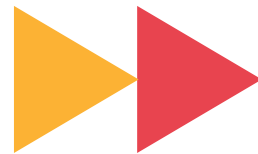# Enhancing **Emotional Connection**: A Path to **Employee Engagement**, **Conflict Resolution**, and **Retention**

Lola Gershfeld, Psy.D.
Victor Gombos, Ph.D.
Dan Hyun, Ph.D.

Emotional Connection: Impact on Employee Engagement, Workplace Conflict, Avoidance/Anxious Behaviors, and Turnover Intentions

Lola Gershfeld, Psy.D., Victor Gombos, Ph.D., Dan Hyun, Ph.D.

Abstract

Healthy team relationships are tightly linked to healthy and profitable companies. Recent work suggests that team relationships can even serve vital emotion regulation functions by minimizing anxious/avoidant behaviors. But team relationship distress remains a significant issue for companies in employee engagement, workplace conflict, and turnover intentions. A promising approach to helping teams both resolve team relationship distress and nurture effective interpersonal functioning is the Emotional Connection Process (EmC), a manualized, empirically supported approach that is strongly focused on repairing team attachment bonds. This white paper provides empirical evidence about the relationships between core elements supporting the EmC methodology and its beneficial impact on enhancing emotional connection, fostering employee engagement, reducing workplace conflict, and diminishing turnover intentions. As expected, our cross-sectional survey, analyzed through path analysis, confirms significant correlations between low attachment levels and reduced employee engagement, leading to increased turnover intention and workplace conflict. These findings lay the groundwork for ongoing research to validate interventions addressing avoidance anxiety, conflict, and declining employee engagement.

Introduction

While cultivating strong social connections in the workplace can have positive effects on employee well-being and productivity, workplace isolation and conflicts can lead to a range of detrimental outcomes, impacting both mental and physical health.[1] In the realm of organizational psychology and human resource management, the significance of harmonious co-worker relationships, job satisfaction, and employee retention cannot be overstated. EmC Leaders, through its unique approach to emotional connection, aims to positively influence these critical aspects of a thriving workplace environment. Our preliminary research, conducted with 169 online research participants, explored the interrelations between anxious-avoidance behaviors, employee engagement, and turnover intentions on workplace conflict. These findings guide our proposition that an intervention designed to enhance emotional connection between team members could potentially mitigate these negative interactions, consequently reducing conflict and increasing engagement.

Attachment Theory

In the interplay of organizational psychology, Attachment Theory, pioneered by John Bowlby, holds significant relevance.1 Within the workplace context, attachment refers to the emotional bonds employees develop with each other, especially with people they depend on, such as their immediate supervisor or manager. A securely attached employee is not only comfortable with forming strong bonds but is also perceived as a valuable group member by others within the organization.

Attachment within the workplace has become an increasingly popular topic of research in recent years.[2] Attachment theory offers a unique perspective on the study of organizational behavior, focusing on the dynamics of relationships within the workplace. Extensive research has demonstrated the direct impact of attachment dynamics on various positive organizational outcomes, such as employee productivity, ethical decision-making, effective collaboration behavior, and creative problem-solving.

Conversely, negative consequences tend to arise when individuals' attachment needs are unmet. In a work context, this can manifest as increased stress, higher rates of burnout, and turnover, among other negative outcomes. For example, a change in the relationship with a manager triggers attachment-seeking behaviors in employees.[3]

When attachment-seeking behaviors are not met or addressed, they become hyper-activated (anxious) or suppressed (avoidant)[4] – is a response to an attempt to restore emotional well-being.[5]

The activation of the attachment behavioral system helps us to better understand organizational culture, team dynamics, and manager/employee relationships.[6] Anxious individuals are heightened in nature and have low levels of emotional awareness and regulation.[7,8] They complain, blame, defend, lecture, judge, continuous talking, and raised tones in response to a disconnect. In contrast, avoidant individuals withdraw, avoid, distant, shut down, and get busy. They try to handle stress alone; however, it often backfires by pushing people away.[9]

The theory's profound impact manifests in several studies demonstrating that high emotional awareness (EI) and secure attachment between a manager and their direct report, and among co-workers, lead to a stronger confidence of knowing that people will be responsive and supportive when needed and associated with enhanced team performance and increased work engagement.[10,11,12] Moreover, strategies and training programs aimed at improving EI traits and fostering secure attachment can effectively mitigate, manage, and resolve conflict in the workplace, providing greater levels of optimism, positive views of self and others, and emotional stability.[9,13,14] Particularly, studies found that securely attached had lesser tendency to put off work, least likely to engage in unethical behavior, least likely to have difficulty completing tasks, and least likely to fear failure and rejection from coworkers.[15,16]

The Theory of Planned Behavior

When combined with the Theory of Planned Behavior, the relationship between attachment, emotional intelligence, and workplace dynamics becomes even clearer. The Theory of Planned Behavior posits that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control shape behavioral intentions.[17] In the context of a workplace, negative interactions between these factors can lead to increased workplace conflict, lower engagement, and high turnover.[18] For instance, if employees have negative attitudes towards their work, perceive unfavorable subjective norms from their colleagues or superiors, and feel a lack of control over their actions, it can contribute to them behaving anxious or avoidant, hindering their commitment and mo-tivation to stay in the organization.

This highlights the importance of considering these factors holistically to promote positive workplace dy-namics and foster a productive and fulfilling work environment. With the EmC Leaders' intervention, which promotes emotional connection and secure attachment among team members and their manager, we aim to reverse these negative inter-actions and behaviors, creating safety and nurturance to the team rela-tionship. An emotionally connected team, we propose, reduces avoidance and anxiety (manifes-tations of insecure attachment), positively influencing employee engagement, and reducing turnover intentions, ul-timately leading to decreased workplace conflict.

Emotional Connection Strategy

In essence, the combination of Attachment Theory and the Theory of Planned Behavior provides a holistic perspective on the role of emotions and behavior in shaping workplace dynamics. More specifically, the Emotional Connection strategy by EmC Leaders is designed with the objective of creating an environment that fosters secure attachment, promotes emotional intelligence, and, in turn, enhances overall workplace productivity and harmony. This includes providing a step-by-step process where employees and the manager have a common language to express their emotional experience, staying accessible, responsive, and engaged. The process guides the team to create bonding moments, securing their relationship and strengthening their emotional bond. In Stage One of EmC, De-escalation, team members learn how to recognize their triggers, raw spots, and emotions. They start to fully observe their nega-

tive cycle and view it as their mutual enemy, which the team can work together to contain. At Stage Two, Restructuring, team members learn how to share their fears and needs, stay emotionally accessible and responsive with each other, creating bonding moments. The team then moves into Stage Three, Integration, where team members start to integrate the emotional connection in other interactions and work relationships.[19] As the team progresses through the stages of EmC, shifting from an insecure to a more secure relationship, noticeable enhancements in productivity, engagement, and overall effectiveness begin to emerge.

Thus, this cross-section survey study sets an empirical foundation for the underlying concepts.

Study Methods and Results

A total of 169 full-time employees from the U.S. aged between 18 to 65 participated in this online research. We adapted key items from four different research-established survey instruments, namely Avoidance and Anxiety (AA)[20], Employee Engagement (EE)[21], Turnover Intention (TI)[22], and Workplace Conflict (WC)[23]. Following are examples of items from each instrument and the scales used:

- **Avoidance and Anxiety (AA)**: *"I'm afraid that my manager may abandon me."* On a scale of 1-7 where 1 = *"Strongly Disagree"* and 7 = *"Strongly Agree"*. Strong agreement with these items indicate high AA.

- **Employee Engagement (EE)**: *"I find the work that I do full of meaning and purpose."* On a scale of 1-7 where 1 = *"Strongly Disagree"* and 7 = *"Strongly Agree"*. Strong agreement these items indicate high levels of EE.

- **Turnover Intention (TI)**: *"How often have you considered leaving your job?"* Response scale 1-5 where 1 = *"Never"* and 5 = *"Always"*. High ratings indicate respondents with more turnover intention.

- **Workplace Conflict (WC)**: *"Had a disagreement with others over the work I do?"* Response scale 1-5 where 1 = *"Never"* and 5 = *"Very Often"*. High ratings indicate more frequent experience of workplace conflict.

Below are the **descriptive statistics** for each of the survey instruments. The general indications from the summary of the scales are: (1) Respondents overall tend to rate on the lower end of the scales (e.g., AA, TI, and WC responses fall below the *"halfway"* point of each scale); (2) AA tends to be more variable between respondents than the other three survey instruments based on a comparison of the standard deviations.

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

	AA	EE	TI	WC
mean	3.14	4.64	2.65	2.16
std	1.42	0.97	0.84	0.97
Cronbach's Alpha	0.92	0.93	0.92	0.94

Cronbach's alpha value, a measure of reliability, was over 0.8 for all our instruments, indicating high reliability. Bivariate intercorrelations between the factors were as follows:

BIVARIATE INTERCORRELATIONS

	AA	EE	TI
AA	-		
EE	-0.43	-	
TI	0.49	-0.33	-
WC	0.45	-0.16	0.71

The results revealed clear correlations between AA and various workplace factors:

1. WC and AA

A positive relationship (r = 0.45, p <.001), with ~21% of the variance in WC attributed to AA. This moderate positive relationship (i.e., they tend to increase or decrease together) indicates that, when there are increased levels of avoidance and anxiety, it's more likely that participants rate higher levels of workplace conflict, and vice versa.

WC v. AA

$R^2 = 0.2061$ N =169

2. EE and AA

EE v. AA

$R^2 = 0.189$ N =169
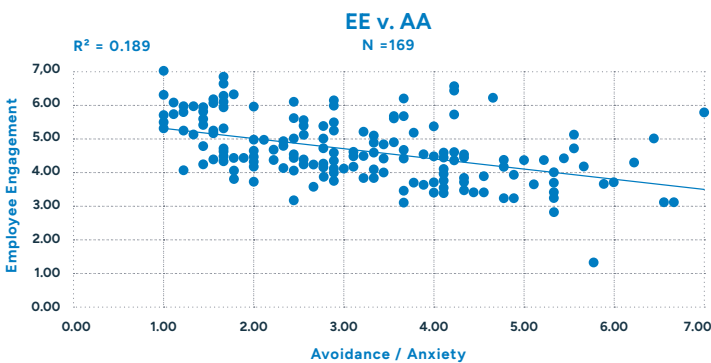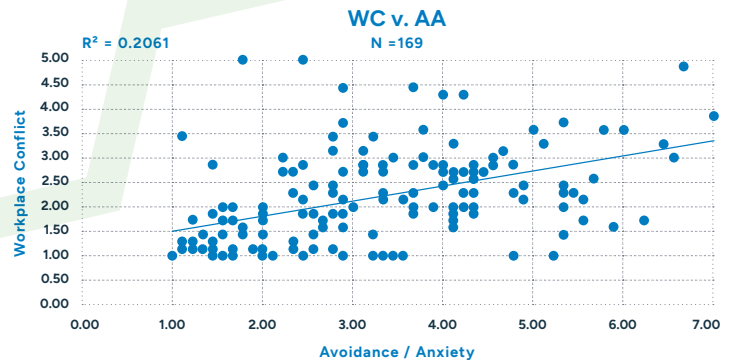
A negative relationship (r = -0.43, p <.001), with ~19% of the variance in EE attributed to AA. Lower Employee Engagement is tied to more Avoidance and Anxiety; conversely, those employees with the least Avoidance and Anxiety are likely to be more Engaged.

3. TI and AA

A positive relationship (r = 0.49, p <.001), with ~24% of the variance in TI attributed to AA. Higher levels of Avoidance and Anxiety are tied to higher levels of Turnover Intention.

TI v. AA

$R^2 = 0.2444$ N =169

WC v. TI

R² = 0,5002   N =169

Workplace Conflict (y-axis)
Turnover Intention (x-axis)
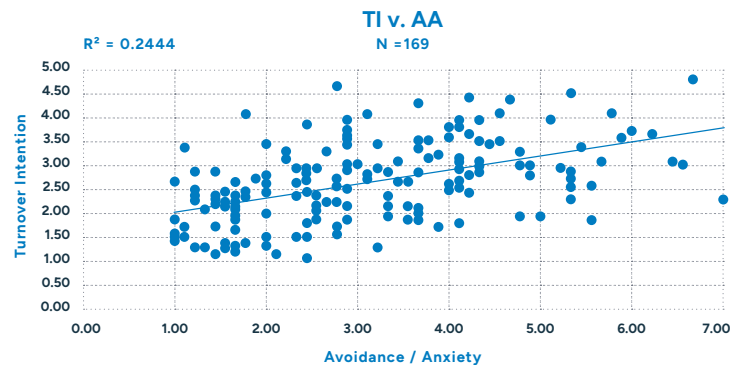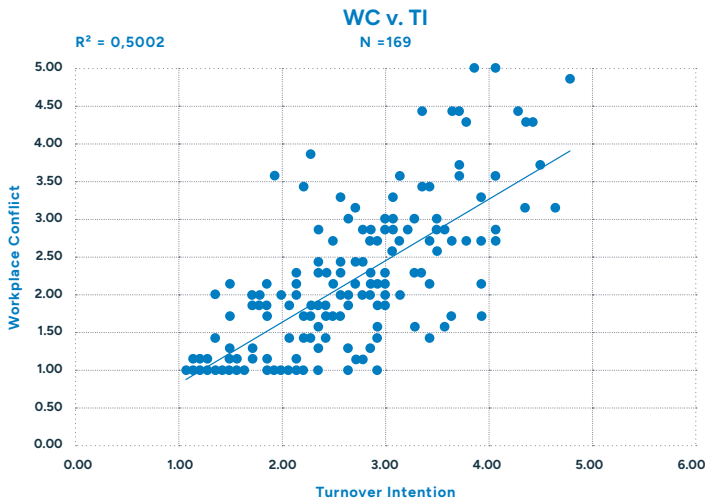
4. WC and TI

A positive relationship (r = 0.71, p <.001), with ~50% of the variance in WC attributed to TI. More Workplace Conflict is tied to higher Turnover Intention.

TI v. EE

R² = 0,1117   N =169

Turnover Intention (y-axis)
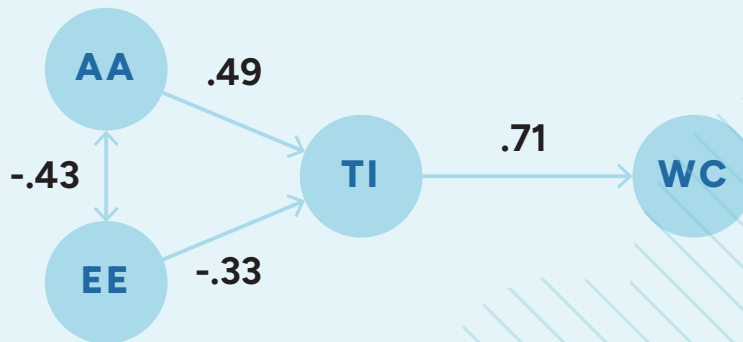**Employee Engagement** (x-axis)

5. TI and EE

A negative relationship (r = -0.33, p <.001), with ~11% of the variance in TI attributed to EE. Employees are more likely to have higher Turnover Intention when they have low Employee Engagement.
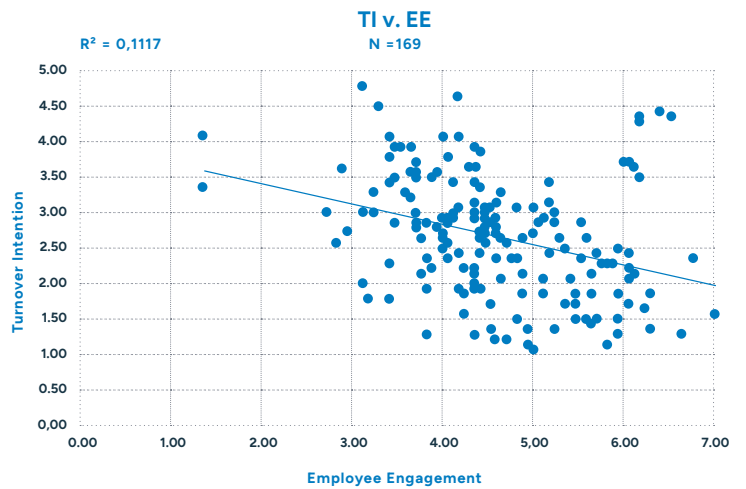
A **path-analysis** indicated that the relationship between low levels of attachment (characterized by high avoidance and anxiety) with supervisors' results in low employee engagement and high turnover intention, subsequently leading to workplace conflict.

PATH ANALYSIS

The overall path from AA to WC, mediated by TI, with an influence from EE on TI, was significantly robust. Avoidance Anxiety has a moderate negative correlation with Employee Engagement (-.43), wherein more AA is associated with less EE. Avoidance Anxiety loads onto Turnover Intention with a moderate positive relationship (+.49), meaning that those with more AA are likely to have more TI, and vice versa. Conversely, Employee Engagement loads onto Turnover Intention in a weak-to-moderate negative relationship (-.33), and while not a strong predictor of TI, when respondents had more EE, they were less likely to have high TI. Turnover Intention significantly predicts Workplace Conflict (+.71), with a moderate-to-strong positive relationship that those people who had high TI were more likely to experience high WC.

Moreover, combining all three factors (AA, EE, and TI) as a single dimension predicted workplace conflict with an effect size of 53%, which further validated the inter-relationships of these constructs.

Conclusion

This cross-sectional survey research provides evidence that employees' perceptions of engagement, avoidance and anxiety, turnover intention, and workplace conflict are correlated. aligning with the expectations set forth by EmC Leaders' concepts and methods.[24] The relationships demonstrated here indicate that, when employees perceive more negative attributes (avoidance, anxiety, workplace conflict), those are tied to less positive attributes (employee engagement, lack of turnover intention). Further, our modeling of these relationships in a path analysis indicates that workplace conflict can be predicted in a fairly robust manner (when turnover intention, avoidance and anxiety, and employee engagement are considered).

In the context of the workplace, it means that when employees perceive more avoidance and anxiety, and they are less engaged in their work, it is observed that their turnover intention increases. Turnover intention is then a strong predictor of how much workplace conflict these employees perceive—those reporting that they have strong intentions of leaving their company report a higher degree of workplace conflict than those who have low turnover intention.

These relationships fit well the assumptions of Attachment Theory and the Theory of Planned Behavior, and it further fortifies the approach that EmC Leaders' method takes in resolving workplace conflict, low employee engagement, turnover intent, and increasing positive emotional connections between co-workers.

Intervention and Future Research

Based on these findings, we are conducting a randomized-controlled trial experiment, evaluating the effectiveness of the EmC Leaders intervention in decreasing avoidance and anxiety, hence reducing workplace conflict and turnover intention while increasing employee engagement. The intention is to further investigate the effect of EmC Leaders emotional connection in a more rigorous research design and determine causal relationships.

1 Hawkley L.C., & Cacioppo J.T. (2012). Loneliness matters: a theoretical and empirical review of consequences and mechanisms. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine* 40, 218–227.

2 Bowlby J. (1969). *Attachment. Attachment and loss*: Vol. 1. Loss. New York: Basic Books.

3 Yip, J., Ehrhardt, K., Black, H. T., & Walker, D. O. (2018). Attachment theory at work: A review and directions for future research. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 39, 185-198. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2204

4 Albert, L., Allen, D., Biggane, J., & Ma, Q. (2015). Attachment and responses to employment dissolution. *Human Resource Management Review*, 25, 94–106.

5 Mikulincer, M., & Shaver, P. (2008). Can't buy me love: An attachment perspective on social support and money as psychological buffers. *Psychological Inquiry*, 19, 167–173.

6 Simpson, J., Rholes, W., Oriña, M., & Grich, J. (2002). Working models of attachment, support giving, and support seeking in a stressful situation. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 28, 598–608.

7 Nelson, D. L., & Quick, J. C. (1991). Social support and newcomer adjustment in organizations: Attachment theory at work? *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 12(6), 543–554.

8 Fraley, R., Niedenthal, P., Marks, M., Brumbaugh, C., & Vicary, A. (2006). Adult attachment and the perception of emotional expressions: Probing the hyperactivating strategies underlying anxious attachment. *Journal of Personality*, 74, 1163–1190.

9 Mikulincer, M., & Shaver, P. (2015). The psychological effects of the contextual activation of security-enhancing mental representations in adulthood. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 1, 18–21.

10 Mikulincer, M., & Shaver, P. (2003). The attachment behavioral system in adulthood: Activation, psychodynamics, and interpersonal processes. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 35, 53–152.

11 Hamel J. F., Iodice P., Radic K. & Scrima F. (2023). The reverse buffering effect of workplace attachment style on the relationship between workplace bullying and work engagement. *Front. Psychol.* 1414:1112864. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1112864.

12 Jordan, P. J., Lawrence, S. A., & Troth, A. C. (2006). The impact of negative mood on team performance. *Journal of Management & Organization*, 12(2), 131-145

13 Schlaerth, A., Ensari, N., & Christian, J. (2013). A meta-analytical review of the relationship between emotional intelligence and leaders' constructive conflict management. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 16(1), 126-136.

14 Brennan, K., & Shaver, P. (1995). Dimensions of adult attachment, affect regulation, and romantic relationship functioning. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 21, 267–283.

15 Seibert, S. E., Silver, S. R., & Randolph, W. A. (2004). Taking empowerment to the next level: A multiple-level model of empowerment, performance, and satisfaction. *Academy of Management Journal*, 47(3), 332-349.

16 Hazan, C., & Shaver, P. (1990). Love and work: An attachment-theoretical perspective. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 59, 270–280.

17 Gillath, O., Sesko, A., Shaver, P., & Chun, D. (2010). Attachment, authenticity, and honesty: Dispositional and experimentally induced security can reduce self- and other-deception. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 98, 841–855.

18 Ajzen, I. (1991). The theory of planned behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 50(2), 179-211.

19 Avgar, A., Lee, E., & Chung, W. (2014). Conflict in context: Perceptions of conflict, employee outcomes and the moderating role of discretion and social capital. *International Journal of Conflict Management*. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCMA-03-2012-0030.

20 Fraley, R. C., Heffernan, M. E., Vicary, A. M., & Brumbaugh, C. C. (2011). The Experiences in Close Relationships-Relationship Structures questionnaire: A method for assessing attachment orientations across relationships. *Psychological Assessment*, 23, 615-625.

21 Schaufeli, W. B., Shimazu, A., Hakanen, J., Salanova, M., & De Witte, H. (2019). An ultra-short measure for work engagement: The UWES-3 validation across five countries. *European Journal of Psychological Assessment*, 35(4), 577–591.

22 Bothma, C.F.C., & Roodt, G. (2013). The validation of the turnover intention scale. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management*, 11(1), http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/sajhrm.v11i1.507

23 Wright, R. et al. (2017). The Workplace Interpersonal Conflict Scale: An Alternative in Conflict Assessment. Psi Chi *Journal of Psychological Research*. 163-180. 10.24839/2325-7342.JN22.3.163.

24 Gershfeld, L., & Sedehi, R. (2021). *Emotional Connection, The EmC Strategy: How Leaders Can Unlock the Human Potential, Build Resilient Teams, and Nurture Thriving Cultures*. Business Expert Press.

BIOS:

Lola Gershfeld, Psy.D., is an organizational psychologist and founder of EmC Leaders.

Victor Gombos, Ph.D., is an independent researcher and data analyst.

Dan Hyun, Ph.D., is a senior advisor at EmC Leader and an adjunct professor at the Graduate School of Education and Psychology, Pepperdine University.