intelligence, which was another theme that arose in the present research, and will be addressed in greater detail in the next section.

**4.3.3 Lack of emotional intelligence**

Emotional intelligence (EQ) reflects an understanding of one’s own feelings and motivators, the feelings and motivators of others, and the subsequent ability to regulate these diverse emotions (Salovey and Mayer 1990). EQ is often lacking in autocratic leaders, the absence of which makes it difficult for them to create work environments that are collegial and inclusive (Singh et al 2007). As Singh et al note, this generates a leadership style where hierarchical power is the highest priority, where the leader is the sole bearer of accountability, and where decisions are the domain of one individual. This often results in dysfunction and job dissatisfaction. The dysfunctional nature of such leadership was described in the present study. Most notably, this could be seen in the decisions by senior leaders, which were perceived by employees to have been made without consideration for the emotional consequences that ensued. For example:

“My overarching thing about this [crisis], the whole issue, comes down to what I believe is true: emotional intelligence. I think that’s the big issue that’s causing disengagement, for me and in our organisation – the lack of it in decisions made at the senior leadership level ... So the corporate decision might be okay on an intellectual level or a corporate level but the emotional intelligence about what this is going to do on an emotional level, they haven’t got it. They haven’t considered that properly; haven’t even understood what it means and bang you’ve got an employee that’s disengaged because their wellbeing’s not being considered...Like, some stuff that happens in my opinion is just mind boggling in terms of the lack of emotional intelligence. Some of the decisions which people make, the timing of when they do. Some of what I see makes me think ‘you
can’t possibly have thought this through’. Think about what’s actually going to happen for that person, how it’s going to impact them. It’s just crazy, crazy, crazy." – Oliver, supervisor

Leaders who are unaware that fear and anxiety can arise when employees are at risk of being retrenched lack EQ (George 2000). Even when there is no prospect of layoffs, an emotionally intelligent organisation is more likely to adapt to the ‘radical change’ (Huy 1999) that often reflects organisations in crisis. In the present research, layoffs were a reality among 76% of participants, however emotionally unintelligent methods were were perceived to have been adopted when informing employees they were being laid off. For example:

“They put out the email saying that appointments would be booked into people’s diaries and they would be told the terms of their retrenchment, and that there would be a morning session and an afternoon session. So all day you’re just looking up to see who leaves their seat to go for an appointment, and wait for them to come back to talk to them about what’s happening.” – Sally, employee

In other words, employees knew they would be retrenched by virtue of being invited in advance to a meeting. Those who had not been invited knew their jobs were safe. This created an environment of anticipatory stress and tension, which is characteristic of a disengaged workforce. For example, stress is at the core of the job demands-resources model (Demerouti et al 2001) and has been used as a key demand in numerous studies on engagement (see Hakanen et al 2006; Bakker et al 2007). In Gary’s case, he tried to protect his team from these negative effects that he believed stemmed directly from the actions of his emotionally unintelligent leader:

“This guy, the executive director, it was an emotional thing. That guy is immature, he was jealous of us...So he wanted to dismantle our structure, replace the senior middle management and just demoralise us. It was resentment. Like I told my [employees], ‘don’t take it personally just
because the new executive director is a rather immature, unprofessionally emotional person.” – Gary, supervisor

The context for Gary’s situation is a belief that his new senior leader intentionally set the team up to fail by restructuring it in an inefficient manner and by instituting targets that were impossible to achieve. Whilst this behaviour could also be considered maltreatment, the underlying lack of emotional intelligence – in this case, jealousy and resentment – were perceived as the core drivers of his behaviour. The senior leader, for a long time, had apparently resented this team for its autonomy and high performance. On being given responsibility for it as a result of the organisational crisis, it is suspected he embarked on a mission to axe it. His efforts were successful. Gary and his colleagues were soon made redundant.

There is perhaps hope for these types of autocratic leaders. Emotional intelligence, after all, can be taught (Slaski and Cartwright 2003). The study conducted by Slaski and Cartwright found health and wellbeing benefits could also subsequently ensue, which could be especially useful in an organisational crisis. In the meantime, what is apparent in the present research is that a lack of emotional intelligence formed the foundation from which leaders embarked on autocratic actions throughout the crisis. From the perspective of the participants, some of these actions also entailed excessive scrutiny, unfairness, and self-serving behaviour, each of which will be addressed next.

4.3.4 Other autocratic characteristics

In this final section on autocratic leadership, three additional aspects will be explored. The first will be the adoption of excessive scrutiny, which is believed to be targeted at women more than men (Gatrell and Cooper 2007; Burke 2007), although a gender-related trend did not emerge in these findings, perhaps because the sample was not representative of the general population. The second is the perception of unfairness, which is emblematic of autocratic leaders, the consequence of which can instil fear within employees (Janson et al
2008). The third is self-serving behaviour, which according to Bass (2008, p. 230) describes leaders who “disregard the rights, values, and feelings of others”. He adds they are manipulative, rude, and Machiavellian.

In relation to excessive scrutiny, Tom’s experience was especially pertinent. Faced with a seemingly insurmountable organisational crisis, he believed his senior leaders initiated a series of exams for their employees:

“[The senior leaders] gave us exams and luckily for the rest of the team I failed the exam as well...[The senior leaders] were actually pretty unhappy with me for that, for not passing my exam.” – Tom, employee

The reason Tom described his exam failure in those terms is that he was the highest performer in the department. By failing the exam, this apparently demonstrated to his senior leaders that the use of such assessments would be an inadequate measure of performance. Their intention was that those who did not pass their exam would be placed on formal performance management with the aim of eventually terminating their employment should they not improve their results. Since every employee failed, including Tom, their best salesperson, they were supposedly left to find other avenues of terminating people without funding large payouts.

In Gary’s case, his senior leader – the one with the ambition to dismantle Gary’s team – was perceived to have similarly embarked on a mission of excessive scrutiny as a way of achieving that objective. That kind of scrutiny can be deemed a form of workplace bullying (Hutchinson et al 2010), and is consequently disengaging (Law et al 2011). Gary stated:

“Reports now had to go through [my senior leader] and he started looking for anything he could to criticise. It was almost personal, the things he was finding to criticise in reports, things like grammar or just wording. Maybe the grammar was correct but he thought it could be worded better. He was becoming very critical.” – Gary, supervisor
Likewise, Fiona, who worked in Gary’s team as one of his employees, echoed his experiences of this questionable scrutiny:

“All of a sudden it was ‘this is not good enough and that is not good enough’. Whereas we’d had surveys and everything with our stakeholders and clients and we’d had very good results – and then all of a sudden it wasn’t good enough. All of a sudden we’d find little articles written about how our [performance] wasn’t that good at all when prior to that it was good enough to be praised by the [CEO]. Then they were using the same statistics to say that it wasn’t good, it could improve. I mean everything could improve, but all of a sudden our statistics based on the same survey, wasn’t good enough ... All of a sudden one person would get raked over the coals for the standard of his report.” – Fiona, employee

An environment characterised by layoffs is one in which the fairness, or lack thereof, of leaders is questioned (Brockner et al 1992). When taking into account that a lack of fairness is a barrier to engagement (Freeney and Tiernan 2009), it is unsurprising, then, that it emerged in the present research as a disengaging factor during organisational crises. More specifically, the calculation of redundancy compensation was one way through which it became apparent. In Bill’s case, he related the story of a colleague whose tenure had been short by one day, which meant the calculation of her final payment was discounted by one year because she had been employed for 364 days that year rather than 365:

“We thought, ‘are they going to go down to that level to try to not give us our money?’ There was also one part of the business that got certain payments where the rest of the business didn’t...So we thought at the same time, ‘are we just going to be thrown to the wolves and they’re just going to take the cheapest option or are they going to actually look after us because we’re keeping the business alive and performing to the end?’
The hopelessness of it was, well, we’re doing all this work, are they going to look after us? We didn’t really trust the message that they were sending us in that.” – Bill, supervisor

Others were concerned less about their income and more about their reputation. Rhonda was one such example. As an employee in a government department, she became disengaged when she would see her senior leader, in this case a government minister, unfairly criticising his workforce in the media:

“Our own minister hates us. He’s quite public about it. It feels really terrible to see the literal head, the actual minister – in a private sector comparison it would be like your CEO going on the news, in the newspapers daily, and saying he doesn’t think it’s worth what you do. We see it all the time, once a week...So the only messaging you’re getting is that, and then you’re getting this silence in between. It’s quite demoralising. That’s the word I would use probably.” – Rhonda, employee

Unfairness was also evident in the perceived nepotism that occurred. It is not unusual for nepotism to arise during organisational crises. This is because leaders, at times of such criticality, need people close to them that they trust (Mhatre et al 2012). This expedient short-term gain, however, neglects the long-term consequences of nepotism, which include poor perceptions of leadership and diminished organisational success (Pearce 2015). Fiona, for example, mentioned:

“Very unpleasant. You just didn’t feel like [the restructure] was being conducted correctly. The [senior leader] was putting people in positions that we later found out were friends...It just felt all wrong. It just felt like it was an unfair situation and things were being planned out to suit the [senior leader].” – Fiona, employee
In relation to self-serving behaviour, Gary’s experience encapsulates the definition stated earlier by Bass (2008), which is that self-serving leaders “disregard the rights, values, and feelings of others” (p. 230). When asked to describe his senior leaders in relation to how they performed in the context of the organisational crisis, his response was short and immediate:

“Completely uncaring. If it did not affect him personally, he didn’t care what [his subordinates] got up to.”

That perceived lack of care meant senior leaders throughout the organisation were free to engage in the autocratic behaviour illustrated throughout this section. It was an experience replicated in the workplaces of a majority of the participants. At times, their senior leaders were deemed to have been dismissive, treated them poorly, exposed them to excessive scrutiny, and acted unfairly, much of which can perhaps be explained by their lack of emotional intelligence. The result, as indicated in the present research in the context of organisational crises, is that disengagement ensued. This level of disengagement, however, was far more pronounced among employees than among leaders. That will be the focus of the next section.

4.4 Differences between supervisors, middle managers and employees

In each interview, participants were provided with the definition of employee engagement articulated by Schaufeli et al (2002). They were then asked to express the degree to which they felt that level of engagement during the organisational crisis. Their responses fell into three categories. Some said they were ‘mostly engaged’; others said they were ‘mostly disengaged’; and some said they were equally engaged and disengaged. When those levels of engagement were then compared, it became apparent, as per Table 4.4, that supervisors and middle managers were more likely than employees to have retained their engagement throughout the crisis. This is in line with
practitioner data that similarly indicates greater engagement, to varying degrees, among leaders than employees (McPhie and Rose 2008; Folkman 2014). In the present research, further analysis revealed this difference in engagement can be attributed to the agency and voice inherent within a leadership position. In other words, being a supervisor or middle manager seemed to be somewhat of a shelter for those privileged enough to occupy such a role. This section, then, will further explore what it is about agency and voice that either engages or disengages people during an organisational crisis.

Table 4.4 Differences between supervisors, middle managers and employees

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<th>Thematic statement</th>
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<th>Percentage of employee participants</th>
<th>Percentage of supervisors and middle managers</th>
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<td>57%</td>
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<td>Mostly disengaged</td>
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<td>64%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Lack of voice</strong></td>
<td>25</td>
<td>44%</td>
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</table>

4.4.1 Expressions of agency

Employee engagement is similar to human agency (Rich et al 2010) since to be engaged usually necessitates a decision to enter into that state. Doing so is easier for leaders whose role is inherently agentic in nature (Dempster 2009). Several supervisors and middle managers in the present research declared that
being in a higher position enabled them to remain more engaged in a way that might not have been possible had they been frontline employees without as much agency. Andrew is one example. He mentioned the words “personal responsibility” on several occasions to describe his action-oriented attempts to overcome the crisis. When probed further on whether his middle management position was what enabled him to adopt such an approach, his response was succinct:

“Clearly. Yeah, absolutely. No doubt about it.” – Andrew, middle manager

Ursula’s experience was similar. In her interview, she used the word “involvement” to describe the ways in which her engagement was maintained during the crisis. This accords with the extant literature, which has found involvement is one way through which engagement can be enhanced (Konrad 2006; Lockwood 2007). It is also an effective way of building trust during significant change and organisational crises (Morgan and Zeffane 2003). When Ursula was asked if this involvement can be attributed to her supervisory responsibilities, her reply was succinct:

“Yeah, probably heavily linked to that. Yeah, absolutely.” – Ursula, supervisor

Kelly offers a more telling example. At the time of her interview, she was a highly disengaged employee. When asked to describe a time during the crisis when she felt engaged, she reflected back to a leadership position she held:

“Probably at this time last year because I was in a more senior role, I was the acting manager in a [department] that has had a crisis for 10 years ... It was very bad. So I was really motivated there because I wanted to prove myself as a manager and I wanted to help that [department].” – Kelly, employee
At the core of human agency is self-efficacy – the perception an individual is able to influence their environment (Bandura 1989). Expressions of influence, then, were one way through which agency was reflected in the present research. The following comments from Andrew, Amy, and Belinda are prime examples. It is not surprising that each of these participants was a supervisor or a middle manager since influence is a fundamental aspect of such roles (Haslam et al 2011).

“I try and influence processes around me as best I can.” – Andrew, middle manager

“[I maintained my engagement] by trying to focus my effort and energy on what we can do to fix it...I had to step out of my remit a little bit to do that. Sometimes I did it within the context of my role, but quite a bit of it was stepping out of my remit to actually look at the business and almost take part of that role of the CEO around business planning and trying to, like I said before, build some structure and build some rigour and get the managers on the same page.” – Amy, middle manager

“[I wrote] a submission to our executive to go, ‘this is the process, this is where you can do a lot of savings, if you’re trying to remove internal bureaucracy, here it is.’ I happen to know that they’re going to act on a lot of those things. So that made me feel good, that it is going to change.” – Belinda, supervisor

In each of those comments, it is evident the organisational crisis became less daunting for these supervisors and middle managers because they were empowered with the requisite agency to influence change. This is to be expected since empowerment is one way through which engagement is fostered (Spence Laschinger et al 2009). Similar sentiments were expressed in relation to responsibility, which along with accountability are important agentic functions (Bandura 2006), as in the following examples:
“I feel a sense of personal responsibility. I feel a sense of pride and satisfaction that I was chosen to look after this massive transformation. The person that was in my role previously was seen as not having the right skill set. I was, and I feel humbled, and I feel a massive sense of responsibility to the organisation and all the clients that we support to try and get it right. So, that motivates me.” – Andrew, middle manager

“I guess it was just a sense of responsibility, that I had ownership over everything that happened in that business and I didn’t want to see it go to waste. I felt like I was really part of [my employees’] lives. We’d built substantial relationships together over that time and I felt like - that it was just my responsibility for the business.” – Bill, supervisor

“I guess my engagement, which sounds a bit counterintuitive, but I suppose that increased during [the crisis]. I’m not going to say that I didn’t feel like I seriously considered not doing it and just quitting or whatever but I guess I had to be more engaged because we were kind of on our own. We were a bit of an island in a sense so if we weren’t engaged we were going to drown...I feel responsible to make it work because we’ve been given an opportunity and because it’s a big risk so we kind of feel like we have to make it work or else we’ll lose a lot of face and the last months of stress will have been for nothing.” – Ursula, supervisor

“I think I would have been engaged less [had I not been in a leadership position]. Yes, definitely. I felt it was my responsibility as part of my role to try and maintain that engagement.” – Gary, supervisor

There comes a point, however, when a leader’s scope to influence the environment reaches its limit (Enderle 1987). This is due to a range of contexts, such as restrictive organisational systems (Chemers 2014). More specifically in relation to employee engagement, Jenkins and Delbridge (2013) found these contextual contingencies include organisational values, organisational culture,
and managerial constraints. In regards to the first contingency, leaders working in an organisation with strong (or weak) values will find it easier (or harder) to engage their employees because of the trust that is present (or absent). A similar principle applies to the second contingency – culture – which Jenkins and Delbridge attest is difficult for managers to change but can prove beneficial (or deleterious) when the prevailing culture fosters positive (or negative) relations among employees. The third contingency – managerial constraints – reflects the factors beyond a manager’s control, such as pay inequities, that are not conducive to engagement. These types of managerial limitations are what happened to Amy with consequences that were both emotional and final:

“But I also got to the point where I felt like the issues were beyond my level of influence and my ability to solve them, but you kind of start to feel overwhelmed I think more than anything, because when the issues start to compound and become so, I guess, broad across a range of different factors you go, ‘wow, I’m not sure that I can have any positive impact that’s going to be enough to salvage it’, so it did become overwhelming ... What prompted me to [resign] was the point that I realised I wasn’t going to be able to have [anymore] influence.” – Amy, middle manager

It could nonetheless be said that Amy, and almost all the other supervisors and middle managers in the current study, at least had the opportunity to exercise their agentic power. The same cannot be said for employees, most of whom did not feel as though they had the autonomy to influence their environment, thereby leading to expressions of disengagement. Conversely, when autonomy is present, it enhances engagement (Xanthopoulou et al 2009) because it makes employees feel as though they have the latitude to remove obstacles from their work environment (Salanova et al 2005). In Kelly’s case, she went from a high-autonomy role to a low-autonomy subordinate position. She was asked if that affected her engagement:

“Yes, because I’ve lost control.” – Kelly, employee
As for Lance, influence was something he still had yet to experience:

“I’ve been here for six years now, and I think I’ve been here long enough to realise that they’re not doing the right thing and that I should have more of an influence.” – Lance, employee

The consequence was that Lance and other participants in a similar situation were unable to experience the benefits that come with human agency, one of which is the opportunity to select and construct optimum working environments (Bandura 1989), which would arguably be beneficial during an organisational crisis. As will be seen in the next section, the same benefit escapes those who lack voice.

### 4.4.2 Lack of voice

Voice is described by Detert and Burris (2007) as the sharing of information by an employee to someone in authority. Kahn (2010, pp. 22) positions voice as being “at the heart of engagement” because it represents individuals who feel psychologically safe to express their true selves at work. These expressions of thought, ideas, information and dissent may be confronting for leaders to hear, and therefore unsettling for employees to express, because they challenge the status quo. As such, many employees are reticent to voice their opinions in fear of the repercussions, which IPA/Tomorrow’s Company (2012) refer to as ‘safety to speak’ – a primary determinant of voice when cultivated in an authentic manner. It became evident in the present research via the following comments:

“[My leader] doesn’t listen to me now because whatever I would say is challenging the way he’s doing things, so there’s a real block there.” – Kelly, employee

“One of the senior staff members who left, he is well respected and he went up to the manager and said ‘there is a difference between being a
leader and leading’ and handed her his resignation. I’m like, finally someone’s told her that because she needed to hear it but there was no way I could say it because I knew at the time if I would say it I would be cut down very quickly.” – Paula, employee

The fear of repercussions was of less concern than the perceived absence of opportunities for employees to have a voice in the first place. This is inherently disengaging (MacLeod and Clarke 2009) and unfortunate considering the potential for voice to lift levels of engagement during times of adversity (Purcell 2014a). In the present study, it was common for employees to desire involvement and consultation, but in most cases they apparently did not receive it, a factor that is often attributed to the way in which employees perceive the authenticity of leadership styles within their organisation, particularly at senior levels (IPA/Tomorrow’s Company 2012). For example:

“Really the staff never like doing these satisfaction surveys anyway because they don’t think that [leaders] listen to us from the results...I just feel I need somebody to listen to what’s going on in our unit.” – Kelly, employee

“[Senior leaders] just made decisions without really consulting the people involved and out of all those decisions and changes, none of them were really implemented because there was no willingness from staff to actually go through with those changes because they didn’t see any benefit to it.” – Vince, employee

“Then all of a sudden all those processes change overnight, or sometimes without even consultation or communication of the reasons for it.” – Henry, employee

“I think everyone understands that the people at head office are all busy, have huge jobs to do during the transition. We all know they are probably as committed to their jobs as we are; but we’d just like to see
more consultation on decisions that affect our work; and less of the
taking over...It could have been very different, but I think the
personalities involved weren’t inclined to bring people along with them;
they just saw a problem and rushed to a solution without consulting ...
We have a disconnect between the high-level vision of senior
management and a seeming reluctance by them to engage with staff who
know the practical realities of how the sector works ... It’s like they are
choosing to refuse assistance from the pool of talented people we have
and are instead just listening to each other and reinforcing their own
attitudes.” – John, employee

Whilst the aforementioned cases are examples of employees who without voice
found the organisational crisis more difficult to endure, Nora’s experience was
somewhat different. In her case, she had sufficient opportunities to express her
voice prior to the crisis, which is one way through which crises can be averted
(Novak and Sellnow 2009). The crisis, however, occurred regardless, and it was
the crisis itself that she held responsible for the restriction in voice that
followed. This presented a missed opportunity in that employee voice during
and after a crisis is a valuable way to learn from what is a rare but teachable
event (Rerup 2009) and to air and resolve pressing problems (IPA/Tomorrow's
Company 2012). In Nora’s words:

“[Prior to the crisis], my opinion was always sought. I was given
interesting things to think about and devise plans for...Like ‘what do you
think about this problem we have? What do you see the solutions are?
Write something down and come and see me.’ They were really giving
me some really interesting stuff. Then once the crisis was going on, all of
that stopped. It felt like my opinion wasn’t really wanted anymore,
wasn’t needed anymore, wasn’t sought. I went from being at the
absolute forefront of the merger deal with a set of amazing skills, to back
to being a typist and answering the phone. It was just a complete shift of
the role.” – Nora, employee
The problem for Nora was that her organisation was reeling from a hostile takeover. The company trying to take over her organisation had a culture that conflicted with the incumbent one. This is not uncommon. Even when mergers occur within the same industry on friendly terms, it is still difficult for employees to adapt to the inevitable cultural changes that arise (Buono et al 1985). Any cultural toxicity can subsequently impact employee engagement negatively (Attridge 2009). According to Nora:

“That particular company has a culture where if you're low down on the food chain, anything below manager and below, you don't have a voice. You just sit there and do your job and you don't have ideas. You don't have anything, so that was apparent fairly quickly. It was a shock to all of us, because these representations had been made that it wasn't like that. So it was quite a shock to everyone that no one really cares what you think.” – Nora, employee

For some participants, leaders made a concerted effort to involve and consult them, but this attempt at employee voice was perceived in a cynical fashion. Employees in the present study did not trust that the consultation was genuine. This is an important consideration because non-genuine forms of voice can have a detrimental impact on employee engagement. In other words, “it has to be more than just a cosmetic exercise” (IPA/Tomorrow’s Company 2012). This cynical behaviour is the antithesis of authentic leadership, which comprises elements of positive psychology, ethical behaviour, self-awareness, and transparency (Walumbwa et al 2008) and is a type of leadership that generates employee engagement because of its ability to engender trust (Hsieh and Wang 2015). One participant noted:

“Well, I’m coming to meetings where we’re going to be consulting and discussing an issue, but clearly the decision’s already been made. No one in this meeting, except for the Chair, has been party to that decision. So it all in a sense became futile, or your effort was redundant. So you’re not
going to bring high levels of energy or put mental investment into it.” – *Henry, employee*

In Henry’s case, just cited, he interpreted the consultation sessions as merely a “bureaucratic necessity” rather than a meaningful attempt to hear the opinions and suggestions of the workforce. This seemingly shallow attempt was counterproductive insofar that engagement deteriorated.

So what does it feel like to have a voice during an organisational crisis? Guidance on this question can be gleaned from some of the respondents who were in a supervisory or middle management position. Their voice was expressed in a range of ways but in most cases it simply involved their leader seeking and valuing their advice. This is referred to as managerial openness, which is one of the strongest ways through which voice is fostered (Detert and Burris 2007) and through which employee-driven change can occur (Morrison and Phelps 1999). Participant comments included:

“[The senior leader] and I did build a trusted relationship in the sense that he would listen to my advice and he would sometimes come to me for advice.” – *Amy, middle manager*

“[The senior leader] asks you for what your advice is rather than tells you.” – *Isaac, middle manager*

“[My leader] takes my advice. He knows that I’m the expert in what I do.” – *Diane, middle manager*

“Well, I was involved in the strategy and in the vision and in the ideas. [My leader] brought me in on meetings, communicated with me constantly, outlined options. She would come up with options and propose them to me. Then the decision-making process was a team thing...What else did she do? She asked for my advice. I guess she trusted me.” – *Ursula, supervisor*
Of the dozens of thematic statements identified in this phenomenological research, none explained the differences in engagement between supervisors, middle managers and employees more so than agency and voice. When these two resources were perceived to be present, participants were more likely to say they maintained their engagement throughout the crisis. When these resources were perceived to be absent, they were more likely to say they were disengaged. For some of the participants, their disengagement went even further. Disillusioned by how their leaders treated them, they embarked on a period of misbehaviour. It is to an explanation of this trend that this chapter will now turn.

4.5 Deviant behaviours

Deviance is defined by Robinson and Bennett (1995, p. 556) as “voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and in so doing threatens the wellbeing of an organization, its members, or both”. It especially arises in environments characterised by job insecurity (Reisel et al 2010). This type of behaviour was acknowledged to varying extremes by nearly half of the participants. What is of particular interest, as per Table 4.5, is that supervisors and middle managers were slightly more likely than employees to engage in such behaviour. The reason for this is unclear. This section will articulate the three broad varieties of deviant behaviour declared by the participants: poorer performance; withdrawal behaviour; and a diverse grouping of other retaliatory actions.
Table 4.5 Deviant behaviours

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thematic statement</th>
<th>Number of passages</th>
<th>Percentage of employee participants</th>
<th>Percentage of supervisors and middle managers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poorer performance</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Withdrawal behaviour</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other misbehaviour</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>38</strong></td>
<td><strong>44%</strong></td>
<td><strong>50%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.5.1 Poorer performance

Robinson and Bennett’s (1995) typology of deviant behaviour comprises four categories: production deviance (e.g. working slowly); property deviance (e.g. sabotaging equipment); political deviance (e.g. gossiping); and personal aggression (e.g. abuse). The intentional drop in quality and productivity, with which this sub-section is concerned, belongs squarely in the production deviance category. It is a somewhat more subtle form of deviance and is therefore harder to prove (Spector et al 2006). In each of the following comments, the participants sacrificed their performance as a direct reaction to the organisational crisis:

“"The thing that is affected – I know this is an engagement thing – the thing that is affected is quality because I’m doing everything much quicker than I want to and need to, and so I make more mistakes. Therefore, the quality of my work deteriorates." – Oliver, supervisor
“[Because of] this crisis, I just didn’t give a shit. I just did what I needed to do, where before I would do everything that I can...Now it's just like, this is the minimum we have to do and I do it.” – Tom, employee

“Management know that there’s a high workload but they’re either not willing or able to assist you in any way and you think, ‘well if I am being outsourced and if someone else is going to get my job and if I am being let go then why should I put so much effort into working as hard as I can to meet all the tasks that are presented to me? What do I get out of it? Am I going to be thanked? No. Am I going to get any praise? No. Do I get any reward other than just salary? No. Will someone see that work and appreciate the work? No.’ It is sometimes just a little bit difficult to motivate yourself. I’ll just sit down and do it but you don’t enjoy doing it. If you don’t have any enjoyment in your job then I think it's very difficult to be engaged or to feel any satisfaction in your work or have any of these [employee engagement] definitions in front of me. When you don't feel that and your work’s not enjoyable then you’re not going to put in the effort.” – Vince, employee

“For me during [the crisis], I started letting things slip...I noticed that my work ethic really dropped. At the time I was even aware that it was happening, but it was just like, well who cares, which again in hindsight was really pathetic...So I started to just try less hard. It wasn’t that I was not handing in work; it was that I was just handing in basic work...It was just about doing the very bare minimum that was needed, because if management aren't going to look after your staff, well why would staff look after management? So it was about handing work in still, but just not work that I would ever be proud of...Then over time it became more malicious...A resentment thing...Looking back in hindsight, I’m just kind of like, oh my God, what a nightmare, why would you behave like that for six months? But it was definitely, definitely the way that my mentality was in that time...Instead of it taking five minutes, it's taken an entire day to write one email.” – Colin, employee
For some participants, like Henry and Isaac, their retaliatory deviance was not necessarily about producing work that was sub-standard; it was about performing strictly and rigidly within the parameters of their job description. Where once they embraced organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB), which reflects discretionary actions that go beyond the requirements of the role (Organ 1988), the crisis compelled them to do merely what was expected and nothing more. That is because when trust between an employee and a leader is breached, the employee is more inclined to view the relationship on a purely transactional basis (Organ and Konovsky 1989). The following are examples:

“I guess the bonus stuff that you bring to your work, that’s ceased. I’m doing nothing for the organisation which is outside of my job description, basically. That’s been the effect on my approach to work...I’m not slacking off. I’m still a good employee, but all the bonus stuff has gone.” – Henry, employee

“I guess I can say I’ve taken the foot off the accelerator in the sense that I’m not going above and beyond.” – Isaac, middle manager

In both of those situations, their employer sacrificed the discretionary effort they previously took for granted. This is especially so in Isaac’s situation, since he also admitted to allowing his team members to relax their standards. In effect, his disengagement became contagious. This contagion can spread in other ways, too, such as withdrawal behaviour, which the next sub-section will address.

4.5.2 Withdrawal behaviour

Another retaliatory action that belongs in Robinson and Bennett’s (1995) typology of deviance is withdrawal behaviour. In some cases, this can result in higher levels of absenteeism and employee turnover. Of most relevance is that withdrawal behaviour, when prolonged for an extended period of time, can lead
to disengagement (Demerouti et al 2001), which was evident in the present research. Participant comments included:

“I’ve disengaged from [the crisis] a bit. I’ve just said ‘look, it’s nothing I can influence, I’m not going to even go there, I’m not even going to worry what those people do or what they’re doing, that’s their issue’. That it affects the organisation, well that’s the general manager’s responsibility.” – Michael, middle manager

“I removed myself from morning teas, lunches – like, I just didn’t socialise at all. I just came in, did my job and left, yeah...The other relationships that I’d built and developed sort of stopped. I just said I’m too busy, just tried to really close myself off from putting myself in a position where I could be compromised.” – Nora, employee

“I have not contributed as heavily to the culture again since. I’m not a frequent attendee at work drinks on a Friday, which a lot of the core group still try to maintain.” – Rhonda, employee

“I offered [senior leaders] the minimum. I had no comment on anything...I’d contribute nothing. I would sit there [in meetings] and that’s it...I was completely disengaged...I didn’t jump on board. I didn’t show any leadership skills ... I was fully aware that people looked to me for example and leadership. I just didn’t provide it because I basically wasn’t interested in sticking my neck out. Realistically, I didn’t want to lift a finger for these people.” – Tom, employee

“[The crisis] has also been positive in a sense that I do the 37.5 hours or whatever is required of me now, and no more. So I spend time with my family, more time now, more quality time than I did previously. Whereas I could be doing anything from 60-hour weeks before because I was objective oriented.” – Henry, employee
Each of the aforementioned participants continued to perform their job; they just did so without the vigour, dedication and absorption that characterises engaged employees. What became evident in their interviews was that the perpetrator was not necessarily the crisis itself; it was more so their leaders’ perceived handling of the crisis. For some participants, that disengagement culminated in more creative deviant behaviours, as will be demonstrated in the next sub-section.

**4.5.3 Other misbehaviour**

Another term for deviance is ‘counterproductive work behaviour’ (CWB), which Fox et al (2001) attest is present when employees are confronted by stressful events and negative emotions. From a JD-R perspective, CWB can materialise when job demands exceed job resources (Balducci et al 2011), thereby generating employee disengagement. It is unsurprising, then, that the misbehaviour to be articulated in this sub-section appeared in the present research. For example, Rhonda and her colleagues enacted a silent protest via non-attendance at the Christmas party, while Kelly’s rebellious act was to flagrantly wear nail polish, which was prohibited in her workplace. In Jackie’s case, her vengefulness centred on exacerbating her leader’s administrative workload:

> “I was vindictive for a moment and submitted an expense claim with 50 line entries each for around $1. For some reason, that made me feel better.” – Jackie, middle manager

For others, the preferred avenue was gossip, which is a cause of disengagement (Georganta et al 2014). Even though the gossip that arises during an organisational crisis may provide leaders with valuable informal information (Tyler 2005), in the present research it was viewed in negative terms:

> “I think one of the key things is that the bitching about petty stuff is a really good way to vent negative emotions. It’s not constructive in any
way but I think when there is that much negativity it is hard to be the one positive person. So for me personally it was a mix of bitching about dumb work stuff. It wasn’t about people, but it was about like, ‘oh the printer has gone’, well I can bitch about that for an hour and a half – that’s something that can’t fight back.” – Colin, employee

“Look, I would say I've not been so tidy on that [gossiping] rule for myself since [the crisis]. I've probably spoken unprofessionally and engaged in conjecture and been derisive of the organisation. I've bought into it on a lot more occasions than I care to probably admit.” – Rhonda, employee

In summarising the harm inflicted on organisations as a result of counterproductive work behaviour, Fox et al (2001) recommend that leaders consider the emotional impacts of their decisions. It is advice that, according to the organisations involved in the present research, has not been widely adopted. The consequence is deviance, even among supervisors and middle managers who would otherwise uphold moral standards and values. Encouragingly, as will be seen in the next section, participants were just as likely to embark on proactive and positive solutions.

4.6 Methods of self-engagement

In their conceptualisation of employee engagement, Macey and Schneider (2008) introduced ‘trait engagement’, which represents attributes such as proactiveness, conscientiousness, and positive affect. The overriding point made by the scholars was that some employees, by virtue of their character, are more easily engaged. This was similarly evident in the present research. Employees were asked in every interview what they personally did to engage themselves while the crisis was in motion. The results are displayed in Table 4.6. A number of findings emerged from this data, such as the tendency for supervisors and middle managers to engage more frequently than employees in
what Britt and Bliese (2003) refer to as self-engagement. This can perhaps be attributed to the agency inherent in their position, as discussed in section 4.4.1. For example, they may have the power to schedule more breaks for themselves throughout the day or to pursue career development opportunities that might not be available to those lower on the hierarchy. Another pertinent finding is that, of the wide variety of self-engagement (or coping) techniques used by the participants, one stood out as more than twice as popular as any other: participants simply made the decision to remain focused irrespective of the negative and uncertain distractions that surrounded them. This section will more deeply explore these techniques.

Table 4.6 Methods of self-engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thematic statement</th>
<th>Number of passages</th>
<th>Percentage of employee participants</th>
<th>Percentage of supervisors and middle managers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Decision to remain focused</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concentrate on career growth</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schedule small breaks</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All other coping mechanisms</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.6.1 The decision to remain focused

Focus of attention is “the degree to which employees think about specific aspects of their work” while they are at work (Gardner et al 1987, p. 279). Employees, for example, might opt to focus on one specific area, such as their
job or their business unit. In the present research, many participants adopted such a focus as a way of dealing with the distracting nature of the organisational crisis. This enabled them to switch from a temporarily disengaged state into an engaged one, which is in line with research indicating employee engagement can fluctuate numerous times throughout the day (Bakker 2014). Participant comments included:

“I mostly chose to ignore [the crisis] because I had a job to do and I chose to say things like ‘well, things are happening for a reason’.” – Irene, middle manager

“Well, I guess I’m weathering [the crisis] now and that just means sitting down, buckling down and doing your job.” – Lance, employee

“I think of two things. First, stay professional. Every job will throw up its challenges and responding to those challenges in a positive and engaging manner will build your character, shape your values and develop your professional personality. I focus on the task at hand and develop a work plan to ensure that the task is completed. Staying focused is important to lessen the external negativity that you may have no control over. Secondly, I remind myself why I work in the first place and that is to provide for myself and more importantly for my family. They rely on me, and how I decide to deal with that adversity will hopefully set a good example to my son. So I just put my head down and work through it and try not to think about it.” – Vince, employee

“Well, you know, you have to keep telling yourself that you’re being paid to do a job at the moment and you just need to keep doing that until such time as you’re not being paid to do a job. You sort of put that to the back of your mind and you just keep working.” – William, employee
“[The crisis] was frustrating, but like I said, just zoning it out and getting really into [my work] helps me to deal with things.” – Diane, middle manager

“You just have to blank things off and get on with what you have to do in the day.” – Holly, employee

While it is not assumed that shifting focus from a crisis to one's job is easy, it seems to have worked for many of the participants in the present study, temporarily at least. What is known about focus of attention is that it can change from minute to minute (Gardner et al 1987), which implies that so, too, can employee engagement during an organisational crisis. Employees may momentarily be able to focus on the task at hand, but it is rarely long before the effects of the crisis are once again front of mind. An additional area of focus is the concentration on career growth, which is the theme to be discussed in the next sub-section.

### 4.6.2 Concentration on career growth

For some of the participants, their shift in focus away from the crisis was not towards their job but towards their career. Their levels of engagement increased when they spent time contemplating their next career move, when embarking on tertiary education, or when updating their résumé. This coping mechanism represents two empirical constructs. The first is career self-efficacy, which is when employees have the confidence and ability to pursue their preferred career (Hackett and Betz 1981). The second is career motivation, which reflects the tangible decisions and behaviours exemplified by those who actively take action to move forward in their chosen profession (London 1983). Examples of participant comments include:

“I just focused on myself, my own career...So I just tried to keep mindful of my strategy. At the time I was also studying, so I put a lot of energy into my study, set myself really high standards for my marks and just
wanted to do my absolute best...So study was a great diversion during that stage, to feel like I was still progressing in my career.” – Nora, employee

“I suppose the [crisis] has made me want to do the postgraduate diploma I’m doing. It’s made me want to go back and get more education because, well, what if I [am made redundant]? So it’s made me want to look at more education, which is a good thing.” – Gina, supervisor

“So I was getting my skills up to scratch and out of my own bat doing training and things like that. So not being paid for it. I’m coming in earlier so that I can get experience.” – Paula, employee

There is evidence to suggest engaged employees are more likely to achieve career success (Bakker and Demerouti 2008). A key finding from the present research, then, is that steps in this direction are still possible even during organisational crises characterised by retrenchments and uncertainty. That, however, is more of a long-term solution. In the short-term, the taking of short breaks seemed to be an engaging circuit breaker. It is to this coping technique that this chapter will now turn.

4.6.3 The taking of short breaks

There are a number of studies that validate the recuperative nature of short breaks throughout the workday (e.g. Dababneh et al 2001; Trougakos and Hideg 2009). That finding has been replicated in the present study but with one important distinction: supervisors and middle managers are significantly more likely than employees to take these much-needed breaks, such as in the following examples:

“What else do I do? It’s a struggle to be honest. That’s really hard. I try and leave the office. If it’s late and I’m not getting anywhere I just try and go.” – Ursula, supervisor
“I’ll get up and go for a walk as well and get outside. I’m an outdoors sort of a person, so even if I’m in a hurry, I’ll just walk around the block and come back in to the building and go back to work.” – Belinda, supervisor

“I’ll take a walk, whereas before [the crisis] I wouldn’t have done that.” – Isaac, middle manager

Whilst the scope of this research does not extend to an analysis of why supervisors and middle managers disproportionately took breaks, it can perhaps be attributed to the fact they have greater agency, thereby enabling them to leave the office at a time of their choosing. Employees are not usually granted such leeway. They do, however, have other options with which to reinvigorate their engagement and to cope more resiliently, some of which will be discussed next.

4.6.4 Other coping mechanisms

In this final sub-section on self-engagement methods and coping mechanisms, a range of alternative techniques will be outlined. None of these were expressed in sufficient numbers to reflect empirical rigour, but they nonetheless offer some insight into the diversity of solutions that participants embraced to varying degrees.

For participants like Belinda, self-engagement came from celebrating small wins, which is an effective way through which engagement can be fostered among work teams (Costa et al 2014):

“…I would just go through every step and try and see every step as an achievement. So every time I got through that step, whether I thought it was necessary or not, it was necessary to achieve my goal. So I would just try and get through each step and go, ‘okay, I got through that’, do a little happy dance and then move to the next one.” – Belinda, supervisor
Others such as Isaac and Irene started to exercise for the first time. That this was effective is unsurprising considering physical activity has been linked to elevated rates of engagement (ten Brummelhuis and Bakker 2012). Holly’s preferred method of coping was via mindfulness techniques such as meditation, which similarly leads to employee engagement (Leroy et al 2013). As for Rhonda, she turned to positive self-talk, namely the appreciation that she, unlike many colleagues, still had a job. Rhonda’s technique is an example of positive psychology, which is an umbrella term under which employee engagement belongs (Bakker et al 2008):

“Self-talk, reminder of gratitude for my employment in the face of so many people just having such a ridiculously tough time.” – Rhonda, employee

In Evelyn’s case, what seemed to work was conversation. This is a method of social support (Johnson and Hall 1988), which will be discussed in more detail in section 4.7.2. Evelyn commented:

“I think lots of talking with people, with the team, with [clients], with other people in the company that I knew already from other relationships, and other people who knew a bit more about business than I did.” – Evelyn, employee

Finally, for some participants, their coping mechanism was not to be found in the workplace; it was to be found at home. This is in accordance with Sonnentag’s (2003) study, which found greater rates of engagement among employees who had time to recuperate away from the stressors of the workplace. For example:

“I just look forward to when I go home and I get to play with my son.” – Vince, employee
“I’ve found challenges external to work as opposed to dealing with things at work. So I enlisted in the army, in reserves, been doing tertiary education, things like that. So it’s just a matter of shifting priorities and focus.” – Henry, employee

Whatever their preferred coping mechanism, each of the aforementioned participants was an example of Macey and Schneider’s (2008) concept of ‘trait engagement’. In effect, they realised that, at certain moments, they were not entirely helpless in the face of the organisational crisis. In many respects, it was up to them to protect themselves from the negative consequences. Some of these consequences, as well as their antidotes, will be summarised next.

### 4.7 Other findings of relevance

The purpose of this final section is to emphasise three final findings of relevance to the present research. The first merely reinforces what has already been established extensively in prior research; namely that organisational crises result in an abundance of negative emotions. The second is that social support can be a critical resource during such periods. The third is that job satisfaction can similarly be a valuable resource.

*Table 4.7 Other findings of relevance*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thematic statement</th>
<th>Number of passages</th>
<th>Percentage of employee participants</th>
<th>Percentage of supervisors and middle managers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative emotions</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social support</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job satisfaction</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.7.1 Negative emotions and sentiments

The wide range of negative emotions and sentiments expressed by the participants was distilled to a total of sixteen, five of which were the most common by a significant margin. In order from highest to lowest: anxiety, sorrow, exhaustion, stress, and anger.

Anxiety is one of the most common emotions experienced by employees during an organisational crisis (Seeger et al. 2003), and is a reaction that can be attributed in part to the chaos that ordinarily ensues (Hensgen et al. 2003). This is best encapsulated by John’s experience:

“‘It’s probably the bigger stuff, like where [the crisis] is going to end up, hanging on the edge of that. Are we going to exist in two months’ time? Because there’s a possibility that we won’t. That kind of anticipatory grief that we’re going to lose something that has a really – it’s got a good history, you know, we’re kind of, well, our brand is reasonably highly regarded I think, in the community.” – John, employee

Sorrow is another common emotion that crisis-affected employees experience (Klann 2003). It is an emotion from which even leaders are not immune (Madera and Smith 2009). This was especially evident in Bill’s response:

“I think the biggest thing for me was a mourning phase, where I’d built what, I believe, was an exceptional team and was recognised from our business for an exceptional team and I basically had to give them away, push them into another direction. I had to close down a business that I’d built to, I thought, a great standard. I felt ashamed...I felt as though I was abandoning them at their time of need...It felt really rough on me at the time.” – Bill, supervisor
Exhaustion is an additional negative effect that appeared in this study. Even though the consequence of exhaustion during an organisational crisis can be both physical and mental (Chong 2004), in the present research only the latter was reported. This is similar to the effect of burnout identified by Maslach and Leiter (2008) in their study on the engagement of employees during a departmental crisis. Michael’s account is an illustration of such a state:

“The crisis] is definitely something that tires you out...Staying focussed on any task was a real effort. You felt very tired, very drained, the day went slowly. It is quite psychologically draining.” – Michael, middle manager

Stress, too, is common during organisational crises, and often results in decision-makers neglecting the needs of stakeholders (Christensen and Kohls 2003). To a large extent, this can be attributed to the uncertainty that characterises an environment in crisis (Seeger et al 2003). One such stakeholder, of course, is the employee. In the present research, this stress-inducing uncertainty was expressed by several participants, including William in relation to his prospects for re-employment as an older worker:

“Well I’m starting to worry more about, at my age, about what I’m going to do when we are outsourced.” – William, employee

The final negative emotion to have featured prominently in the present research was anger. Since employees are the stakeholders closest to the organisation, their psychological reaction during a crisis tends to be the strongest (Frandsen and Johansen 2011). As Frandsen and Johansen note, this anger is usually directed at those who are deemed most responsible for the crisis, such as senior leaders. Irene, however, provides a somewhat unique perspective:

“I guess in the last 12 months it’s been an interesting mix of feeling pleased with the job I do but also feeling a bit angry maybe. I don’t know if angry is the right word – but a bit angry with myself at why am I
continuing to work this hard, when I was having those feelings of grief, like the department's just tossing my job out somewhere else and not looking after me. So there's been parts like that where it's been angry with myself and not being able to stop giving more than maybe I get back from the department at times.” – Irene, middle manager

Even though most employees and every supervisor and middle manager in the current study expressed some sort of negative emotion or negative sentiment during their interview, there were some positive expressions, too. These were the factors that engaged them irrespective of the crisis, the first of which is social support – the theme of the next sub-section.

4.7.2 Social support

In the current study, social support appeared to belong in two categories. The first reflects the participants who relied on their colleagues for support, which is a resource that can have a 'healing' effect on people as they attempt to recover from a crisis (Powley and Cameron 2006). The second category reflects those who were themselves a source of support for their colleagues, which in itself can be a taxing experience while also simultaneously fulfilling (Taylor 2007). Andrew, Nora and John are three examples of the former:

“When I feel the need to talk through problems and I'm feeling a bit disengaged or a bit emotional, a bit anxious, I've got a couple of people that I know very well and trust and I can talk to them, and I value that. I'll often say, hey, can I just bounce some ideas around with you? We'll go into a room and chat, and that's valuable.” – Andrew, middle manager

“I had a couple of trusted friends in the same group that were experiencing these same issues of the crisis as I was. We just commiserated together as much as possible; lunches out and talked through it. There were some days where it was like really bad, where you just feel like walking out. So without those friendships – they
remind you that you’re a professional...Talk it through then you feel better, go back to your desk.” – Nora, employee

“Like I say, it’s a really close team, and when you go through a lot of crises and change together, and there isn’t a lot of help from outside, you have to look to each other for support and to come up with solutions for the challenges we’ve been experiencing.” – John, employee

In respect to being a provider of social support rather than a recipient of it, Rhonda and Belinda were prime examples:

“Just listen, empathise, walk beside them, let them talk about it and then – where I feel safe to, or where I have available energy to contribute to that too, I guess, just share with them my story, remind them of what they know about me, that I came to work there to experience something different, that there’s so much more out there, that there’s infinite possibilities.” – Rhonda, employee

“So I mentored probably about – oh hang on, one, two, three – I’ve mentored four people. Of those four, two of them took a lot of my time, with coming to me, scared they were going to lose their job...So I guess I’m still getting that satisfaction with being able to guide people and help people, even if they’re not reporting to me.” – Belinda, supervisor

The aforementioned comments indicate that social support during an organisational crisis is not only a resource that preserves engagement; it is also a distinct coping strategy. That is what Cohen and Ashby Wills (1985) refer to as the ‘buffering hypothesis’, for the way in which it protects employees from adverse events, such as the anxiety that arises from unpleasant workplace experiences (Plaisier 2007). Job satisfaction, which is similarly a buffer from workplace stress (Healy and McKay 2000), will be discussed next.
4.7.3 Job satisfaction

Job satisfaction, in the present research, was evident in two ways. For some of the participants, the engagement they felt during the organisational crisis could be attributed to the enjoyment they derived from carrying out their work. This, however, is often unrelated to actual performance (Hantula 2015), which is why, for others, their satisfaction was less about enjoyment and more about the pride that stemmed from being proficient at their job, the mastery of which can stimulate job satisfaction (Janssen and Van Yperen 2004). In the present study, then, an enjoyment-mastery dichotomy became apparent.

Lance and Diane are examples of the job enjoyment experience:

“Well it is a feeling where I'm enthusiastic to get back to my computer and to work and to come up with new ideas. It is a case of the time goes quickly and I am enthusiastic, it's a great feeling and I'd like to feel that way all of the time.” – Lance, employee

“I really enjoy my job, so it was actually nice to forget about the whole crisis, and just concentrate on my particular job. Like starting up a new project, I find that really exciting. Finishing up a project, meeting those milestones, that kind of thing. I really enjoyed that.” – Diane, middle manager

In contrast, Oliver's comment reflects the importance of job mastery:

“You sort of don’t think about the crisis and I think my personal satisfaction will increase with the work I’m doing when I’m feeling highly engaged and when I know that I’ve done something quality; or reached a milestone; or done an achievement which I get satisfaction out of.” – Oliver, supervisor
Some of the findings in this brief and final section have further emphasised what has already been established in the academic literature. This was most evident in relation to negative emotions, which are indeed prominent during organisational crises (Maitlis and Sonenshein 2010), while there is evidence to suggest they are superseded by positive emotions in the presence of employee engagement (Rothbard 2001). Likewise, social support and job satisfaction have been the beneficiaries of much scholarly attention. Social support, for example, is deemed essential during times of crisis (Powley and Cameron 2006) and is a resource that protects employee engagement from stressful job demands (Bakker et al 2005a). Similarly, job satisfaction diminishes during organisational crises (Begley and Czajka 1993) but is a positive outcome of employee engagement (Giallonardo et al 2010). The present research extends scholarly knowledge of these important resources by demonstrating they may have an engaging influence not only during times of stability but also during organisational crises.

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter has articulated, via the context of employee engagement, the lived experience of 30 people who have been through an organisational crisis. In line with Moustakas (1994, p. 58) who writes that phenomenology is concerned with “examining entities from many sides, angles and perspectives” until a core essence has been distilled, these findings now lead to the following summation.

The essence of employee engagement during an organisational crisis is that the participants in the current study were more likely to be disengaged by what their senior leaders did not do than by what they actually did. This is seen in the prevalence of laissez-faire leadership, particularly regarding the perceived lack of communication and information, which was the predominant finding in the present research. Some way behind but still important was the perception of autocratic leadership, especially the trait of dismissiveness. Some leaders were described as possessing a combination of both styles – occasionally
laissez-faire and occasionally autocratic – with both found to exacerbate the negative effects of the organisational crisis.

Furthermore, when comparing employee participants to supervisors and middle managers, it became apparent that supervisors and middle managers were significantly more likely to report high levels of engagement. On further analysis, it became apparent this was due to the agency and voice with which they are ordinarily bestowed. Employees are rarely as fortunate and so their experience of the crisis, from an engagement perspective, tends to be more challenging. Irrespective of their position, most participants engaged in deviant behaviours in retaliation for how they were perceived to have been treated throughout the crisis, with an intentional drop in performance being the primary form of misbehaviour. This, however, was counterbalanced to some degree by the self-engagement techniques enacted by the participants in an attempt to weather the crisis more resiliently. Simply making a decision to remain focused on their job was overwhelmingly the preferred method.

In the Discussion chapter to which this dissertation will now turn, these findings will be synthesised with the research questions posed throughout the literature review. As will be demonstrated, an understanding of these research questions has been enriched as a result of the current study, which consequently substantiates some components of the crisis-specific adaptation of the JD-R, but not others.
Chapter 5. Discussion

5.1 Introduction

In line with Almeida’s (2012) process of writing a phenomenological dissertation, this chapter will comprise the following sub-sections. First, a summary of the findings will be presented; second, each of the research questions will be addressed to ascertain the degree to which they have been answered; and third, this will lead to implications for theory and practice.

5.2 Summary of the findings

This section will summarise the findings detailed throughout Chapter 4. As noted, none of these was more prominent than the disengaging effect of laissez-faire leadership among senior leaders. According to Bass (2008), laissez-faire leadership is characterised by a reticence to communicate and a reluctance to spend time with employees. In the present research, in the context of an organisational crisis, a typology of laissez-faire leadership emerged. Namely, this comprised four disengaging components, in order of prevalence:

- Lack of information
- Insufficient communication
- Distance
- Passivity

The gap between the information employees desired and the information they received was such that ambiguity, performance handicaps, uncertainty, and mistrust were present. These consequences were exacerbated when employees embarked on information-seeking behaviour only to have their requests denied, which is concerning when taking into account that senior leaders can be a valuable source of information during a crisis (Carmeli and Schaubroeck 2008). To provide information, however, would necessitate communication (Mayfield
and Mayfield 2002) but this, too, was deemed to be deficient. That it was reported in negative terms can be understood by the vital role communication plays in generating employee engagement (Attridge 2009) and in effectively managing a crisis (Barton 2001). Instead of adopting this leadership approach, senior leaders were instead perceived as passive. Whilst this can perhaps be explained by the social distance between their position in the hierarchy and those on the front line (Waldman and Yammarino 1999), this was neither an excuse nor a consolation. Even when distance was not the issue, the perception of passivity among senior leaders resulted in disengagement since employees perceived this as a lack of care in their wellbeing. Similar consequences were reported for other laissez-faire characteristics such as naïveté, avoidance, indecision, and vagueness.

On the opposite end of the leadership continuum is autocratic leadership, which is reflected in control, power, coerciveness, dominance and closed-mindedness (Bass 2008). It is not surprising, then, that it appeared in the present study as a disengaging factor during organisational crises. As with laissez-faire leadership, a typology of autocratic leadership emerged incorporating the three most prominent components from the findings, namely:

- Dismissiveness
- Maltreatment
- Lack of emotional intelligence

Of the aforementioned autocratic leadership characteristics, perceived dismissiveness was twice as common as the rest. Senior leaders in the present research were seen to be dismissive of their subordinates’ ideas, opinions, emotions, wellbeing and feedback. Such selective listening is believed to be common during organisational crises (James and Wooten 2005), and what is apparent from the present study is that it also has a negative impact on employee engagement. Taking this to a more serious level was the perception that maltreatment was prevalent, which disengaged not only the victims of this behaviour but also the observers. This maltreatment apparently included
bullying, verbal abuse, inappropriate humour and blame. Such behaviour can perhaps be attributed to the lack of emotional intelligence that often characterises autocratic leadership (Singh et al 2007). In addition to maltreatment, a dearth of EQ was used by the participants to explain what they perceived as dysfunctional decisions, insensitive announcements, resentment, excessive scrutiny, unfairness, and self-serving behaviour.

The third theme that emerged from the present study was the evidence that supervisors and middle managers were more likely to report higher levels of engagement than employees. This is in accordance with previous research (McPhie and Rose 2008; Folkman 2014), which found a similar trend. The present research, however, extends scholarly knowledge in two ways. First, it demonstrates that the greater levels of engagement among supervisors and middle managers also applies in the context of organisational crises and, second, it identifies two potential causes of this engagement disparity:

- The presence (or absence) of agency
- The presence (or absence) of voice

In the present study, the agency inherent in a leadership role (Dempster 2009) gave the supervisors and participants the freedom to embark on actions that elevated their levels of engagement during the crisis. Indeed, a majority directly credited their position on the hierarchy – and the autonomous benefits arising from that position – as reasons for their milder experience of the crisis. In other words, the ability to proactively influence their environment increased their self-efficacy, which is intricately linked to human agency (Bandura 1989). These participants derived a similar advantage as a result of the voice inherent in their role. This finding is aligned to important work by Kahn (1990), MacLeod and Clarke (2009), IPA/Tomorrow's Company (2012) and Purcell (2014a), each of whom consider voice to be an essential corollary of employee engagement. In the present study, however, voice was mostly perceived to be absent with a majority of the employee participants reporting a lack of such opportunities in their workplace. In addition to the negative effects on
employee engagement, an absence of voice also poses adverse repercussions on effective crisis management (Novak and Sellnow 2009; Rerup 2009).

Another of these repercussions relates to deviant behaviour. A majority of the participants, irrespective of their position in the organisational hierarchy, embarked on revenge for how they felt they were being treated as a result of the crisis. These deviant behaviours fell into three categories:

- Poorer performance
- Withdrawal behaviour
- Other retaliatory actions

The most common of the aforementioned behaviours was poorer performance, which in Robinson and Bennett’s (1995) typology is described as production deviance. In the present study, poorer performance was reflected in the participants who intentionally allowed their quality and productivity to drop while others merely ceased engaging in organisational citizenship behaviour. Others opted instead for withdrawal behaviour, gossip, or silent protests. Whatever the method, what became apparent was that these were manifestations of disengagement during the crisis.

In the present study, participants were just as prepared to take responsibility for their own engagement. In an environment characterised by leadership that was perceived as not doing enough to keep the workforce engaged, most of the participants embarked on a range of self-engagement strategies. These included:

- Deciding to remain focused
- Concentrating on career growth
- Scheduling small breaks
- Other methods of self-engagement
The first strategy – the decision to remain focused irrespective of the crisis – was twice as popular as any other coping mechanism. This does not imply that participants were able to maintain their levels of engagement indefinitely. Rather, they were temporarily able to switch into a state of engagement. This is in accordance with growing research that points towards the fluctuating nature of employee engagement (Bakker 2014), which the present study now extends to the context of organisational crises. In most cases, the participants focused on the task at hand. For others, it was their career; they used the crisis as an opportunity to explore job opportunities, to embark on additional qualifications, or to update their résumé. Other coping mechanisms included the taking of short breaks, the celebration of small wins, the practice of mindfulness techniques, and physical exercise.

In a sense, the participants were buffering themselves from the adverse effects of the organisational crisis and the negligent ways in which their leaders were perceived to have been managing the situation. The present research identified two other resources that served to buffer the participants from these effects, namely:

- Social support
- Job satisfaction

For some participants, greater levels of engagement were generated by the social support they made available to their colleagues while others were instead more frequently the recipients. Irrespective of the nature of the interaction, the availability of social support had a healing effect (Powley and Cameron 2006) on the participants such that it temporarily lifted their engagement. Likewise, in relation to job satisfaction, it did not matter so much whether the participants derived enjoyment or mastery from their work. What seemed to matter most was that the presence of job satisfaction was a precursor to their engagement (Rayton and Yalabik 2014) even though the existence of other crisis-related demands meant this state of engagement was short lived.
In the next section, the research questions will be reviewed in light of the evidence presented.

5.3 Review of the research questions

A literature review provides the foundation from which research questions are developed (Creswell 2014). This was demonstrated in Chapter 2, which detailed the relevant studies conducted to date on employee engagement and organisational crises, the culmination of which resulted in a number of research questions. The purpose of this section is to revisit each of these to determine the extent to which they have now been answered. It is important to remember, however, that the phenomenological nature of the present study means these questions were not addressed directly in the interviews. Instead, the participants were free to describe their experiences as per their own perspective. What follows in this section, then, is an account of whether the gaps that were identified in the literature review were answered voluntarily in some form during the interviews. The structure of this section will follow a similar format to that which characterised the literature review. First, leadership demands and resources will be addressed, followed by work-related demands and resources, before concluding with those of a personal nature.

5.3.1 Leadership demands and resources

The research questions in relation to leadership were detailed throughout section 2.4.3. In summary, questions 2a to 2f broadly asked about the six specific leadership styles and their relationship to the context of employee engagement during organisational crises. The literature review that led to the generation of these research questions suggested that transformational leadership, transactional leadership, servant leadership and authentic leadership may have a positive influence, which would therefore categorise them as resources on the JD-R. In contrast, it was suggested that laissez-faire
leadership and autocratic leadership would have a negative influence, thereby
categorising them as demands.

The research questions pertaining to the resource-related leadership styles (2a
to 2d) were not answered by the present research. Whilst it is true that
favourable comments about leaders were made by several participants, they
were nonetheless exceptions. Indeed, positive perceptions of leadership were
not reported by the participants with enough frequency to warrant a separate
section in the Findings chapter. This scarcity of data in relation to positive
leadership styles makes it impossible to determine whether transformational
leadership was more or less related to employee engagement during an
organisational crisis than, say, servant leadership. It can be said, however, that
immediate supervisors were more likely to be the beneficiaries of positive
appraisals than were senior leaders. In fact, there were three times as many
favourable comments about immediate supervisors than there were about
those higher up the leadership hierarchy (61 positive references for immediate
supervisors versus 20 for senior leaders). The lack of evidence in the present
research on the engaging role of transformational leadership, transactional
leadership, servant leadership and authentic leadership should not discount
their potential influence. It merely suggests that negative styles appear to be
more dominant and prevalent in this specific context for this particular sample.

The two research questions, therefore, that enquired about the role of laissez-
faire leadership (2e) and autocratic leadership (2f) have been answered. As has
been detailed in sections 4.2 and 4.3, laissez-faire leadership was evident in a
perceived lack of information, insufficient communication, distance and
passivity. Autocratic leadership was evident in perceptions of dismissiveness,
maltreatment, and behaviours that indicated a lack of emotional intelligence.

5.3.2 Work-related demands and resources

In differentiating between the various types of demands and resources, the
literature review in section 2.4.4 emphasised five of a work-related nature that
were identified as potentially having a relationship with employee engagement during organisational crises. These culminated in a series of broad research questions that enquired about the role of human agency (3a), employee voice (3b), social support (3c), job satisfaction (3d), and challenging work (3e).

Research questions 3a to 3d were answered by the present research. As detailed in section 4.4 of the Findings chapter, the presence of human agency and employee voice were the predominant factors explaining why engagement among supervisors and middle managers was greater than among employees. Social support and job satisfaction were similarly found to have an engaging influence during organisational crises. Social support’s influence can be explained by its ability to strengthen an individual’s coping mechanisms (Snow et al 2003) while a similar relationship exists with job satisfaction (Golbasi et al 2008).

In relation to challenging work, there was a lack of evidence in the present research to indicate a positive influence. Importantly, neither was there evidence to suggest a negative effect. The challenging nature of one’s job was simply not raised in the interviews. In addition, section 2.4.4 raised the prospect that organisational crises could be defined as ‘challenge demands’, meaning some employees might view their existence positively because of the opportunity to grow and learn from the crisis. Such a finding would have established organisational crises as both a demand and a resource on the JD-R. Such a position, however, was not supported by the findings of the present research. Every participant referred to the organisational crisis in negative terms on account of its disengaging effect. In other words, they interpreted the crisis-related challenges as ‘hindrance demands’ or, in the context of the JD-R, as job demands rather than job resources.

5.3.3 Personal resources

Of the multitude of personal resources that pertain to employee engagement, section 2.4.5 of the literature review identified eight that could potentially have
an engaging effect during an organisational crisis. These resulted in a number of broad research questions that explored the potential role of hope (4a), resilience (4b), self-efficacy (4c), positive affect (4d), proactivity (4e), focus of attention (4f), conscientiousness (4g), and autotelic personality (4h). As will be explained in the upcoming passages, five of these research questions – 4c, 4d, 4e, 4f and 4h – were answered by the current study.

- **Hope:** The only reference in the present research to hope was in relation to the hope that senior leaders would someday provide the information and support the participants desired. This is in stark contrast to the hope that compels an employee into a state of engagement (Ouweneel et al 2012). In the present research, hopelessness was more common. The absence, then, of the positive state of hope as a topic of discussion in the interviews therefore renders research question 4a unanswered.

- **Resilience:** Similar to hope, at no stage did participants credit their resilience as a way by which they maintained their engagement, which therefore means that research question 4b remains similarly unanswered. There were, however, several participants who expressed cynicism at the use of the term ‘resilience’ by their leaders. These cynical expressions pertained to rhetoric and learning. In relation to rhetoric, participants saw the ‘need for resilience’, quoted excessively by senior leaders, as an excuse that leaders used to abdicate their responsibilities. In other words, if only employees could be more resilient, there would be less need for leaders to provide ongoing support. In relation to learning, the provision of resilience training workshops was likewise interpreted by participants as a futile exercise because they saw resilience as something that could not be taught. According to the participants, resilience was instead a strength that could only be developed and inspired via the competent management of the organisational crisis, the effectiveness of which was perceived to have been lacking. This is an important consideration because employee cynicism appears to be negatively related to employee engagement (Cartwright and Holmes...
2006) and is a consequence of the emotions that employees experience during an organisational crisis (Cole et al 2006).

- **Self-efficacy:** Self-efficacy was evident as an important factor in the current study due to the central role it plays in the functioning of human agency (Bandura 1989). The positive influence of self-efficacy was further demonstrated by one specific coping mechanism: career self-efficacy. This represents employees who feel confident enough to pursue the career of their choice (Hackett and Betz 1981). Thus, in the present research, participants were able to shift into a temporary state of engagement by focusing proactively on their own career development, such as the updating of their résumé or their enrolment in a new professional qualification.

- **Positive affect:** For several participants, their positive disposition seemed to motivate them to embark on a range of self-engagement techniques, such as gratitude and motivational self-talk, thereby supposedly protecting them from the disengaging consequences associated with the organisational crisis. It is important to note, however, that it was the participants themselves who described their own account of positive affect. Such self-reports, particularly in relation to emotions, can be unreliable because an individual’s memory of affect is influenced by the beliefs they hold about that emotion (Robinson and Clore 2002). For example, if they value it highly, they are more inclined to consider themselves as embodying it.

- **Proactivity:** The research question pertaining to this personal resource was answered most strongly in relation to the methods of self-engagement detailed in section 4.6. In addition to those that have already been identified in the preceding paragraphs, the participants – in an attempt to increase their engagement – would take breaks, celebrate wins, undertake physical exercise, practice mindfulness techniques, and
converse with colleagues. Each of these has proactivity in common because they are voluntary acts (Grant and Ashford 2008).

- *Focus of attention*: As articulated in section 4.6.1, focus of attention was prominent among a majority of the participants. By merely making the decision to be engaged, irrespective of the turbulent environment in which they were employed, the participants were representing what Gardner et al (1987, p. 352) describe as an employee’s “cognitive orientation toward each of a number of targets”, with the target in this case being their engagement with the task at hand.

- *Conscientiousness*: This personal resource did not appear in the present research explicitly. For instance, participants were not asked about their conscientiousness and neither did any participants raise it in their interview. It could be inferred, however, that focusing one’s attention is a conscientious act (Barrick et al 2002), as is proactivity (Bateman and Crant 1993), but in the absence of explicit references and substantive evidence, research question 4g is unanswered by the present research.

- *Autotelic personality*: Neither autotelic personality nor the outcome of entering a flow state were mentioned explicitly by the participants but since an autotelic personality represents an inclination to perform a task simply for its intrinsic value (Csikszentmihalyi 1975), it becomes apparent that this research question has been addressed in the current study. Most evidently, this can be seen in the majority of participants who identified the enjoyment and pride they derived from their job as being key drivers of their engagement during the organisational crisis. For example, when Lance said “time goes by quickly”, or when Oliver stated his job satisfaction meant he didn’t “think about the crisis”, both were manifestations of autotelic personalities in flow. Indeed, both comments represented what Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2002, p. 89) refer to as “complete absorption in what one does”.

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In summary, this section revisited the research questions that arose as a result of the literature review. The intention of the present research was not to answer these questions directly but to adopt an exploratory methodology in the expectation that some of these gaps would be spontaneously addressed. That has certainly been the case. For example, laissez-faire leadership and autocratic leadership emerged as disengaging demands in the context of an organisational crisis. These negative effects were counteracted to a certain degree by the work-related resources of human agency, employee voice, social support, and job satisfaction. Personal attributes similarly were seen to protect employee engagement during the organisational crisis, particularly self-efficacy, positive affect, proactivity, focus of attention, and autotelic personality. The culmination of these findings answers the primary research question, Research Question 1, which asked: *How does employee engagement relate to the context of organisational crises?* This then leads to a number of theoretical and practical implications, which will be discussed next.

### 5.4 Implications for theory

Generalisations cannot be made in phenomenological research outside of the group being studied (Sanders 1982) because phenomenology seeks to describe rather than explain the lived experience of a group of participants (Moustakas 1994). This, of course, does not preclude the drawing of implications that arise from these findings, which in future can be tested quantitatively across a much larger sample to determine generalisability. This section will detail these implications, firstly from a theoretical perspective followed by several practical considerations in the subsequent section.

The literature review, in which scholarly work on employee engagement and organisational crises was contrasted, culminated in the development of a crisis-specific adaptation of the job demands-resources (JD-R) model. This was introduced as Figure 2.6. The primary theoretical contribution of the present research, then, is evidenced in the degree to which this adaptation was reflected accurately in the findings. This crisis-specific adaptation of the JD-R, which is
replicated again in this section as Figure 5.1, comprised a number of amendments. As this section unfolds, new iterations of this adaptation will be revealed so that the evolution of the model is more clearly understood.

**Figure 5.1: Crisis-specific adaptation of the JD-R Model – v1**

**5.4.1 Organisational crisis as a demand**

The first theoretical amendment arising from the literature review was that organisational crises were depicted as a demand on the crisis-specific adaptation of the JD-R. In the present research, that depiction appeared to be true. A demand, in the context of the JD-R, refers to “aspects of the job that require sustained physical or mental effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological and psychological costs” (Demerouti et al 2001, p. 501). In order to better understand the demanding nature of organisational crises, it is helpful to break down the two costs – physiological and psychological – in relation to how they materialised in the current study.

- The most common physiological cost was exhaustion, which some scholars (Demerouti et al 2001; Maslach and Leiter 2008) associate with
disengagement, and which was reported by numerous participants who felt “tired” and “drained”. Even though the crisis literature, such as McConnell and Drennan (2006), warns about the effects of exhaustion on employees, the present study extends this position by providing qualitative evidence of its potential for disengagement as per the JD-R. Indeed, there were two participants – one an employee, the other a supervisor – who attributed their more-extreme health issues directly at the existence of the crisis. The employee participant, Holly, blamed the stress arising from the crisis as the cause of her breast cancer. The interview had to be stopped midway in order for her to regain her composure such was the anguish and anger she felt at the organisation and its leaders. The supervisor participant, Oliver, had recently endured a year’s worth of stomach pains. Repeated visits to the doctor and consultations with specialists failed to identify a cause. Medication, too, had a negligible effect. Likewise, he blamed the management of the organisational crisis as the culprit of his ongoing medical concerns. These physiological consequences are not uncommon during times of crisis (Grant and Mack 2004). The most frequently cited consequences include the accumulation of excessive weight, diminished energy, higher blood pressure, and bodily pains located especially in the chest and back. Indeed, one particular study found that, among disengaged employees, 54% blame their work for the poor state of their physical health. In contrast, only 12% of engaged employees feel that way (Crabtree 2005).

The most common psychological costs in the present research were anxiety, sorrow and stress. Stress, in particular, is at the core of the JD-R (Bakker and Demerouti 2007), while all three receive extensive mention in the crisis literature. For example, Pauchant and Mitroff (1988) particularly emphasise the deleterious impact of the ‘disconnect’ between what executives think their workforce is feeling and the anxious and stressful reality. Seeger et al (2003) even recommend psychological counselling to help employees as they recover from what many perceive as a traumatic event. These psychological consequences are explained
by the “psychological sense of security and stability” (p. 4), which is threatened in the event of an organisational crisis. This was especially evident in the current study among the participants employed in the public sector. Where once their employment could have been considered secure and stable, they were shocked to discover that was no longer the case. Indeed, for several participants from one government department, 95% of their colleagues were informed their jobs would be outsourced to India and that widespread retrenchments were imminent. They were apparently not informed, however, of the timing of these retrenchments nor of the ways in which the transition to the outsourcing provider would be managed. The psychological costs, then, became manifest in the uncertainty associated with their job prospects. These psychological consequences were heightened by the expectation that securing new employment would be more difficult in an environment of rising unemployment, age discrimination, and perceived prejudice in the private sector against those whose work experience has been mostly in the public service. That such psychological costs are abundant in the present study enables organisational crises to be firmly situated as a demand.

5.4.2 Leadership styles as a demand, but not as a resource

The second theoretical amendment made to the JD-R was that second-order leadership styles were specified as either demands or resources. Their stipulation as second-order is warranted because these represent leadership behaviours that may come into effect after the organisational crisis has been triggered. If it is to be accepted, for example, that leadership styles can – and should – change based on contexts such as task requirements and employee maturity (Hersey and Blanchard 1993), the organisational crisis, then, may be one more context that may necessitate a change in leadership style. In the present research, there was substantial commentary to support the inclusion of laissez-faire leadership and autocratic leadership as second-order demands. If laissez-faire leadership, for example, has a destructive effect on employee
engagement during acontextual work environments (Tims et al 2011), it is unsurprising for it to materialise in the present study, too, as the biggest obstacle to employee engagement during organisational crises. In the present study, the mere provision of information and communication would have sufficed. The perceived absence of these factors explains why numerous scholars consider laissez-faire leadership to be a form of non-leadership (Den Hartog et al 1997; Gardner and Stough 2002; Jones and Rudd 2008) and therefore insufficient in the context of employee engagement during organisational crises. Likewise, autocratic leadership deprives employees of the essential resources they need (Blomme et al 2015). It is therefore similarly unsurprising that it materialised in the present research as a disengaging influence, especially considering the integral role of job resources in the JD-R model. To dismiss employees’ ideas (Dessein 2007) and to mistreat them as individuals (Barron and Ogle 2014) are both autocratic acts, the existence of which is disengaging during times of stability and now, from the perspective of these participants, during times of organisational crisis, too. For these reasons, laissez-faire leadership and autocratic leadership are rightly situated on the crisis-specific adaptation of the JD-R as job demands.

As already discussed in the preceding section, there was little evidence to support the inclusion of the other positive leadership styles as second-order resources. It is important to note this does not mean those styles would have a negligible effect on employee engagement during an organisational crisis. Indeed, scholarly work to date indicates these styles would almost certainly have a positive impact (e.g. Pillai et al (1999) for transformational leadership; Gill et al (1999) for transactional leadership; Humphreys (2005) for servant leadership; and Klenke (2007) for authentic leadership). It is merely the case that, in the present research, the participants tended to describe their senior leaders in negative terms. Such descriptions support the classification of laissez-faire leadership and autocratic leadership as second-order demands but not of the others as second-order resources. As a result, version 2 of the crisis-specific adaptation of the JD-R is presented here as Figure 5.2. The key
difference is that the four leadership resources have been removed since they did not emerge as key factors in the present research.

5.4.3 Work-related resources

The next amendment to the model pertains to work-related resources. At the conclusion of the literature review, it was suggested that human agency, employee voice, social support, job satisfaction, and challenging work may be included as resources on the crisis-specific adaptation of the JD-R. As discussed throughout this chapter, there is reason to include the first four.

The inclusion of human agency and employee voice can be justified by the finding that supervisors and middle managers were more likely than employee participants to report high rates of engagement during the organisational crisis. This does not imply that the possession of leadership responsibilities should in itself be classed as a job resource. That would neglect the prevailing notion that even those who are not privileged with a formal leadership title can nevertheless display effective leadership behaviours, albeit informally (Pielstick 2000). Rather, the significance of this finding is that the reasons why
supervisors and middle managers experienced greater engagement are a more valuable indicator of the additional resources worthy of inclusion. As detailed in Section 4.4, the difference in engagement can be attributed to the agency and voice that supervisors and middle managers are accustomed to by virtue of their greater responsibilities. For example, human agency is a core component of leadership in that leaders are often the beneficiaries of choice (Osborn et al 2002). Likewise, the tendency for voice to be a core component of leadership is that it is usually employees (rather than leaders) who seek greater voice (Detert and Burriss 2007). Human agency and voice, however, do not need to be the exclusive domain of those in formal leadership roles. For example, Bandura (2006) makes special note of the need for employees to embrace their agentic potential, while Detert and Burriss (2007) emphasise the ways in which employees can embark on voice behaviour when their leaders display openness and create a psychologically safe climate. Therefore, human agency and voice are appropriately included as work-related resources in this crisis-specific adaptation of the JD-R.

Social support and job satisfaction can also be included on the adapted model but for reasons other than those that pertain to human agency and voice. When participants had colleagues on whom they could rely, and jobs from which they derived mastery and enjoyment, they were more likely to report a positive experience of the crisis. This does not mean they experienced high rates of employee engagement; rather, the periods of disengagement were temporarily punctuated by moments of engagement as a result of interacting with colleagues they respected and by undertaking work they enjoyed. More specifically in relation to social support, the present research identified this resource as a coping mechanism on account of the ways in which conversations, mutual empathy, knowledge sharing, and trusted friendships buffered the negative effects of the organisational crisis. The resource-like role of social support can be extended further when considering its potential to reduce the obstacles that prevent organisations from embarking on much-needed change (Glanz et al 2008). In relation to job satisfaction, employee engagement increased when participants were in jobs they felt were suited to their talents. It is apparent, for
example, that of the five dimensions identified by Hackman and Oldham (1975),
task significance was related the most closely to supervisors and middle
managers due to the obligation they felt to care for their employees. The
employee participants varied in the constitution of their job satisfaction, with
evidence suggesting variety, autonomy and task identity were most prominent.
Social support and job satisfaction have therefore been included in the crisis-
specific adaptation of the JD-R as work-related resources.

As discussed in section 5.3.2, there was no evidence in the present research to
indicate that challenging work influences employee engagement during
organisational crises. Therefore, in version 3 of the crisis-specific adaptation of
the JD-R, illustrated by Figure 5.3, challenging work has been removed from the
list of work-related resources. The others remain.

Figure 5.3: Crisis-specific adaptation of the JD-R Model – v3

5.4.4 Personal resources

The next amendment to the crisis-specific adaptation of the JD-R pertains to the
eight personal resources that were identified as potentially having an engaging
influence during organisational crises. As explained in section 5.3.3, evidence
supporting five of these personal resources was found in the present research. These are self-efficacy, positive affect, proactivity, focus of attention, and autotelic personality. In addition to the reasons already stipulated in this chapter, the inclusion of self-efficacy is further supported by its leadership equivalent – leadership self-efficacy – which generates the motivation and confidence within leaders to believe they can lead the organisation throughout the crisis (Paglis and Green 2002). The inclusion of positive affect on this adapted model is justified by its ability to generate resources for individuals, which in turn increase their resilience as they confront adverse events (Xing and Sun 2013). For similar reasons to that given for self-efficacy, proactivity can be extended to leadership proactivity, in that a proactive inclination on behalf of leaders may be one way through which the leadership demands, particularly laissez-faire leadership, can be avoided (Barber and Warn 2005). The fourth personal resource – focus of attention – can be considered either a state or a trait. As Gardner et al (1989) explain, the direction and intensity of an individual’s focus can change from moment to moment, thereby classifying it as a state. However, when analysed in aggregate terms, some individuals develop a pattern that reflects the predominant nature of their focus, thereby turning focus of attention into a trait. Either way, focus of attention’s ability to shift an employee into a period of engagement, as evidenced in the present research, positions it as an important personal resource irrespective of its temporal nature. A similar conflict exists with autotelic personality. Whilst it appeared in the present research as an engaging factor, it is unclear whether it is the trait of autotelic personality or its state equivalent – flow – that generated the participants’ engagement. Regardless of the underlying condition, which was beyond the scope of the present research, it was deemed by participants to be an enabler of their engagement.

All five, therefore, are included in the crisis-specific adaptation of the JD-R. The same cannot be said for the remaining three: hope, resilience, and conscientiousness. Their absence from the present research does not necessarily render them detrimental to employee engagement during organisational crises. Hope, for example, is an antecedent of employee
engagement (Ouweneel et al 2012) and is considered essential during times of crisis (Avey et al 2008). Resilience, too, is positively related to employee engagement (Avey et al 2008) and is necessary if a crisis-stricken organisation is to recover (Powley 2009). Conscientiousness, similarly, mediates the relationship between employee engagement and a range of outcomes, such as performance and learning (Bakker et al 2012a) while, during a crisis, it is the conscientious traits of hard work and dependability that could help the organisation’s recovery (Smits and Ally 2003). Despite these encouraging signs, the fact remains that hope, resilience, and conscientiousness did not emerge in the present study as key factors, and so they have been removed from the adapted model, thereby resulting in the fourth version, Figure 5.4.

**Figure 5.4: Crisis-specific adaptation of the JD-R Model – v4**

5.4.5 Deviant behaviour as a consequence

The next amendment to the JD-R incorporates deviant behaviour as a consequence of disengagement. Whereas performance is a consequence of engagement (for example, Salanova et al 2005; Bakker and Bal 2010; Christian et al 2011), what is also apparent as a result of the present research is that, should disengagement arise, deviant behaviour could be a potential corollary.
In the present research, supervisors and middle managers were just as likely as employee participants to engage in such actions, which included poorer performance and withdrawal behaviour. This connection between workplace deviance and employee engagement echoes in reverse the findings of Shantz et al (2013), who found that engaged employees are less likely to be deviant. Further, Dunlop and Lee (2004) found there are significant performance ramifications resulting from the presence of workplace deviance. This is because deviant behaviours intentionally disrupt the environment that makes superior performance possible. Such performance-based consequences were out of scope of the present research and were therefore not identified in the interviews. However, many of the participants who admitted engaging in deviant behaviours also, in contrast to the findings by Dunlop and Lee, expressed sentiments that indicated they were performing well overall, which seemed attributable to their focus of attention. Such statements, however, must be viewed with caution, since a participant’s interpretation of personal performance may contradict the reality (Podsakoff and Organ 1986). Nonetheless, the subjective nature of phenomenological research compels this researcher to accept these perceptions as true. Therefore, a two-way arrow has been added between deviant behaviours and performance on the crisis-specific adaptation of the JD-R to highlight the possibility that even those who are high performing may resort to temporary workplace deviance in retaliation for how they perceive they have been treated as a result of the organisational crisis. This then results in version 5 of the adapted model, Figure 5.5.
5.4.6 Fluctuations between engagement and disengagement

Finally, on account of the frequency with which employee engagement fluctuates (Bakker 2014), the literature review resulted in a two-way arrow added between engagement and disengagement. This reflects that an employee may be engaged in one moment but disengaged in the next. In the present research, the one level of engagement did not remain constant throughout the organisational crisis. Every participant reported periods during which they were engaged and periods during which they were not. The triggers for the periods of disengagement were those that have been identified so far in this dissertation and which have been captured by Figure 5.5, the final iteration of the crisis-specific adaptation of the JD-R. More specifically, while the existence of the organisational crisis was certainly a stressful demand for each participant, the most dominant triggers for disengagement were the actions associated with laissez-faire leadership and autocratic leadership.
5.4.7 Summary of implications on theory

In summary of the aforementioned findings and theoretical implications, Figure 5.5 in the previous section accounts for the following amendments to the JD-R:

- The inclusion of organisational crises as a demand.
- The inclusion of laissez-faire leadership and autocratic leadership as second-order demands.
- The inclusion of human agency, employee voice, social support and job satisfaction as work-related resources.
- The inclusion of self-efficacy, positive affect, proactivity, focus of attention and autotelic personality as personal resources.
- The inclusion of deviant behaviour as a consequence of disengagement, which in itself has been added as a potential consequence.
- The inclusion of a two-way arrow linking engagement with disengagement, and deviant behaviour with performance.

The theoretical implications of the present research extend beyond the JD-R. Further implications relate to the crisis, engagement, and leadership literature:

- Organisational crisis literature: There are three implications that further scholarship in this field. The first is that a disengaged workforce may hinder an organisation’s ability to recover from a crisis by virtue of the deviant behaviour that emerges. This could perhaps be attributed to interpersonal injustice, which reflects how one is treated (Colquitt et al 2001), thereby culminating in deviance (Ferris et al 2012). The second implication is that psychological safety, which is the perception that individuals can participate freely in interpersonal activities without risk (Edmondson 1999), may be paramount during times of crisis. Even though the importance of this connection has already been established by others, such as Carmeli and Schaubroeck (2008), the present research identifies the two mechanisms through which psychological safety becomes manifest during organisational crises: human agency and
employee voice. The third implication is that, rather than relying on the JD-R, it may be possible to instead utilise conservation of resources (COR) theory to explain the way in which employee engagement is maintained during organisational crises. COR theory reflects the notion that, during times of stress, individuals will attempt to retain the resources they need to more-effectively cope (Hobfoll 1989). Of Hobfoll’s (1998) 74 resources, those that have become most apparent in the present research are ‘support from co-workers’ and ‘motivation to get things done’. The theoretical term employed in the present research to describe the former is ‘social support’ while ‘focus of attention’ and ‘job satisfaction’ could be used for the latter.

- **Employee engagement literature:** The present research furthers scholarship on employee engagement in two ways. First, it provides evidence to support the conceptual article by Blomme et al (2015), which depicts laissez-faire leadership and autocratic leadership as detrimental to employee engagement. The current findings, at least qualitatively, partly substantiate Blomme et al’s third and fourth propositions (p. 8) that “autocratic leadership is negatively related to employee engagement” and that “a passive attitude on the part of managers is negatively related to employee engagement“. Second, the present research addresses the criticisms made by Purcell (2014b) and Jenkins and Delbridge (2013). The aforementioned scholars criticised the research conducted on employee engagement to date as lacking context. The present research provides one such context: organisational crisis.

- **Leadership literature:** Whilst much has been published on laissez-faire leadership and autocratic leadership, the present research furthers scholarly knowledge by developing a typology on how these styles become manifest during organisational crises via their effect on employee engagement. These typologies, however, are at an embryonic stage of development. As Doty and Glick (1994, p. 231) assert, typologies “should be subjected to quantitative modeling and rigorous empirical
testing” prior to their acceptance as instruments of classification. Such testing would be a logical next step for future research in this regard.

Theoretical implications in phenomenological research can be challenging to determine since they emerge from subjective data that can be difficult to replicate (Sanders 1982). Despite these challenges, this section has demonstrated the ways in which theory has been advanced as a result of the present research. This furthering of scholarship extends beyond the crisis-specific adaptation of the JD-R to also encompass contributions to the organisational crisis, employee engagement, and leadership literature. The next section will use these theoretical implications as a base from which to draw a number of implications for practice.

5.5 Implications for practice

When describing participatory action research (PAR), Brydon-Miller et al (2011, p. 389) suggest that “theory is informed by practice and [that] practice [is] a reflection of theory”. Whilst the present research used phenomenology rather than PAR, they are both qualitative methodologies that have longstanding connections (Susman and Evered 1978). For this reason, there is merit in Brydon-Miller et al’s (2011) view that theory and practice are interlinked. Therefore, all ten of the practical implications in this sub-section have been drawn from the theoretical implications discussed in the previous sub-section. More specifically, these practical implications result in the following recommendations, in order of strategic priority, each of which will be discussed in more detail:

- The proactive enactment of strategies and solutions to prevent organisational crises occurring in the first place.
- The provision of learning activities centred on two main areas: leadership development and crisis resilience. The recruitment of leaders with a propensity for emotional intelligence.
• The design of jobs in which the characteristics and responsibilities are more likely to increase employee engagement.

• The inclusion of a comprehensive internal communication strategy as a requisite component of crisis management plans.

• The timely and relevant provision of information in the event of an organisational crisis. The systematised process of ensuring employees have voice, particularly during organisational crises.

• The empowerment of employees, most notably via the expanded use of human agency, for the purposes of creativity and resilience.

• The establishment of forums and programs in which employees can support each other during times of crisis.

• The monitoring of short breaks for employees – and perhaps an increase in their frequency – during times of crisis.

Crisis prevention: It is perhaps stating the obvious, but one way to avoid disengagement during an organisational crisis would be to prevent the occurrence of the crisis in the first place. Scholarly work to date provides several methods through which crisis prevention can be enacted. Carmeli and Schaubroeck (2008) suggest it is important for organisations to pause after adverse events in order to learn the causes of the event and the ways in which they can be avoided in future. Hensgen et al (2003) recommend that leaders should remain vigilant for warning signals that indicate a crisis is imminent, at which point they can dedicate resources to averting the impending crisis. The challenge with warning signals, however, is that leaders are so bombarded with information that it can be difficult to differentiate signals from background noise (Pearson and Mitroff 1993). A solid waning system, then, can be beneficial when it comprises competitor analyses, market information, and financial performance indicators (Sheaffer et al 1998), as well as qualitative data such as underlying issues in culture, leadership and risk management (Probst and Raisch 2005). For these signals to be effective, organisations must be prepared to give employees voice such that they feel comfortable expressing their concern that a particular sign may be indicative of a looming crisis (Simola
2005). Other preventative actions, as stipulated by Pearson and Mitroff (1993), include extensive audits, improved safety, and protection for whistle blowers.

**Learning activities:** The training of leaders comprises two distinct categories (Day 2000): leader development; and leadership development. The former relates to human capital, which denotes learning activities with an individualistic focus. The latter relates to social capital, which denotes learning activities with a relational focus. In respect of the present research, both are recommended for the effective training of leaders with the objective of maintaining employee engagement during organisational crises. As Day notes, *leader development* competencies include self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-motivation. Self-awareness is important during a crisis (Garcia 2006), as is self-regulation (Parker 2002), while self-motivation is deemed essential for the purpose of cultivating employee engagement (Lovelace et al 2007). All three, therefore, would serve a useful role in a tailored development program. In regards to *leadership development*, Day (2000) suggests this is primarily associated with interpersonal competence. He cites coaching, networking, mentoring, and job assignments as potentially valuable additions to such a program. Depending on the context, any of these could be valuable, as could workshops designed specifically to educate leaders on crisis preparation. The learning outcomes of such a program could include the prevention of accidents, the enhancement of communication skills, problem solving, and ethics (Wooten and James 2008). The subsequent impact on the organisation could be significant, including stronger employee engagement, as well as a greater willingness among employees to accept change on account of their leaders’ competence.

Learning activities, however, are recommended for employees as well as leaders. In regards to employees, the key area for development arising from the present research is in crisis resilience. This can be achieved via the practice of drills and exercises (Sternberg 2003) that give employees a realistic expectation of what they will potentially endure with a suite of techniques and tools on how to appropriately react. Since resilience is a personal resource linked to
employee engagement (Bakker et al 2008), it should follow that training employees in resilience techniques could also protect their engagement during times of crisis. That several participants in the present research expressed cynicism in relation to resilience training should not discount the effectiveness of such development. It seems apparent, for example, that the cynicism of these participants was more an emotional reaction to what they perceived as the inconsiderate management of their organisational crisis. Resilience training is an important way through which psychological harm can be minimised, especially when organisations are confronted by failure and stagnation (Seligman 2011), and should be duly considered by leaders.

**Recruitment:** In the present research, a perceived lack of emotional intelligence among senior leaders was regarded as autocratic and therefore a cause of disengagement. Targeted recruitment, then, that aims to recruit or promote leaders with higher levels of emotional intelligence may be a wise solution. One way of achieving this could be via the use of video assessment tools that determine a candidate’s ability to display empathy and to recognise emotions in a range of situations (Cadman and Brewer 2001). Another option is to develop a list of competencies associated with emotional intelligence, which collectively form the basis on which hiring decisions are made (Goleman et al 2013). A third consideration entails administering a questionnaire, such as the one developed by Schutte et al (1998), or one of many others promoted by consultants and practitioners in EQ.

**Job design:** Participants in the present study associated periods of engagement with job satisfaction. In other words, they were less likely to be disengaged when their work was designed in such a way that it enabled them to derive mastery or enjoyment from it irrespective of the organisational crisis. It is incumbent upon leaders, then, to design jobs that have a greater propensity to generate engagement so that, in the event of a crisis, employees remain committed to their core responsibilities. For example, work that incorporates task variety and significance has been demonstrated to have a positive effect on employee engagement (Christian et al 2011). This means leaders who provide
employees with different tasks to perform, and which cumulatively have an impact on people’s lives, may in turn have levels of engagement that are sustained throughout an organisational crisis. Where such opportunities to enrich jobs is not possible, alternatives may include job rotations or job changes, since the challenge and stimulation arising from such changes may be a much-needed trigger for employee engagement (Salanova et al 2010). It is important to note, however, that such changes to job design should be enacted only in consideration of the employees’ preferences. For instance, the provision of a job characteristic undesired by an employee may consequently have a negligible effect on that employee’s motivation (Gagne et al 1997).

**Internal communication:** Much like information, a lack of internal communication was perceived as disengaging by participants in the present research since it resembled laissez-faire leadership. The model proposed by Frandsen and Johansen (2011) provides a valuable antidote to such crisis situations. The scholars delineate internal crisis communication into three stages. The first is the pre-crisis stage during which communication should seek to prevent crises or prepare for them. This includes communication that strengthens employees’ psychological fortitude, that notifies them of risks and issues, and that imparts the policies and guidelines contained within the crisis management plan. The second stage is the crisis event, which necessitates the use of communication in such a way that it helps employees to make sense of the crisis and to handle it more effectively. More specifically, this includes the timely provision of instructions, the preservation of trust and confidence, and the prompt handling of reactions that employees have to the crisis. The third is the post-crisis stage, which represents the role that communication can play in learning and changing. The dissemination of new knowledge and the process of organisational renewal are two such examples. The latter is referred to as ‘discourse of renewal’, which Seeger et al (2005) attest is a communicative way for leaders to realign the organisation with its true purpose and to reinvent itself, and is therefore a key recommendation arising from the present research. It is expected that this discourse of renewal would also see an improvement in collaboration and a positive recalibration in the organisation’s values, which are
positive outcomes that have already been generated by other organisations experiencing significant crises (Paquette 2015).

Information: The perceived lack of information, as revealed in the present research, was a major predictor of disengagement. Leaders should therefore, throughout an organisational crisis, provide complete and unbiased information that takes into account the needs of stakeholders (Ulmer and Sellnow 2000). Nunamaker et al (1989) refer to this as ‘information literacy’. Organisations are said to be information literate when they account for three important factors. The first is knowledge. As the authors note, the unpredictability of a crisis means knowledge should be shared openly and flexibly so that individuals are not bound to unnecessary rules that may otherwise delay the recovery period. The second is systems. Since a crisis necessitates the making of quick decisions, it is imperative that cumbersome and restrictive processes are streamlined and made more efficient. The third is technology. This reflects the tools and strategies that could facilitate the way in which an organisation conducts its operations, especially in the period following the crisis. This conceptualisation by Nunamaker et al (1989) demonstrates the complexity of information provision that organisations should consider in the event of a crisis. While the benefits of such an approach may be obvious in relation to employee engagement, there are additional benefits that make this recommendation even more pertinent: generating information literacy among employees makes them more adaptable to change and enhances organisational learning and memory (Bruce 1999).

Voice: One of the reasons why leaders in the present research reported higher levels of engagement can be attributed to the greater voice inherent in their positions. Therefore, extending such privileges to employees may be another way through which engagement can be preserved during organisational crises. In an elaboration of his seminal work on engagement, Kahn (2010) identified employee voice as the core of employee engagement, since engagement is when individuals feel psychologically safe to express their true selves (Kahn 1990). In particular, Kahn (2010, p. 22) specifies that voice is “the instrument by which
we say what we think and feel, question others, describe options and inventions, dialogue”. Breaking down that statement into its key words provides guidance on the ways in which leaders can promote voice among their workforce during a crisis. For example, leaders can ask employees what they *think* about the crisis and how they *feel* about the consequences; they can encourage them to ask *questions* about management decisions; they can reward them for *inventions*, particularly in regards to how they solve crisis-related problems; and they can engage in meaningful *dialogue* that may facilitate the aforementioned discussions. The challenge for leaders, however, is to overcome the personal threats that may arise as they grant their employees greater voice. These include the perception that the leaders’ unilateral decision making may be interrogated. One way to overcome such a threat is by establishing consultative committees of employees who actively liaise with senior leaders on strategic matters (Purcell 2014a). By doing so, the greater voice among employees is likely to attract a range of positive outcomes beyond those that are implicit with this dissertation. These include greater performance, positive job attitudes, stronger relationships, lower employee turnover, creativity and innovation, better decision-making, greater learning, and fewer incidences of wrongdoing (Bashshur and Oc 2015). Other voice-related solutions can include the encouraged use of social media for employees to express their views; the establishment of a variety of open communication channels; the opportunity for staff to be involved; and the authentic seeking of feedback such that employees’ opinions are not just canvassed but responded to as well (IPA/Tomorrow’s Company 2012).

**Human agency:** Another reason for the higher rates of engagement reported among supervisors and middle managers in the present research is evident in the greater human agency inherent in their role. Similar to employee voice, expanding agentic functions to those who do not have leadership responsibilities may go some way in maintaining employee engagement during organisational crises. Guidance on how to do so can be gleaned from the work of Sweetman and Luthans (2010) who identified agency as a means through which hope can be generated, thereby serving as an antecedent of employee
engagement. Since hope is deemed critical during organisational crises (Avey et al 2008), its agentic qualities serve a useful purpose in the context of employee engagement during times of crisis. Namely, these necessitate three elements (Sweetman and Luthans 2010). The first is the freedom for employees to establish their own pathways towards a specific goal. The second requires the granting of latitude to take the necessary actions as per that pre-defined pathway. The third demands a level of success on that endeavour. The leader’s role, then, should be to give employees the requisite autonomy and delegated power, to help them determine the most suitable goals and pathways, and to celebrate successes. In addition to the potential for generating employee engagement during organisational crises, such an approach could also be the catalyst for institutional entrepreneurship (Garud et al 2007), which in itself may be of particular assistance to organisations that need unorthodox thinking during a crisis (Hardy and Maguire 2008).

**Social support:** According to numerous participants in the present research, moments of respite during the organisational crisis were due to the interactions they had with their colleagues. Facilitating such exchanges is therefore a further recommendation arising from these findings. These exchanges can be established via the hosting of forums at which employees can connect and share experiences; the designing of peer-to-peer mentoring programs; and the facilitation of focus groups. These forums and programs, however, would be best served if they accommodated three different types of social support. Those tested by Greenglass et al (1996) included *emotional support*, which reflects the ability of colleagues to sympathise with, and motivate, each other; *informational support*, which reflects the horizontal sharing of information; and *practical support*, which reflects the tangible assistance on which each team member can rely. Of course, such social support does not need to be the exclusive domain of colleagues. Leaders, too, are a source of social support, and can subsequently be a catalyst for employee engagement (for example, see Bakker et al 2007; Hakanen et al 2006). It is therefore recommended that leaders similarly embark on the same three types of social support in their interactions with their employees. By doing so, they are likely to discover that the benefits of social
support also include greater job satisfaction and productivity, as well as lower incidences of burnout (Baruch-Feldman et al 2002).

**Short breaks:** A common technique used by participants in the present research, especially among supervisors and middle managers, was the taking of short breaks as a way of recuperating from the disengaging pressures of the crisis. The need for these periods of recovery, even when employee engagement is high, is necessary if optimum levels of engagement are to be maintained (Sonnentag 2003). Otherwise, the consequence could be burnout, which could materialise during times of chronic job demands, such as crises (Leiter and Maslach 2003). It is recommended, then, that leaders model the regular taking of breaks and that, during a crisis, it may be wise that they strongly recommend that employees do the same so they can fully recuperate. It is expected that, beyond employee engagement, such breaks could also enhance employee health, productivity and morale (Taylor 2011).

The two preceding sections have demonstrated the contributions the present research has made in relation to theory and practice, most notably in relation to the design of a crisis-specific adaptation of the JD-R, which culminated in a number of associated recommendations for practitioners. This dissertation will now proceed to its final chapter, the conclusion.
Chapter 6. Conclusion

6.1 Conclusion

This thesis began with the premise that the acontextual nature of research on employee engagement (Jenkins and Delbridge 2013; Purcell 2014b) warranted the exploration of one context in particular: the organisational crisis. The literature review argued this was warranted on two levels. First, it appeared as though scholars to date had studied the construct of employee engagement during periods of stability – but what may engage or disengage employees during stable times might not be replicated during a crisis. Second, scholarly work on organisational crises had thus far concentrated on how employees were affected emotionally – but such perilous circumstances may be better served by a construct such as employee engagement, which comprises not just emotions but also cognitive and physical effort (Kahn 1990). This philosophical position therefore led to the primary research question: *How does employee engagement relate to the context of organisational crises?*

To best answer that question, phenomenology was selected as the methodology because of its ability to understand a subject’s lived experience (van Manen 1990). In addition, research on employee engagement to date had been analysed almost entirely in positivistic terms (Truss et al 2014). The qualitative nature of the present research, then, has resulted in an additional dimension through which employee engagement can be better understood. Further, the social constructivist paradigm inherent in phenomenology (Alvesson and Skoldlberg 2009) suited the aforementioned research question because social constructivism is subjective (Creswell 2013), much like employee engagement (Salanova et al 2003) and even organisational crises (Coombs 2012a).

Criterion sampling was adopted to ensure all participants shared the phenomenon in common (Collingridge and Gantt 2008). More specifically, the parameters of the study required the crisis to have occurred within the previous 12 months and to have met the severity of a crisis as per the definition by
Pearson and Clair (1998). A total of 30 participants were selected, which exceeded Creswell’s (1998) recommendation of between five and 25. These participants were sourced from notices placed in this researcher’s newspaper column and email newsletter. Each of these participants attended a semi-structured interview, which ranged in duration from 35 minutes to 65 minutes, in person, either at the participant’s place of work or at a neutral office in one of six Australian cities. The interview questions were intentionally broad. For example, participants were provided with the definition of employee engagement by Schaufeli et al (2002) and then they were asked to describe when they felt that level of engagement – or its opposite – during the crisis.

All interviews were transcribed and coded on NVivo v10.2, resulting in 278 nodes, 37 sub-themes, and 14 overriding themes. Data saturation, which reflects the point at which additional interviews do not lead to new insights (Mason 2010), was reached after the 17th interview. To ensure validity, participants were provided with an opportunity to edit their transcripts, and triangulation was demonstrated throughout the Findings chapter via the use of multiple participants and references to prior scholarly work. To ensure reliability, an inter-coder agreement between this researcher and the principal supervisor was conducted after the fifth interview. Further reliability was evident via the use of transcription and professional coding software.

The data analysis generated six major themes, each of which was outlined in Chapter 4 and furthers scholarly knowledge. The most prominent of these was the near unanimous experience of disengagement arising from the perceived presence of laissez-faire leadership. Similar sentiments were expressed by a significant majority in relation to autocratic leadership. The next most dominant theme was that supervisors and middle managers reported higher levels of engagement than employees, which can be attributed to the agency and voice inherent in their role. Irrespective of their position, participants described moments of self-imposed deviant behaviour in retaliation for the disengaging way in which their leaders managed the crisis. Finally, participants utilised a variety of self-engagement strategies, the most popular of which was
simply making the conscious decision to be engaged, otherwise referred to as focus of attention. From a theoretical perspective, this resulted in a crisis-specific adaptation of the JD-R, which incorporated the aforementioned findings as well as others pertaining to social support, job satisfaction, self-efficacy, positive affect, proactivity, and autotelic personality. These findings are not without their limitations, and it is these that this dissertation will now address.

6.2 Limitations

Every methodology has its limitations (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011). The present research is no exception. In this section, five distinct limitations will be discussed. Namely, these are: (i) that the findings cannot be generalised; (ii) that the sampling method may have attracted participants with a particular bias; (iii) that cause-and-effect relationships cannot be determined; (iv) that this study has relied on self-reported data; (v) that the findings may be difficult to replicate; and (vi) that this researcher was relatively inexperienced as a phenomenologist. Each of these will now be discussed in turn.

First is the issue of generalisability. Since sample sizes in qualitative research are relatively small, the findings arising from such research cannot be generalised (Creswell and Clark 2011). This is despite the nature of the findings in the present research. For instance, even though laissez-faire leadership was reported by all but one of the employee participants, this prevalence is still not generalisable due to the fact it has not been verified representatively among a wider population. This limitation can be alleviated to a certain extent via the inclusion of methodological features that enhance reliability and validity (Lewis and Ritchie 2003). As noted in section 3.8, these have included researcher reflexivity, member checking, triangulation, and an inter-coder agreement. Despite these attempts, it remains the case that qualitative research is less concerned with generalisability and more concerned with understanding a specific phenomenon (Marshall 1996), which means the research question is what should be of primary importance. In the case of the present research, the research question was adequately answered, as per section 5.3, using an
interpretive framework rather than a deductive one. Regardless, the lack of generalisability is still included here as a limitation in acknowledgement of it being a common criticism by those who favour quantitative methods (Schofield 2002).

The second limitation is that this research may have attracted participants with an inherent bias. For example, the disengaging nature of an organisational crisis may be such that it has provoked those who are most discontent to volunteer. This means those for whom the crisis was actually a positive experience may have felt little motivation to participate in an interview. There are two factors that mitigate this limitation. One of these is that, surprisingly, only a minority – precisely 30% – of the participants reported that they were mostly disengaged throughout the crisis. The other mitigating factor is that the present research has accepted the view posited by Bakker (2014) and Sonnentag et al (2010) that employee engagement fluctuates many times throughout an employee’s workday. The focus of this research, then, has been to better understand these fluctuations during an organisational crisis. Whether the participant in question was mostly engaged or mostly disengaged during that period is therefore less relevant. Another potential bias, and indeed a more probable one, is what Christensen (2006) refers to as ‘positive self-presentation’. This reflects the participants whose contributions are determined not by what is true but by what they think will seem most impressive. This was certainly a risk in the present research, most notably among the supervisors and middle managers. Each of them was asked to share the ways in which they influenced their own employees’ engagement during the crisis. Their responses were invariably positive. This could be an example of the self-representation bias because these participants were aware of this researcher’s experience as a writer and educator on team leadership. Their responses, then, to that line of questioning, may have been embellished in order to impress the interviewer whose work they have followed in the past. For this reason, the ways in which these supervisors and middle managers influenced their own employees’ engagement was excluded from the data analysis.
The third limitation is that cause-and-effect relationships cannot be drawn from these findings. For example, it should not be assumed for certain that laissez-
faire leadership will always result in employee disengagement during a crisis, or that disengaged employees will always be compelled to embark on deviant behaviours when confronted by a poorly managed crisis. Doing so would constitute an ‘illusory correlation’ (Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2007), which threatens the validity of the data. The present research has simply attempted to describe the lived experience of Australian participants who have recently experienced, or who were currently experiencing at the time of the interview, a significant organisational crisis. The exploration of such a phenomenon is not suited to a cause-and-effect inquiry (Creswell 2013). As Creswell (p.47) notes, qualitative researchers are more concerned with “sketching the larger picture that emerges” rather than “identifying the complex interactions” of the phenomenon. Nonetheless, a lack of causation is deemed by many scholars to be a shortcoming of qualitative research (Maxwell 2004), which is why it is still represented here as a limitation.

The fourth limitation is the use of self-reports as a data collection method. For example, qualitative researchers rely on the ability of the participants to recollect their memories correctly and to communicate those experiences articulately (Polkinghorne 2005). Since semi-structured interviews were the primary method of data collection in the present research, such limitations pose a risk to the reliability of these findings. The issue of memory can be countered to a certain extent by the fact that 73% of the participants were, at the time of the interview, still in the midst of the organisational crisis. The issue of communication, too, is mitigated somewhat by the fact that each participant could speak English fluently and was asked dozens of probing questions in order to reach a level of interpretative clarity. Nonetheless, criticisms of self-reports abound among the academic community, with prevailing scepticism about their validity. In response, Chan (2009) suggests that criticisms of self-reports may be justified when objectivity is desired, but not when subjectivity is the priority. In other words, when the researcher aims to understand the perceptual experience of a specific phenomenon, as per the present research, “it
is difficult to argue for superior validity” (p. 326) than that which is provided by self-reports. Still, other methods of data collection, such as document analysis and on-site observation, would have strengthened this research, which is why the reliance on self-reports remains a limitation.

Fifth, the nature of qualitative research is such that it is difficult, if not impossible, to replicate the findings (Daymon and Holloway 2011). But as Daymon and Holloway note, this is not necessarily the objective of qualitative researchers. As in the present research, the intention is to describe the lived experience of a group of participants, each of whom has experienced the same phenomenon. Despite this, all research – even qualitative methodologies – should nonetheless seek to maximise the likelihood of replication (King et al 1994) because such an approach increases reliability and encourages research integrity. As suggested by King et al (p. 27), this can be done by detailing as intricately as possible the “exact methods, rules, and procedures used to gather information” so that other researchers can follow a similar methodology and reach the same conclusions. It is believed the methodology of the present research, as detailed in Chapter 3, meets this requirement and mitigates to a certain degree the inherent problem of replicating phenomenological findings.

The final limitation is that this researcher is relatively inexperienced as a phenomenologist. This, of course, is to be expected among doctoral candidates, who are often referred to as apprentices or researchers-in-training (McCallin and Nayar 2012), and which is why Almeida (2012) emphasises the importance of including this limitation unashamedly in the thesis. Therefore, even though the quality of the current study is robust enough such that it confidently meets Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria of trustworthy qualitative research, there are nonetheless other practices that could have strengthened this work. In light of Shenton’s (2004) suggestions, there are two worth mentioning. One of these is reflective commentary, such as diary notes that track the researcher’s thought processes as the data is gradually unravelled and interpreted. The other is diversity in data collection, which could have involved focus groups,
observations, document analysis and other forms of triangulation beyond those noted in section 3.8.

In conclusion, this section has detailed a number of limitations of the present research. It is important to note that the declaration of limitations does not render the findings invalid (Gilchrist and Williams 1999). In addition, apologising for them is not warranted since doing so would unnecessarily and unfairly judge qualitative research as inferior to quantitative methods (Morrow 2005). Instead, being transparent about these limitations is one way through which they can be better understood, thereby serving as valuable learning experiences for future research (King et al 1994). It is these suggestions for future research that this dissertation will now address.

6.3 Suggestions for future research

This doctoral research has been exploratory, which means it has been useful for identifying themes, patterns and variables that could be analysed further by subsequent scholars using other methodologies (Marshall and Rossman 2016). The purpose of this section, then, is to articulate some possible suggestions for future research. More specifically, these comprise the following: (i) the use of explanatory research to test the crisis-specific adaptation of the JD-R; (ii) the adoption of a mixed methods methodology to answer the unanswered research questions; (iii) the utilisation of a case study to develop a comprehensive account of employee engagement in an organisation in crisis; (iv) the replication of the present research methodology in other contexts; and (v) the exploration of other consequences that go beyond those reported in the current study.

The previous section on limitations implies that a quantitative study would be a logical next step in the evolution of research on employee engagement during organisational crises. A starting point for such research could be the crisis-specific adaptation of the JD-R. The benefits of such an approach are that conclusions can be more reliably drawn, while causes and effects can be more
objectively examined (Creswell 2015). This is in contrast to the qualitative methodology of the present research where generalisability is limited and where subjectivity is high. Therefore, deductive and positivist inquiries would serve the following research propositions well:

a) An organisational crisis, for a majority of employees, is a job demand.

b) Leaders, during an organisational crisis, are more likely to display laissez-faire leadership or autocratic leadership than other forms of leadership such as transformational, transactional, servant, and authentic.

c) The presence of laissez-faire leadership or autocratic leadership during an organisational crisis has a negative effect on employee engagement.

d) The presence of transformational leadership, transactional leadership, servant leadership, or authentic leadership has a positive effect on employee engagement during an organisational crisis.

e) Disengaged employees, during an organisational crisis, will be more likely to embark on deviant behaviours.

f) Employee engagement, during an organisational crisis, fluctuates daily within individuals in the same way it does during times of stability.

g) The resources of human agency, employee voice, job satisfaction and social support have a positive effect on employee engagement during an organisational crisis.

h) Focus of attention, as a personality trait, has a positive effect on employee engagement during an organisational crisis, as does self-efficacy, positive affect, proactivity, and autotelic personality.
Section 5.3 made the point that some of the research questions that emerged from the literature review remain unanswered. Mixed methods research is one way through which these can be addressed in future. That is because the combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies can provide a stronger analysis of the research problem (Creswell 2015). This is a more pragmatic approach that takes multiple paradigms into account (Teddlie and Tashakkori 2011). For example, arising from the literature review, one research question pertained to the potential for an organisational crisis to be an engaging force for some employees. A mixed methods methodology in answering that question could include, first, a quantitative assessment of the proportion of crisis-affected employees who find the experience a mostly engaging one, followed by a qualitative exploration of what specifically makes such an experience so engaging. Further mixed methods research could also focus on the duration and intensity of disengagement during organisational crises, and perhaps the consequences that ensue in relation to organisational commitment, job involvement, and other relevant constructs.

There could also be value in conducting case studies on organisations in crisis. Whilst this has already been done for organisations such as food retailer Jack in the Box (Ulmer and Sellnow 2000), and oil and gas conglomerate Exxon (Johnson and Sellnow 1995), additional value could also be derived from embarking on such research in the context of employee engagement. Case studies enable researchers to develop a holistic view of a particular phenomenon in one specific context (Yin 2014). A robust case study approach uses a triangulation of sources such as interviews, documents, records and observations (Hays 2004). In relation to interviews, future research could include in-depth interviews with a range of stakeholders, such as executives, middle managers, supervisors, employees, customers, and suppliers. The documents to be examined could include annual reports, performance appraisals, and media reports. Relevant records could include data on performance, employee turnover, employee engagement, and absenteeism. In regards to observations, researchers could spend time observing body language, team meetings, public announcements, and staff interactions, all of which may
especially be of value if the observations were made prior to the crisis, during it, and throughout its recovery so that more substantial conclusions can be drawn.

A fourth suggestion for future research is to attempt the replication of these findings or to compare them in other contexts. Contextual distinctions are important in qualitative research, particularly for studies on leadership (Bryman et al 1996). As Bryman et al note, the exploration of a similar research problem in a number of different contexts provides researchers with greater insights on the diversity of leadership practices and the varying effects these have on an organisation. In the present research, then, contextual clarity can be obtained via several avenues. For example, this research focused on Australian employees. It may be useful for future research to phenomenologically explore employee engagement during organisational crises in countries that are culturally distinct from Australia’s, such as those in Asia, Africa or South America. The present research also comprised, unintentionally, participants in white-collar and service-based professions. Future research could concentrate on blue-collar workers instead to see if their experiences differ. The participants in the present research were also confronting a variety of crises such as outsourcing, restructures, major operating losses, and the significant loss of government funding. It may be worthwhile for future researchers to select just one or two types of organisational crisis as a way of better understanding whether the type of crisis influences the type of experience.

The final suggestion for future research could be to explore other consequences associated with disengagement during an organisational crisis that go beyond the workplace deviance reported in the current study. One potential consequence could be word-of-mouth communication. Even though ‘staff word-of-mouth’ is ordinarily associated with recruitment and marketing (Keeling et al 2013), it would be insightful to learn whether this informal communication with family, friends and associates would become more or less negative in the context of (dis)engagement during organisational crises, and the reputational repercussions that would then follow. Another notable consequence could be learned helplessness, which in organisations may become manifest among
employees who remain in a state of passivity amid constant failure (Martinko and Gardner 1982), perhaps as a result of an organisational crisis, thereby perpetuating a pervasive victim mentality.

The significance of this section on future research is evident in comments by Truss et al (2014), who note that the human resource management (HRM) discipline has been “late in appreciating the emerging importance of engagement” (p. 9) and that “studies examining the HRM implications of engagement are just starting to emerge” (p. 2). Likewise, research on crisis management is similarly limited (Yukl and Mahsud 2010). These suggestions for future research represent a few small but progressive steps towards attaining this desired level of scholarship for both employee engagement and organisational crises.

In the meantime, this dissertation will detail a number of contributions that have been made to the lived experience of this researcher. This is quite common among phenomenologists (Almeida 2012). In the interests of clarity and emphasis, the next section will be written in the first person.

6.4 Personal reflections

This research has been the most stimulating and fulfilling intellectual activity I have undertaken. As will become apparent in these personal reflections, there are a number of reasons that explain why this has been the case. This section will begin by discussing how the timing of the dissertation has affected me and what I would have done differently had I the opportunity to start over. Both of these are important points of consideration for those writing a phenomenological dissertation (Almeida 2012). In addition, this section will also address my initial naïveté; my surprise at the findings that emerged; and the ways in which this research has influenced my work outside academia.
Davis and Parker (1997) state that a common mistake made by doctoral students is that they underestimate the time it will take to complete the dissertation. This is not a challenge that has affected me during this research. I can attribute this to two reasons. The first is my status as a self-employed professional, which has meant I have been able to reduce my workload in order to accommodate the demands required of me. The most time-consuming of all activities in this research has been the data collection and data analysis stages. In regards to data collection, I interviewed each of the participants face-to-face in their home city. This necessitated the dedication of time not only to each interview but also to the periods spent in transit. Then, in regards to data analysis, each transcript had to be analysed and coded sentence-by-sentence. This is why Caelli (2001, p. 280) refers to the "lengthy" and "time consuming" nature of phenomenological research, citing it as "a matter for concern given that the time required to complete a research project is a significant factor in getting it funded" or, in this case, getting it completed within the requisite qualification period. Nonetheless, I have been able to keep this research on track. The second explanation for this productivity can be attributed to my experience as a corporate leader in roles that have demanded project management skills. This means I have managed this dissertation like a corporate project with careful planning, dedicated resources, strict deadlines, efficient decision-making, and regular progress reports.

My success from a timing perspective, however, does not preclude the learning of some important lessons, which serve as examples of what, in hindsight, I could have done differently. There are three that particularly stand out:

- The first is that I would have asked more questions of my supervisory team. This lesson was most acute when I completed the first draft of the literature review, which was almost 30,000 words in length. Had I asked more questions so that I clearly understood what was expected of me at the time, it would have become apparent that, for the purposes of Confirmation, a literature review of 8,000 words would have sufficed.
• The second is that I would have pursued a more aggressive sourcing strategy. The methodology utilised my newsletter and column as the means through which the target of 30 participants was reached. Even though this number exceeds the recommended sample for phenomenological research (Creswell 1998), I believe this could have been doubled had I also: (a) approached trade unions for their assistance and, (b) placed advertisements in the periodicals of industries known for being in crisis. Whilst this would have presented me with additional challenges, most notably with time, I think the findings would have been strengthened had a greater number of voices been represented.

• The third lesson pertains to cost efficiencies. This research was an expensive undertaking that went significantly beyond the $5,000 grant issued to me by Deakin University. These expenses were strongest in two respects: flights and meeting rooms. The cost of flights could have been avoided had I made a stronger attempt to recruit participants based in one city. The cost of meeting rooms could have been avoided had I interviewed the participants in, say, a café or in a hotel lobby. There are, however, benefits to the expenses that have been incurred. For example, a national sample has enriched this research with diversity, while the reservation of meeting rooms has provided participants with quiet surroundings, a professional environment, and an implicit assurance of anonymity and confidentiality. Do these benefits outweigh the costs? That is hard to determine. My hope is that they have.

These types of lessons are perhaps the ways in which doctoral students transition out of their naïveté, which is a term that Phillips and Hugh (2010) use to describe the incipient PhD candidate. At the onset of this research – and well into it, too – I was undoubtedly naïve. The most prominent example is that I had begun this process after spending almost a decade as a consultant and trainer on the topic of employee engagement. During that time, I had worked with hundreds of clients in a dozen countries and had written thousands of pages of text in the form of articles and books. I thought I knew everything there was to
know about employee engagement. Indeed, I even went so far as to call myself an ‘expert’ on the topic. This, to me, has been the harshest awakening: that I was a fraud. I was not an expert at all. True expertise, I realise now, comes from an extensive literature review, but only reaches a respectable stage when one’s own research meets empirical standards. That this academic rigour was missing from my work explains to a certain extent why I often felt like a fake when dealing with clients. I was suffering what is known as the ‘imposter syndrome’ (Clance 1985). I no longer feel this way. As a result of this dissertation, I can now confidently call myself an expert on employee engagement and have the evidence to justify such a position. The other corollary, however, is that I have become cynical when I hear others describing themselves as experts. I immediately make an attempt to find out their qualifications and am reticent to trust their advice if it does not appear to be well informed.

This experience has also had a profound effect on me as a writer and will continue to influence my future employment endeavours. As a columnist for Fairfax Media, using the penname of James Adonis, I write every week on topics relating to the workplace. Prior to this PhD, my articles were shallow and sensationalist. My intention was to garner as many online hits and comments as possible. To that end, I was successful. This doctoral candidature, however, has taught me the value of substance, depth and critical thought. All of my articles now include at least one reference to empirical research that has been conducted in recent years. Surprisingly, I am still attracting the same number of hits and comments, only now it is for a different reason: readers seem to be getting from my articles a level of intellectualism missing from other mainstream media publications. Further, in relation to my future employment endeavours, I am somewhat different to other PhD students, a majority of whom seem to desire a career in research (Crossley 2013). Upon graduation, my intention is to return to the corporate workforce as an executive. This qualification has strengthened my leadership skills as I prepare for such a transition. After listening to 30 people talk at length about their senior leaders, and then analysing and writing in detail about their experiences, I am acutely
sensitive to the needs of employees, especially during organisational crises and significant change.

Finally, a section on my personal reflections should also include my thoughts on what the research generated. I was not surprised when I discovered the perceived presence of autocratic leadership, since I presumed that crisis situations may cause leaders to panic and to act over-emotionally. I also was not surprised by the greater engagement reported among the supervisors and middle managers. Indeed, my own personal experience of leadership – both as a practitioner and as an observer – has included the witnessing of vigour, dedication and absorption more so among those in a leadership position. Neither was I surprised by the deviant behaviours nor by the self-engagement techniques adopted by the participants, since I expected them to retaliate against perceived injustice and to protect themselves from harm. But I was incredibly surprised by the most prevalent and significant finding of this research, which was the perceived presence of laissez-faire leadership. I did not expect that senior leaders would react passively rather than actively. At a time when they should have been visible and communicative, they were deemed by employees to be invisible and silent. At a time when they should have been stepping forward, they were seen to be stepping back. This element of surprise has been a source of immense enjoyment for me, particularly since it pertains to a topic about which I have been passionate for a very long time.

This ongoing period of contemplation, which has culminated in the preceding reflections, is a form of reflexivity. In qualitative research, reflexivity represents the inseparable connection between the researcher and the researched (Moustakas 1994). This is why section 3.9 detailed my personal and professional biases. Creswell (2013) suggests, however, that it is important for reflexivity to occur not only at the beginning of such research but also at the end, which is what this section has attempted to do. The next section will return to the third person as this dissertation concludes with some closing comments.
6.5 Concluding comments

In their instructive handbook, Phillips and Pugh (2010) outline a number of requirements a dissertation must comprise in order to qualify for the PhD qualification. The purpose of this final section is to list these requirements and to briefly detail the way in which the present research has met each of them.

The first is the need for original research. To the knowledge of this researcher, this is the first time that a study on employee engagement and organisational crises has been conducted in unison. That this has been necessary is exemplified by the growing frequency and complexity of organisational crises (Wang et al 2009) and the increasing importance of employee engagement as a "significant factor in the management of people" (Truss et al 2014, p. 10). By virtue of this combined research, the second of Phillips and Pugh's (2010) criteria is met: that the research be at the forefront of the discipline. This accomplishment is evident in the crisis literature, which has now been extended from its predominant focus on emotions to the more robust construct of employee engagement. The employee engagement discipline, too, has been extended from a focus on stable environments to those characterised by severe instability.

The third requirement is that PhDs make an informed judgement on academic issues. This can be seen in Chapter 4, which reports extensively on the findings of the present research, with many supportive references included to justify why, for example, laissez-faire leadership can be disengaging during an organisational crisis or why supervisors and middle managers may be more likely than employees to be engaged. These findings then culminated in a number of implications, as outlined in section 5.4, thereby meeting Phillips and Pugh's fourth criterion that the research must result in the development of new techniques and approaches. There were ten recommendations for practitioners, while the need for a fresh approach is evident in the crisis-specific adaptation of the JD-R.
The final requirement is that this furthering of scholarly knowledge be communicated in a dissertation that is easily understood by academic and non-academic audiences. It is sincerely hoped the language, tone and structure of this dissertation is such that it piques the interest – and maintains the attention – of scholars and practitioners alike. The ultimate hope, however, is that the current research serves an even greater purpose by transcending communication so that leaders are inspired to transform a crisis from a risk to an opportunity, and their employees from disengaged victims to engaged survivors.
Chapter 7. Bibliography


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### Appendix 1. Extracted nodes

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**Negative Emotions**

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