ROLE OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT & MENTORING OF SALES PERSONNEL: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Organizations look at ways to create a positive work environment where employees can look at continuous growth and expansion of knowledge.

The research attempts to find whether being a part of the mentoring relationship enables employee engagement. The study involved surveying a sample of 170 sales / marketing professionals at different levels in the organizational hierarchy from Mumbai region. A questionnaire was developed to assess the level of engagement and whether the respondents were a part of mentoring relationship. The questionnaire consisted of 21 statements which had to be rated on a five point scale ranging from 1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree. Cronbach Alpha reliability of 0.784 was established for the questionnaire.

Use of independent samples t-test found that there was a significant difference in the employee engagement scores of respondents who were a part of mentoring relationship (t-value was found to be -4.300 which was significant at .01 level). Thus, indicating that organizations who plan to invest their resources in establishing a mentoring program will see a significant effect on the employee engagement levels of their workforce.

KEY WORDS: Sales professionals, Employee Engagement, Mentoring, Retention, Disengagement, Development.

1. INTRODUCTION

In his 2004 book entitled The New Rules of Engagement, Mike Johnson wrote ‘the ability to engage employees, to make them work with our business, is going to be one of the greatest organisational battles of the coming 10 years’ (p. 1). Today employee engagement is the one which has been quickly absorbed into the HR agenda. It is a key challenge which is capturing the attention of executives and HR professionals alike (Soldati, 2007; HR Focus, 2006) and, increasingly, the acceptance of academics.

Nevertheless, there is an increasing awareness that employee engagement is pivotal to successful commercial and business performance, where engaged employees are the ‘backbone of good working environments where people are industrious, ethical and accountable’ (Levinson, 2007a; Cleland et al, 2008).

Engagement can affect employees’ attitudes, absence and turnover levels and various studies have demonstrated links with productivity, increasingly pointing to a high correlation with individual, group
and organisational performance, a success measured through the quality of customer experience and customer loyalty (Hemsley Fraser, 2008, cited in The HR Director, 2008; The Conference Board, 2006). Organisations with higher engagement levels tend to have lower employee turnover, higher productivity, higher total shareholder returns and better financial performance (Baumruk, 2006). Towers Perrin (2007) found that organisations with the highest percentage of engaged employees increased their operating income by 19 per cent and their earnings per share by 28 per cent year to year. Highly engaging organisational cultures may also have an attractive employer brand, being an employer of choice which attracts and retains the best talent (Martin and Hetrick, 2006).

Research by Hewitt Associates revealed that companies who invested the most time and resources in on-boarding, enjoyed the highest levels of employee engagement. Investing in preparing employees to be successful at their jobs is a logical step in building a psychological contract which is often ignored by organizations. Under increasing pressure to respond to competitive conditions and to meet ongoing customer demands, organizations have had to negotiate and renegotiate formal employment relationships and the psychological contracts or shared sense of obligations that underlies them (Robinson, 1996: 574). Amidst these rapid changes, mentoring has been identified as one of the essential ways in which new employees can be helped in understanding the culture and expectations of the organization and in turn, strengthening the employer – employee bond. Despite this, one of the sad things that seem to be occurring in all industries today is the lack of mentoring. It seems that everyone is too busy in their jobs to take the time to help others advance their careers.

The value of a good institutionalized mentoring process is multi-fold and difficult to ignore. With good leaders acting as mentors, the mentees – mostly team members, report or a colleague – get to learn new technology, a new process in the organization structure, a new and innovative way to handle customers or close a sale. An organization that fosters a good mentoring culture and environment attracts talent that prefers to learn by the day, innovate, contribute and grow in the rungs.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Employee Engagement

As a concept that has developed over time, engagement has been defined in numerous, often inconsistent, ways in the literature, so much so that the term has become ambiguous to many and it is rare to find two people defining it in same way (Macey and Schneider, 2008a). It has variously been conceived as a psychological or affective state (eg commitment, involvement, attachment etc.), a performance construct (eg role performance, effort, observable behaviour, organisational citizenship behaviour etc) or an attitude (Macey and Schneider, 2008a). Little consensus has been reached in the literature as to which of these definitions is the definitive, or at least, ‘best-fit’ model of engagement.

All sources (Company based, academic based and consultancy based definitions) define engagement to some degree by its outcomes and something given by the employee which can benefit the
organisation. They generally agree that engaged employees feel a sense of attachment towards their organisation, investing themselves not only in their role, but in the organisation as a whole.

In 2003, an IES consultation of HR professionals from 46 organisations found they perceived engaged employees to be individuals who show a belief in the organisation, have a desire to work to make things better, have an understanding of the business context and the ‘bigger picture’, respect and help their colleagues, have a willingness to ‘go the extra mile’ and keep up-to-date with developments in the field (Robinson et al., 2004). As a result of this study, IES defined and developed a comprehensive definition of engagement:

‘A positive attitude held by the employee towards the organisation and its values. An engaged employee is aware of business context and works with colleagues to improve performance within the job for the benefit of the organisation. The organisation must work to develop and nurture engagement which requires a two-way relationship between employer and employee’ (Robinson et al., 2004, p.4).

Report published by Lloyd Morgan along with the Corporate Leadership Council (2004) states that by increasing employees’ engagement levels, organizations can expect an increase in performance of up to 20 percentile points and an 87% reduction in employees’ probability of departure. The highly engaged outperform the average by two deciles and are dramatically less likely to leave the organization.

Figure 1: Relationship between Employee Engagement and Performance and Retention (Source: Corporate Leadership Council, 2004)
A review of studies that have examined job engagement demonstrates that being engaged in one’s job may lead to positive outcomes for individuals as well as organizations. As demonstrated in a recent study of hotel and restaurant service quality by Salanova, Agut and Peiro (2005), the employee’s level of job engagement, measured by the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002), predicted the overall service climate of the organization, which in turn predicted employee performance and customer loyalty.

Additional support for the positive relationship between engagement and organizational and personal outcomes has been shown in a meta-analysis by Harter, Schmidt, and Hayes (2002). In this study, which encompassed 7,939 business units in 36 companies, employee engagement, measured by the Gallup Workplace Audit (GWA), demonstrated true score correlations with employee turnover of -.30, customer satisfaction .33, and profitability .17. Finally, Colbert et al. (2004), using a modified version of the GWA scale, showed that employee engagement was negatively related to workplace deviance, measured as the withholding of effort ($r = -.22$).

### 2.2 Effect of Disengagement

Over recent years there has been seen a significant shift in the employee-employer relationship.

With increasingly competitive markets, globalisation, a volatile economic climate, demands for constant change and the war for talent, organisations face significant challenges in their pursuit for business success. The psychological contract is now different to what it once was; for many, there is no longer a job for life, and indeed redundancy is a very real possibility. There is also evidence that expectations of employers and employees differ from those of the past. In increasingly turbulent times engagement may therefore be the ‘deal-breaker’ for organisations seeking sustainable success.

Some employees now seek short-term careers in different organisations with the expectation that they will commit for the short-term and move on from jobs that are not satisfying, or simply use experience gained in one role as a stepping stone to another job (Bates, 2004). On the other hand, organisations want people to put in extra effort and generate innovative ideas to improve services and save money (Skapinker, 2005).

Several researches have highlighted the startling costs that employee disengagement may bring to the organization in terms of employee turnover and reduced productivity.

According to a 2003, Towers Perrin study of 35,000 employees, employee disengagement may be the best predictor of turnover. Two-thirds (66 per cent) of highly engaged employees have no plans to leave their current jobs, versus just a third (36 per cent) of the moderately engaged and only 12 per cent of the disengaged.

According to a 2002 meta-analysis by Gallup, business units with more employee engagement showed higher rates in every measure of success when compared with business units that had low employee engagement. Results showed that business units with higher rates of employee engagement had 86 percent higher success rate on customer metrics; 70 percent higher success rate in lowering
turnover; 70 percent higher success rate in productivity; 44 percent higher success rate in profitability and 78 percent higher success rate in safety figures. (Triple Creek, 2010).

In contrast to this, their research found that disengaged employees are two to three times more likely to leave their jobs voluntarily, leading to average turnover rates in the United States of 15-20 per cent, depending on industry and region. Active disengagement causes lost productivity that costs an estimated $3,400 per $10,000 in salary; this is on top of the turnover costs. The Gallup research further establishes that the least engaged employees are the lowest performers. (Triple Creek, 2010)

2.4 Mentoring – High Impact Low Cost Strategy to Engage Employees

Adult development and career theorists have long espoused the benefits of having a mentoring relationship for an individual's personal and professional development (Dalton, Thompson, & Price, 1977; Hall, 1976; Kram, 1985; Levinson et al., 1978). Since these seminal studies, quite a lot has been learned about the nature and benefits of traditional forms of mentoring. A "traditional" mentoring relationship is one in which a senior person working in the protege's organization assists with the protege's personal and professional development (Fagenson, 1989; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1993; Ragins & McFarlin, 1990). Moreover, the "mentor" generally provides high amounts of both career and psychosocial assistance (Thomas & Kram, 1988).

The current business scenario demands a new set of core leadership competencies including managing uncertainty, dealing with ambiguity, and leading with strategic agility. Promising talent has the greatest opportunity to develop these competencies if they are part of a collaborative learning experience. (Kaye, 2009) Establishing leadership programs creates a support network that provides resources in understanding corporate culture, accountability, team interaction and most importantly the unspoken rules of business engagement. Mentoring programs are a proven method for generating professional interest and commitment to the firm or department. (Arms, 2010)

The emerging business landscape necessitates a dynamic mentoring process that is available in a variety of shapes and sizes to fit the needs of an organization, its mentors and their partners. Furthermore, a multi-generational workforce demands mentoring approaches that create inclusion and diversity and support quick transitions to different assignments while new skills and knowledge are acquired (Kaye, 2009). Mentoring remains a critical path to success for the overwhelming majority of today’s organizational leaders. (Harrington, 1986).

With respect to the above mentioned changes, the practice of mentoring has also changed during the last decade, expanding into the world of virtual relationships and multi-participant interactions. Those who lead mentoring programs need to help reposition the user mindset around what mentoring is, what it can be, and how it can affect participants. Today’s definition of mentoring allows for a richer experience and more utility than mentoring of the past. Five significant shifts in the practice of mentoring can help lay the groundwork for creating a new mentoring mindset (Emelo, 2011). The following shifts has been identified:
a) Mentoring can occur in one-to-one, group and situational interactions.

b) The terms “learner” and “advisor” have a broader reach than “mentor” and “mentee”; the goal of mentoring today has shifted to focus on helping anyone gain new insights and abilities.

c) The sole purpose of mentoring was once career advancement and promotion, which explains why mentoring was often seen as merely an activity to groom the next generation of leaders. The goal of mentoring today has shifted to focus on helping anyone gain new insights and abilities.

d) Spanning mentoring engagements across the hierarchy of the organization can result in many benefits, such as exposure to new points of view, experience with different methods for accomplishing work, and interactions across the organization. To make the most of these opportunities, it’s best to look for mentoring engagements that are outside one’s organizational level.

e) Mentoring does not need to be time consuming or face-to-face.

In a 2009 AIMD study, researchers discovered critical factors that can hinder or facilitate the effectiveness of the program. Whether an organization is launching a new program or modifying a mature one, the following program traits are important considerations for an organization seeking to improve employee engagement.

Recent research on the mentoring program at Sun Microsystems demonstrated that mentoring had a much higher impact on the bottom 60 percent of performers than on the top 40 percent. The greatest impact was found to be for the bottom 20 percent, leading to the conclusion that investing in the mentoring for lower performers would be a better investment for Sun Microsystems. Results from the research within the company showed higher retention rates for both mentees (72 percent) and mentors (69 percent), when compared to the retention rates of non-participants (49 percent). (Triple Creek, 2010).

Research by Towers Perrin (2003) found that the top factor that increases engagement, are the actions demonstrated by senior management such as showing a sincere interest in employee well-being. According to the study engaged employees believed that senior leaders care about their personal and professional development, and one of the most desirable and appreciated developmental opportunities is a mentoring relationship. Surveys of Fortune 500 leaders show that 96 percent believe that mentoring enhanced their career development and opportunities.

In an article titled, “Conversations with Mentoring Leaders”, Emelo (2011) discusses three companies having three different mentoring approaches, but all agreeing to the fact that mentoring shares knowledge and builds skills competency while increasing employee engagement and developing connectivity.

From creating a culture of speed to opportunity, creating strategic alignment, building organizational capability, and delivering results by engaging the hearts and minds of their employees. Mentoring at Agilent Technologies allows for people connections to achieve their business goals. Ultimately, it’s
about increasing speed to competence and breaking the intrinsic challenges that come with matrix organizations. The result desired by Agilent Technologies through its mentoring initiative is knowledge exchange to increase productivity and enable competency to deliver on its strategic intent. With this comes the potential of higher employee engagement and innovation. (Emelo, 2011)

Mentoring is one of the key ways in which Yum Brands builds the capability of its employees to help them grow and develop. There are two key areas to be affected namely: business growth and expansion, and retention and engagement. In business growth and expansion, mentoring matches employees across geographies, disciplines, and generations, both allowing them to share knowledge outside of the boundaries that business can naturally create and encouraging global innovation and new thinking. Because mentoring fosters close relationships, we learn to deliver superior results supported by the requests we feel more comfortable making of each other. (Emelo, 2011)

Related to retention and engagement, mentoring is used to engage and coach employees to grow to their full potential. Mentoring helps in the identification and focus of specific needs for development, and it pairs employees with others who are dedicated to developing in a truthful, safe, one-on-one work relationship. These relationships, based on low cost experiential learning, expand professional networks, promote diversity and inclusion, and increase engagement. This heightened sense of associate commitment results in reduced turnover, which allows Yum to build a stronger talent bench. Mentoring is one of the main reasons why Yum happens to be an employer of choice. (Emelo, 2011)

Mentoring has been deemed as a key employee development and career management tool in organizations (Finkelstein & Poteet, 2007). It enhances employee skills, aids socialization to a new work setting, and improves career outcomes. Meta-analyses has also confirmed the positive relationship between mentoring and protégés’ career outcomes such as salary, promotions, career satisfaction, and perceptions of advancement opportunities, to name a few (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004; Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, & Dubois, 2008; Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005). Mentor benefits include improved job performance, recognition and visibility, sense of fulfillment, and having a loyal support base (Eby, Durley, Evans, & Ragins, 2006; Ragins & Scandura, 1999). Potential organizational benefits include higher organizational attraction among job applicants (Allen & O’Brien, 2006), organizational commitment (Payne & Huffman, 2005), and talent pool development, performance, and productivity (Ramaswami & Dreher, 2007).

Various models of employee engagement proposed by researchers and consulting houses have identified the drivers or the factors which if focused on by the organization, will help in engaging employees. Robinson et al (2004) has identified training and development, promotion, performance appraisals, equal opportunities, immediate management, pay and benefits, cooperation, family friendliness and job satisfaction; Penna (2007) has identified pay and benefits, learning and development, opportunity for promotions, leadership, trust and respect and meaning derived from the work done, these are considered to be essential in engaging employees. Leadership development, career advancement have
been identified as the top two drivers for employees in 18-24 age group, the so-called Generation Y employees. (Towers Perring, 2008).

It has also been reported that employees feel most engaged on days when they make headway or receive support to overcome obstacles in their jobs. Small successes mean a lot to employees. In consideration to the above discussion, there seems to be some degree of similarity between the benefits that are derived from mentoring and the factors that have a positive impact on employee engagement. The research paper aims at empirically investigating this phenomenon.

A significant difference found in the engagement levels of employees with and without mentors would indicate that investing in a large, self-directed mentoring process is a low cost, high impact way to foster employee engagement, while improving morale, retention and productivity at the business unit or organizational level. (Triple Creek, 2010). Thus, mentoring relationship may have a significant effect on employee engagement in sales management. This was the main area of research focus in this study

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Information for the paper was collected using both primary and secondary data sources.

3.1 Sample and Measures

170 sales / marketing employees in the age group of 20 – 61 years from Mumbai region were surveyed. The survey was conducted by distributing 100 hard copies of the questionnaire as well as soft copies. The sample was not restricted to any industry or company.

Questionnaire Background

The questionnaire developed was based on Robinson’s model of the drivers of employee engagement. The drivers identified by the model are: Training, development & career, immediate management, performance appraisal, communication, equal opportunities & fair treatment, pay & benefits, health & safety, cooperation, family friendliness, job satisfaction. Sample questionnaires from the internet which included Gallup’s 12 point questionnaire and a questionnaire developed by Scarlett Surveys also helped in framing the statements used in the questionnaire.

The statements framed in the questionnaire were related to the following factors: Company Perception, Information / Communication, Working Conditions, Compensation & Benefits, Job Assignment, Development Opportunities and Work – Life Balance. Researchers felt the need to develop a questionnaire as they wanted to include work-life balance as one of the factors and understand whether it positively contributes to employee engagement in their future studies. The questionnaire included statements which had to be rated on a five point rating scale ranging from 1 – strongly disagree to 5 – strongly agree. Some statements included were negatively worded so as to remove the effects of response set and rater bias. Cronbach Alpha reliability of the questionnaire was found using SPSS 15. It was established as being 0.784 for the questionnaire which is considered to be in the range of a good reliability score. (George & Mallery, 2003 and Nunnally, 1994). This is given in table-2 (Refer Table 2)
3.2 Operational Definitions of Variables

1. **Employee Engagement** - ‘A positive attitude held by the employee towards the organisation and its values. An engaged employee is aware of business context and works with colleagues to improve performance within the job for the benefit of the organisation. The organisation must work to develop and nurture engagement which requires a two-way relationship between employer and employee’. (Robinson et al., 2004, p. 4)

2. **Mentoring Relationship** – It is an intense reciprocal interpersonal exchange between a senior experienced individual (the mentor) and a less experienced individual (the protégé). This relationship is characterized by guidance, advice, counsel, feedback, and support provided by the mentor for the protégé’s personal and professional development (Eby, Rhodes, & Allen, 2007; Kram, 1985).

4. **DISCUSSION OF RESULTS**

Gallup (2005) compared what happens when managers primarily focus on employees’ strengths, on their weaknesses or just plain ignored employees. It was found that if a manager totally ignored employees, 40 percent of them will be actively disengaged in their jobs. If a manager focuses on employees’ weaknesses, 20 percent will be disengaged. Only 1 percent of workers will be disengaged if the boss focuses on employees’ strengths. This finding hints at the fact that positive mentoring which maximizes skills and knowledge will be immensely effective in creating an engaged workforce. (Weaver, 2011).

Independent Samples t-test was used to test the hypothesis under consideration to know whether the mean employee engagement scores of employees who are or are not a part of mentoring relationship are significantly different from each other. SPSS 15 was used for the analysis.

Results from the independent samples t-test for the sample surveyed found that there is a significant difference in the employee engagement scores depending on the presence or absence of mentoring relationship. The t score of -4.300 was found to be significant at .01 level of significance. Thus, indicating that presence or absence of mentoring relationship does have a significant effect on employee engagement score.

Mentoring partnerships ensure that employees understand the business strategy and have meaningful opportunities to contribute to the recovery. Mentors help identify challenging learning assignments that broaden knowledge and develop skills that contribute to an upturn in the business. Mentors aid in extending connections and networks of employees and thereby provide a crucial link to an organization’s competitive advantage -- people – and increasing productivity which in turn affects profitability. (Kaye, 2009)

Respondents in the survey who were a part of mentoring relationship scored high on the dimensions of company perception, development opportunities, work environment and information and communication in the questionnaire i.e. they felt that their organization is a better place to work for and were positive about the senior leadership, they also perceived that the organization provided
opportunities for them to grow in their careers and that they were well informed about the future course that the organization would be taking. This further supports the hypothesis under consideration for the study.

5. CONCLUSION

Results from the Triple Creek survey report (2010) found that mentoring positively impacts employee engagement and can have lasting positive repercussions for organizations. It has been established repeatedly that providing quality mentoring relationships throughout the organization increases employee engagement in multiple ways. The research paper has highlighted that mentoring does have a significant impact on engaging employees.

6. IMPERATIVES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research on the topic can be aimed at further understanding whether the link between mentoring and employee engagement holds true for different industries across a wider geographic region. Research can also try to assess which of the different types of mentoring (i.e., peer mentoring, web based mentoring, reverse mentoring) have the most significant impact on employee engagement.

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ANNEXURES

Table 1: Determinants for failure and success of mentoring programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mentor programs tend to fail when:</th>
<th>Mentor programs tend to succeed when:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mentors and/or senior employees don’t see mentoring as a responsibility</td>
<td>The program has a strong visible purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• No one wants to be accountable for advancing the next generation of employees</td>
<td>• The employer establishes a clear and strong purpose for the mentoring program at the beginning and continues to communicate the purpose regularly</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>There is poor mentor/mentee matching</strong></td>
<td>• The goals and purpose of the program are displayed on the organization’s website, social board, at the mentoring opening session, in their mentoring package, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Mismatch in mentor/mentee work goals, interests, and needs creates challenges</td>
<td>• Mentoring program goals are clear, helping sustain motivation among employees</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Personality differences create tension</td>
<td><strong>There is effective match-making</strong></td>
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<td>• Mentor or mentee stereotyping and biases generate disrespect and contribute to the erosion of the relationship</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Mentor’s and/or mentee’s availability is too limited</td>
<td>• The program driver matches the mentor’s skills, knowledge, and abilities to the mentee’s professional and personal developmental needs and goals</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>There is a weak program structure and design</strong></td>
<td>• Self-assessment tools are used to set mentor/mentee relationship goals and improve mentor/mentee match-making.</td>
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<td>• Follow-up and feedback meetings are not incorporated in the structure of the mentoring program</td>
<td><strong>There is a supportive organizational cultural</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• The employer has not sufficiently integrated the mentoring program into the organizational strategy</td>
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<tr>
<td>• The mentoring program’s goals are perceived as fuzzy and unorganized</td>
<td>• The employer fosters a mentoring culture within the organization that rewards the constructive investment of time and effort that mentors give to the mentor/mentee relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>There is poor mentoring</strong></td>
<td>• The organization tracks progress against the program’s stated goals and instills a sense of accountability among all participants</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Mentor lacks motivation</td>
<td>• The program incorporates feedback meetings with established guidelines to give mentors and mentees the opportunity to provide concerns or suggestions periodically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Mentor doesn’t provide guidance or transfer knowledge to the mentee</td>
<td>• The program includes an evaluation of the mentor and mentee, fostering accountability among all the parties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Mentee doesn’t view mentor as authentic and trust fails to develop.</td>
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Table 2: Cronbach Alpha Reliability score for 21 item scale

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<tr>
<th>Cronbach's Alpha</th>
<th>N of Items</th>
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<td>.784</td>
<td>21</td>
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