Why Leadership Matters to Internal Communication: Linking Transformational Leadership, Symmetrical Communication, and Employee Outcomes

Linjuan Rita Men

Communication Studies, Southern Methodist University

This study examines how organizational leadership influences excellent internal communication by building the linkage between transformational leadership, symmetrical communication, and employee attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. The results showed that transformational leadership positively influences the organization’s symmetrical communication system and employee–organization relationships. The effects of transformational leadership on employee relational outcomes are partially mediated by symmetrical internal communication. Symmetrical communication demonstrates large positive effect on the quality of employee–organization relationships, which in turn leads to employee advocacy. Effects of symmetrical internal communication on employee advocacy are fully mediated by employee–organization relationships. Significant theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Internal communication, sometimes called employee communication (Kennan & Hazleton, 2006; Kreps, 1989), as a subarea of public relations, has been recognized as the foundation of modern organizations. Deetz (2001) defined internal communication as a way to describe and explain organizations. Internal communication is a central process by which employees share information, create relationships, make meaning, and construct organizational culture and values (Berger, 2008). Berger asserted that internal communication is one of the most dominant and important activities in organizations because it “helps individuals and groups coordinate activities to achieve goals, and [is] vital in socialization, decision-making, problem-solving, and change-management processes” (p. 2).

A growing body of evidence has demonstrated that effective internal communication plays a vital role in developing positive employee attitudes, such as job satisfaction (Gray & Laidlaw, 2004), identification with the organization (Smidts, Pruyn, & van Riel, 2001), trust and organizational commitment (Jo & Shim, 2005), and positive employee–organization relationships. These attitudes, in turn, increase productivity, improve performance, and enhance external relations (Berger, 2008). In this increasingly connected digital world, employees possess numerous tools to initiate conversations about the company in the public domain. Quality employee–organization relationships and positive employee communication behavior (J. Kim & Rhee, 2011) are critical factors that affect an organization’s intangible assets, such as reputation and...
stakeholder relations. Thus, the influence of employees as invaluable communication assets in the organization and the function of internal communication in generating positive employee outcomes have received increasing attention from public relations scholars and professionals.

Dozier, L. A., Grunig, and J. E. Grunig. (1995) and L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, and Dozier (2002) suggested that a participative organizational culture, an organic structure, power symmetry, and gender equality, are the key factors that facilitate the organization’s internal communication. Presumably, all these organizational contextual factors are connected to one concept, organizational leadership. Yukl (2006) defined leadership as the process of influencing followers. Leadership at different organizational levels directly or indirectly determines structural forms, organizational culture and climate, power distribution, and communication. Different types of leadership advocate different communication styles to influence followers, and thus constitute a major component of the internal communication system (Whitworth, 2011). Management competence and leadership behavior also drive communication outcomes, such as perceived organizational reputation and quality relationships (Dowling, 2004; Men, 2011b). However, despite the innate connection between leadership and communication, few empirical studies have examined the exact influence of organizational leadership as a contextual factor on internal communication in organizations.

The limited studies on leadership in public relations have primarily focused on examining the leadership styles and traits preferred by public relations leaders (e.g., Aldoory & Toth, 2004; Jin, 2010; Shin, Heath, & Lee, 2011; Werder & Holzhausen, 2009) and on theorizing about and measuring leadership in the public relations context (Lee & Cheng, 2012; Meng & Berger, 2013; Meng, Berger, Gower, & Heyman, 2012; M.-L. Yang, 2012). For example, Aldoory and Toth found a strong preference for transformational leadership over transactional leadership in public relations. Jin (2010) examined the influence of emotions on public relations leadership and proposes that “transformational leadership and empathy are key predictors of public relations leaders’ competency in gaining employee trust, managing employees’ frustration and optimism,” and handling “decision-making conflicts” (p. 159). Shin et al. (2011) compared the leadership characteristics preferred by public relations practitioners in the United States and South Korea and concluded that public relations leadership depends on culture and situation differences. M.-L. Yang (2012) established the linkage among transformational leadership, the job satisfaction of Taiwanese public relations practitioners, and organizational commitment and observes the effectiveness of transformational leadership in generating positive attitudes among public relations practitioners. Meng et al. (2012; Meng & Berger, 2013) conceptualized excellent leadership in public relations and suggested that strategic decision-making capability, problem-solving ability, and communication knowledge and expertise are the three most important qualities of public relations leadership. Although several communicative aspects are discussed by leadership theories about work-related leader–follower interactions and leadership communication has been examined by a few organizational communication scholars, limited systematic studies have analyzed the effect of leadership on internal communication in the organization (Mast & Huck, 2008).

To fill the research gap and expand the body of knowledge on leadership and internal communication, this study investigates the effect of a particularly effective form of leadership (Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013), transformational leadership, on symmetrical internal communication in an organization and employee outcomes (i.e., employee relational outcomes and employee advocacy). The findings provide significant implications for communication
professionals and organizational leaders on how to develop best practices of internal communication and form positive employee attitudes and behavior that contribute to organizational effectiveness.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Leadership and Internal Communication

Whitworth (2011) suggested that organizational hierarchical communication, represented by top-down or bottom-up communication among the successive layers of executives, managers, supervisors, and nonmanagement employees, is a major component of an organization’s internal communication system. Leaders at different levels significantly influence the top-down transmission of messages to every employee and the communication of the opinions of employees to top management. Immediate supervisors are the information source preferred by employees and thus have more credibility with employees than senior executives (e.g., Larkin & Larkin, 1994; Whitworth, 2011). The communication competence, styles, and channels of a leader also influence the attitudinal and behavioral outcomes of employees. For example, Holladay and Coombs (1993) noted that leadership communication shapes follower perception. Leaders who clearly and persuasively communicate a vision gain the confidence of followers. Cameron and McCollum (1993) found that the two-way nature of interpersonal communication channels, such as team meetings, group problem-solving sessions, and supervisor briefings, enhances employee–management relationships better than publications and fosters a sense of community and belonging among employees (White, Vanc, & Stafford, 2010). Similarly, this study argues that organizational leadership provides a critical organizational context for internal communication.

Organizational Leadership

Leadership as a key factor in determining organizational success has been extensively studied in management, business, and marketing, but leadership research in the public relations setting is still emerging (Aldoory & Toth, 2004; Bass & Avolio, 1997). Yukl (2006) suggested that leadership can be defined from various perspectives, such as the “traits, behaviors, influence, interaction patterns, role relationships, and occupation of an administrative position” (p. 2). For example, Yukl and Van Fleet (1992) defined leadership as a process of influencing, including “influencing the task objectives and strategies of a group or organization, influencing people in the organization to implement the strategies and achieve the objectives, influencing group maintenance and identification, and influencing the culture of the organization” (p. 149). House et al. (2004) conceptualized leadership as “the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organization of which they are members” (p. 15). Stogdill (as cited in Yukl, 2006, p. 8) noted that “there are as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define this concept.” Researchers often define the term according to their individual perspective or the aspects of the leadership phenomenon they are interested in (Yukl, 2006). This study agrees with Yukl and Van Fleet (1992) that the essence of leadership is behavioral influence. Existing as a nested
form in the organization, leadership behavior influences not only the attitude and behavior of followers and group performance but also the organizational structure, climate, culture, and effectiveness (Yukl & Van Fleet, 1992).1

Transformational Leadership

According to Bass (1985) and Bass and Avolio (1997), leadership behaviors may be categorized into three styles: transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire (nonleadership), known as the full-range leadership model. Transformational leadership motivates followers by appealing to their higher-order needs and induce employees to transcend self-interest for the sake of the group or the organization. Transactional leadership appeals to followers’ lower-level personal desires, based on instrumental economic transactions (Bennet, 2009). The laissez-faire leader is indifferent toward followers. Among these leadership styles, transformational leadership has received the most significant scholarly attention across disciplines because of its relationship-oriented nature and the rich empirical evidence on its positive influence on employee attitudes and behavior (e.g., Behling & McFillen, 1996; DeGroot, Kiker, & Cross, 2000; Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Dumdum, Lowe, & Avolio, 2002; Dvir, Eden, Avolio, & Shamir, 2002; Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Bommer, 1996).

Transformational leaders convey a strong sense of purpose and collective mission and motivate employees by communicating inspirational vision and high performance expectations. This form of leadership creates an emotional attachment between leaders and followers. Jin (2010) noted that transformational leadership integrates “empathy, compassion, sensitivity, relationship building, and innovation” (p. 174). Acting as role models, transformational leaders elicit strong emotions from followers and identification with the leader (Yukl, 2006). Transformational leaders take genuine interest in the well-being of employees, foster a climate of trust, nurture confidence in their followers, and encourage individual development. Thus, transformational leaders often closely interact with their followers to better understand and address their needs. Transformational leaders empower followers in decision making and delegate significant authority to followers to make them less dependent on the leader (Aldoory & Toth, 2004; Men & Stacks, 2013; Yukl & Van Fleet, 1992). Therefore, transformational leadership is relationship-oriented, empowering, and participative by nature.

Although recognized as a dominant perspective in leadership research, transformational leadership has been criticized for its conceptual broadness and measurement validity issues (e.g., Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013; Northouse, 2004, Yukl, 1999). For instance, Yukl (1999) criticized transformational leadership for its lack of conceptual clarity regarding the criteria against which leadership aspects are included in or excluded from the concept. Other researchers (e.g., Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013; Northouse, 2004) have challenged the weak discriminant validity of the most commonly used instrument of transformational leadership, the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (Bass, 1990), highlighting the difficulty to discern how each dimension has a distinct influence on the mediating processes and outcomes. Despite these concerns,

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1Similar to Yukl and Van Fleet (1992), this study does not distinguish between leaders and managers because these terms are often interchangeably used in leadership literature. Specifically, leaders or managers are considered to be individuals who occupy organizational positions that require them to lead other employees.
research on transformational leadership has kept its momentums and won increasing popularity across fields because of its merits in leadership effectiveness. Conceptualizations and measures have been refined to address the abovementioned issues (Podsakoff, Mackenzie, & Bommer, 1990; Rafferty & Griffin, 2004). Transformational leadership strongly emphasizes relationships, individual consideration, meaning, and empowerment and thus has particular implications for communication and relationship managers.

Symmetrical Internal Communication

According to J. E. Grunig (2006), the conceptualization of symmetrical communication was stimulated by Carter (1965) and Chaffee and McLeod’s (1968) concept of coorientation. In contrast to traditional approaches about how to develop messages to change attitudes or behavior, coorientation emphasizes how two people or levels of a system are jointly oriented to each other. Similarly, the basic premise of a symmetrical model is how individuals, organizations, and the public use communication to adjust their thinking and behavior, rather than control or manipulate how the other party thinks or behaves. Thus, symmetrical communication favors understanding, collaboration, responsiveness, and the creation of long-term and mutually beneficial relationships (L. A. Grunig et al., 2002).

In the internal communication setting, symmetrical communication is defined as the communication worldview and practice that characterized by its emphasis on “trust, credibility, openness, relationships, reciprocity, network symmetry, horizontal communication, feedback, adequacy of information, employee-centered style, tolerance for disagreement, and negotiation” (J. E. Grunig, 1992, p. 558; J. Kim & Rhee, 2011). Symmetry is entwined with power in organizational networks and management (e.g., Chiles & Zorn, 1995; Men, 2011b; Parker & Price, 1994). J. E. Grunig (1992) indicated that the asymmetrical use of power means that managers maximize their power by controlling followers and increasing the dependence of followers on them. By contrast, the symmetrical concept of power (i.e., empowerment) means “collaborating to increase the power of everyone in the organization, for the benefit of everyone in the organization” (p. 564). Internal symmetrical communication in the organization is based on the principles of employee empowerment and participation in decision-making (J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, 2011). In such a communication system, managers and followers engage in dialogue and listen to each other; internal media disseminate information required by employees to foster mutual understanding and understanding of individual roles. Thus, symmetrical communication fosters a participative organizational culture and organic structure.

By contrast, asymmetrical communication takes the one-way, top-down approach. This type of communication persuades or controls employee behavior for the goals of management. Asymmetrical communication is often associated with a centralized and mechanical organizational structure and authoritarian culture, where employees have little opportunity to offer input to organizational decision making (J. E. Grunig, 1992; L. A. Grunig et al., 2002). The effectiveness of symmetrical communication in nurturing positive public attitudinal and behavioral outcomes has been demonstrated in many studies (e.g., L. A. Grunig, et al., 2002; Ki & Hon, 2007, J. Kim & Chan-Olmsted, 2005; Ni & Wang, 2011; Seltzer & Zhang, 2011). Likewise, the study argues that symmetrical communication in an organization plays a vital role in building quality employee–organization relationships and fostering employee advocacy.
Employee–Organization Relationships

Public relations practice and research have developed a new emphasis on building, and maintaining, quality relationships with strategic publics (Kent & Taylor, 2002). As one major outcome of public relations, organization–public relationships have been extensively examined in various contexts, including corporate, nonprofit, government, global, and online settings (e.g., Bruning, Castle, & Schrepfer, 2003; Bruning & Ledingham, 1999; J. E. Grunig & Huang, 2000; L. A. Grunig et al., 2002; Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999; Huang, 2001; Hung, 2006; H. Kim, 2007; Ni & Wang, 2011; Seltzer & Zhang, 2011). Broom, Casey, and Richey (2000) defined organization–public relationships as “the patterns of interaction, transaction, exchange, and linkage between an organization and its publics” (p. 18). Hon and J. E. Grunig (1999) noted that a relationship begins when consequences created by an organization affect the public, or vice versa. Organization–public relationships can be experienced as a process and perceived as an outcome (J. E. Grunig, 2006). As an outcome, such a relationship is indicated by public trust, control mutuality, commitment, and satisfaction (Huang, 2001), which contribute to the public’s favorable perception of the organization (i.e., organizational reputation; S. Yang & J. E. Grunig, 2005) and supportive behavior (e.g., Bruning & Lambe, 2002; J. Kim & Rhee, 2011).²

Similarly, in the internal setting, the employee–organization relationship can be operationally defined as the degree to which an organization and its employees trust one another, agree on who has the rightful power to influence, experience satisfaction with each other, and commit themselves to the other. The quality relationships of organizations with their employees contribute not only to organizational performance and the achievement of organizational goals but also to the development and protection of organizational reputation and image in a turbulent environment. J. Kim and Rhee (2011) proposed that employees with good long-term relationships with their organization “are likely to consider organizational problems as their own, and are thus likely to forward and share supportive information for their organization during organizational turbulence.” By contrast, employees with poor relationships with the organization “are less empathic to the organizational situation and more likely to disassociate themselves from their working organization. Even worse, they empathize with external active publics who criticize and attack the troubling organization and attribute problematic situations to organizational management” (p. 251). This notion reflects Rhee’s (2004) finding that employees who have positive relationships with their organizations facilitate the development of positive relationships with the organization’s external publics as corporate advocates.

Employee Advocacy

The influence of employees as informal spokespersons and brand advocates for organizations has long been recognized within public relations (Dozier et al., 1995). Employees use their personal network to amplify the brand message or proactively personalize, promote, and defend the

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²Hon and J. E. Grunig (1999) suggested that trust concerns the willingness and confidence of both parties to a relationship to open themselves to each other. Control mutuality refers to “the degree to which parties agree on who has rightful power to influence one another” (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999, p. 13). Commitment means the desire of both parties to make continuous efforts to maintain and promote a relationship. Satisfaction refers to the degree to which both parties to a relationship are satisfied with each other.
brand. Compared with sophisticated public relations messages, what employees represent is often perceived by external publics as neutral and credible (Men & Stacks, 2013). This observation is especially true in the social media era, when digital technologies facilitate not only communication among employees but also interactions between employees and the external publics. The interactions of employees with external publics arguably affect public relations outcomes, such as the quality of organization–public relationships and organizational reputation (J. Kim & Rhee, 2011). The unprecedented increase in employees’ power to communicate has made employee advocacy a buzzword in professional literature on public relations. In the academic arena, however, employee advocacy has yet to be studied as a focal concept.

Literature on marketing and business communication has extensively discussed the similar concept of customer advocacy (e.g., Russel & Morgan, 2009; Urban, 2005; Walz & Celuch, 2010). Defined as “the promotion or defense of a company, product, or brand by a customer to another” (Walz & Celuch, 2010, p. 96), customer advocacy behavior is more than a positive form of word of mouth (WOM). Advocacy includes positive WOM but is also considered an outcome of a strong relationship, in that the public defends the company or brand against critics (Walz & Celuch, 2010). Thus, advocacy is a more influential form of behavioral support than positive WOM. As an ultimate test of the relationship between an organization and its public, advocacy significantly extends the effectiveness and efficacy of the communication efforts of a company (Reicheld, 2003; Walz & Celuch, 2010). Similarly, in the internal setting, employee advocacy is a major step forward in the evolving relationship (Urban, 2005) between an organization and its employees. Similar to Walz and Celuch (2010), this study defines employee advocacy as a behavioral construct, that is, the voluntary promotion or defense of a company, its products, or its brands by an employee externally.

Hypothesis Development: Linking Transformational Leadership, Symmetrical Internal Communication, and Employee Outcomes

Transformational leadership and symmetrical internal communication. Leadership is performed largely through communication (Holladay & Coombs, 1993). Hackman and Johnson (2004) noted that transformational leadership is characterized by interactive, caring, visionary, inspirational, and empowering communication behavior. Transformational leaders create changes through a creative process of thinking out of the box, such as being open to different opinions and listening to the opinions of their followers. Transformational leaders genuinely care about the well-being and feelings of their followers. Accordingly, such leaders often communicate well and closely interact with employees to understand and address their higher-order needs well. Therefore, a transformational leader can be “touched, felt, believed and heard” (Neff & Citrin, 1999, pp. 39–40). Communicating a desirable, inspirational, and attainable vision is among the most important acts of transformational leaders. Such a vision gives followers a sense of meaning within the organization and thus improves their relational commitment to the organization. Transformational leadership communication is also empowering (Hackman & Johnson, 2004).
Transformational leaders seek opinion from followers and invite them to openly participate in the decision-making process (Hackman & Johnson, 2004). Therefore, transformational leadership demonstrates the key inherent attributes of symmetrical communication, such as openness, listening, feedback, two-way dialogue, participation, and accountability. Given that leaders interact with employees daily, transformational leadership arguably serves as an avenue for symmetrical communication in the organization. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Transformational leadership is positively associated with symmetrical internal communication.

**Symmetrical internal communication and employee outcomes.** Previous studies have demonstrated the positive associations of internal symmetrical communication and employee outcomes, including job satisfaction, organizational identification, loyalty, employee–organization relationships, and employee communication behavior (e.g., L. A. Grunig et al., 2002; Jo & Shim, 2005; J. Kim & Rhee, 2011; Smidts, Pruy, & van Riel, 2001). For instance, J. Kim and Rhee found that symmetrical internal communication efforts to cultivate positive relationships with employees eventually lead to employees’ positive megaphoning (i.e., amplifying organizational kudos) and scouting (i.e., voluntary environmental scanning) behaviors. Similarly, this study posits that when the organization’s communication system is open, two-way, and responsive; invites feedback; addresses employee voices and concerns; and boosts mutual understanding, collaboration, and dialogues, employees feel they have a better relationship with the organization and are more likely to advocate for the organization. Therefore, the following two hypotheses are suggested:

H2: Symmetrical internal communication is positively associated with the quality of employee–organization relationships.

H3: Symmetrical internal communication is positively associated with employee advocacy.

Quality public relationships with the organization engender positive attitudes toward the company as well as supportive behavior intention (Bruning, 2000, 2002; Bruning & Ledingham, 2000; Bruning & Ralston, 2000; Ki & Hon, 2007; J. Kim & Chan-Olmsted, 2005; Ledingham, 2001; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998; Peppard, 2000) and even actual behavior (J. Kim & Rhee, 2011). Thus, this study predicts that employees who perceive a quality relationship with the organization are more likely to become loyal advocates for their company and promote or defend the company and its products and services in public. Given that positive relationship is a major precursor of advocacy (Urban, 2005), symmetrical communication efforts that enable organizations to foster positive relationships with employees could promote employee advocacy indirectly. Therefore, it can be predicted that:

H4: The quality of employee–organization relationships is positively associated with employee advocacy.

H5: Employee–organization relationships partially mediate the effect of symmetrical internal communication on employee advocacy.

**Transformational leadership and employee outcomes.** Leaders represent the organization in their communication with followers. Thus, leaders’ treatment of their followers may
influence how employees feel about the organization (Men & Stacks, 2013). Transformational leadership positively affects employees’ attitudes and behavior toward their jobs and leaders, such as trust in leaders, job satisfaction, satisfaction with the leader, leader–member exchange, team/organizational commitment, loyalty, task performance, and organizational citizenship behavior (e.g., Behling & McFillen, 1996; DeGroot et al., 2000; Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Dumdum et al., 2002; Dvir et al., 2002; Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Lowe et al., 1996; Podsakoff et al., 1996). Similarly, this study proposes positive relations between transformational leadership, employee–organization relationships, and employee advocacy.

On the one hand, transformational leaders support employees, care about their concerns and development, and delegate significant decision-making authority to them. Thus, employees are motivated, empowered, and feel trusted by management. As a result, employees are satisfied with the organization and less prone to leave. Furthermore, by coaching, listening, providing performance feedback, fulfilling individual needs, and stimulating changes, transformational leaders form lasting relationships with employees (D’Aprix, 2010) and foster employee advocacy. On the other hand, transformational leadership communication is characterized by symmetry, such as listening while telling, a balance of power, relationship orientation, trust, and collaboration, which contribute to the development of symmetrical communication in the organization. Symmetrical internal communication nurtures positive employee attitudes and behavior (L. A. Grunig, et al., 2002; J. Kim & Rhee, 2011); thus, transformational leadership can influence employee outcomes by shaping internal symmetrical communication. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H6: Transformational leadership is positively associated with employee–organization relationships.
H7: Transformational leadership is positively associated with employee advocacy.
H8: Symmetrical internal communication partially mediates the effects of transformational leadership on employee outcomes (i.e., employee–organization relationships and employee advocacy).

Based on the preceding discussion on transformational leadership and symmetrical communication in association with employee outcomes, the conceptual model tested in this study was developed as follows (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 Conceptual model of the impact of transformational leadership on symmetrical internal communication and employee outcomes.
METHOD

This study empirically tested a causal model linking transformational leadership, symmetrical communication, employee–organization relationships, and employee advocacy to generalize it to a large population. Quantitative survey was considered appropriate for the research because it allows the testing of causal relationships among variables of interest with nonexperimental data while ensuring external validity (Judd, Smith, & Kidder, 1991; Weisberg, Krosnick, & Bowen, 1996).4

Population and Sample

The study population comprised employees from different positions in medium-sized and large corporations in the United States. Sample selection aimed to cover a diverse range of business communities to cross-validate the proposed model. Rather than participant corporations, individual employees were recruited through a sampling firm.5 The sampling firm solicited participation from its 1.5 million research panel members in the United States through its patented online sampling platform. Qualified potential participants were directed to the online survey hosted by the researcher. Stratified and quota random sampling strategies were used to obtain a representative sample with comparable age groups, gender, and corporation sizes across various income and education levels. A final sample size of 402 was achieved (45.5% men and 54.5% women, 59.2% nonmanagement and 40.8% management employees, average age = 44). Approximately 55% of the respondents held at least a bachelor’s degree. The respondents were employees working in various corporations with average company tenure of 10 years.6

Data Collection

Before survey administration, one pretest and one preliminary survey were conducted to ensure the reliability and validity of the measure. The pretest was conducted with 30 employees of a Fortune 100 software company in the company food court in January 2011. Respondents completed the survey and provided feedback on their opinions of the wording, thematic clarity, and format of the survey. Based on respondent feedback, several questions were reworded to avoid ambiguity. For example, the item “Leaders in my department consider my personal feelings before acting” was changed to “My manager considers my personal feelings before acting.” A five-point Likert scale on major concepts was also changed to a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) to capture respondent traits well and follow

4The experiment method is generally considered the most rigorous way to establish causal relationships between variables because it allows full control over extraneous variables. However, the external validity (i.e., generalizability) of this method is low (Stacks, 2010; Wrench, Thomas-Maddox, Richmond, & McCroskey, 2008).

5The sampling firm is a global provider of sampling solutions for survey research with headquarters in the United States. This firm is the first commercial research sampling company.

6The companies of participants covered various industries, including education, retail, health care, finance, information technology, food, industrial and manufacturing, and transportation and logistics.
respondent suggestions. In March 2011, the researcher conducted a preliminary online survey with 700 employees randomly selected from a Fortune 500 energy company through the pretested instrument. A total of 167 employees completed the online survey. Preliminary analysis of the reliability and validity of the measures revealed satisfactory results. Therefore, most of the measurement items on key variables were retained. However, to avoid respondent fatigue and reduce the length of the questionnaire, several demographic questions (i.e., questions about ethnicity, nationality, and industry tenure) were excluded from the actual survey.

Data for the research were collected via an Internet survey in March 2012. The online questionnaire was used as the tool for data collection because of its low-cost and high-speed information transmission (Stacks, 2010). On March 1, the link to the online survey was provided to the sampling firm. Data collection began on March 5, when qualified participants randomly selected by the sampling firm were directed to Weblink to complete the online survey. By March 15, 2012, a sample size of 402 had been achieved.

Measures

The measures of key concepts in this study were adapted from previous literature (J. E. Grunig, 1992; Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999; Kirkman, Chen, Farh, Chen, & Lowe, 2009; Podsakoff et al., 1990; Podsakoff et al., 1996). The scale used for close-ended questions was the seven-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The measure of transformational leadership was adapted from the Transformational Leadership Inventory of Podsakoff et al. (1990). Strong evidence from prior empirical studies supports the reliability and validity of this inventory (Kirkman et al., 2009; Pillai & Williams, 1998; Podsakoff et al., 1990; Podsakoff et al., 1996; Viator, 2001). Following Kirkman et al. (2009) and based on the pretest results, a short measure of six items was used to evaluate the transformational leadership style of leaders (e.g., “My manager articulates a vision,” “My manager shows respect for my personal feelings;” $\alpha = .90$).

To operationalize symmetrical communication in the corporate internal setting, six items developed by Dozier et al. (1995) were used (e.g., “Most communication between management and other employees in this organization can be said to be two-way communication,” “This company encourages difference of opinions;” $\alpha = .86$). To assess the quality of the relationship between the organization and its employees, this study used the widely adapted instrument developed by Hon and J. E. Grunig (1999). This 20-item instrument ($\alpha = .97$) comprises four subconstructs: employee trust ($\alpha = .89$), control mutuality ($\alpha = .93$), commitment ($\alpha = .91$), and satisfaction ($\alpha = .96$). Two items were also used to evaluate employees’ advocacy of their organization (e.g., “I will speak favorably about my company in public;” $\alpha = .88$).

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7 Instead of the standard leadership instrument (Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire; Bass, 1990), TLI was adapted to measure transformational leadership because it is a more construct-valid measure.

8 The alpha values reported are Cronbach’s reliability coefficients for each construct in this study.

9 Although there exist a few measures of symmetrical communication (e.g., J. E. Grunig, 1992; L. A. Grunig, et al., 2002) in the public relations literature, the study adopted Dozier et al.’s (1995) measure because it was developed particularly to measure the symmetrical qualities of internal communication from the employee’s perspective.
Data Reduction and Analysis

Before major data analysis, the data were proofread and checked to assess univariate normality and identify obvious univariate and multivariate outliers.\(^{10}\) Expectation–maximization (EM) was used to diagnose the pattern of missing data.\(^{11}\) Kline (2005) suggested that most methods used to address incomplete observations assume that data loss patterns are negligible, missing at random, or missing completely at random (MCAR).\(^{12}\) The result of Little’s MCAR test was not significant \((\chi^2 = 68.95, p = .90)\), indicating that the missing data were MCAR. EM was then used to compute and impute missing data before all multivariate analyses.

The proposed model (Figure 1) and hypotheses were tested through structural equation modeling (SEM) AMOS 19.0 software.\(^{13}\) Two-step latent-variable modeling was used. Multiple criteria were used to evaluate the model goodness of fit, including the comparative fit index (CFI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR). These indices are a minimal set of fit indices that should be reported and interpreted in SEM analyses (Kline, 2005).\(^{14,15}\)

RESULTS

The proposed model was analyzed and interpreted in two stages: (a) an assessment of the construct validity of the measurement model through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and (b) an assessment of the structural model. All four constructs in the structural model (i.e., transformational leadership, symmetrical communication, employee–organization relationships,

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\(^{10}\) Univariate outliers were detected by observing the subjects’ standardized values (z-scores) generated from descriptive statistics in SPSS. Multivariate outliers were detected by comparing the Mahalanobis distance with the critical point at \(z = .001\) of the chi-square distribution with the degrees of freedom of the number of independent variables plus one (An, personal communication, October 25, 2011).

\(^{11}\) EM includes two steps. In the estimation (E) step, missing data are imputed by predicted scores in a series of regressions, where each missing variable is regressed on the remaining variables for a particular case. In the maximization (M) step, all imputed data are subjected to maximum likelihood estimation. Both steps are repeated until a stable solution is reached (Kline, 2005).

\(^{12}\) MAR denotes that the presence and absence of data on a certain variable are unrelated to those on any other variable. MCAR is simply a stronger assumption about the randomness of data loss than MAR (Kline, 2005). Little’s MCAR test, a statistical test available in the most recent version of SPSS, diagnoses the pattern of missing data. If the result of Little’s MCAR test is not significant (H0: Missing data are MCAR), the null hypothesis is accepted, indicating that the missing data are MCAR.

\(^{13}\) Kline (2005) proposed that SEM can be applied to both experimental and nonexperimental data to verify a priori models consisting of latent variables or a mix of latent and observable variables. Thus, structural SEM was used as the primary statistical method to test the hypothesized model.

\(^{14}\) Hu and Bentler (1999) suggested that a cutoff value close to .95 for CFI and the TLI, a cutoff value close to .08 for SRMR, and a cutoff value close to .06 for RMSEA indicate good fit between the hypothesized model and the observed data.

\(^{15}\) Kline (2005) observed that a single fit index reflects only a particular aspect of model fit and that a favorable value of this index does not in itself indicate good fit. No single magic index provides a gold standard for all models. The chi-square is the most commonly reported measure of model-data fit. However, the chi-square strongly depends on sample size.
and employee advocacy) were specified as latent variables. The maximum likelihood method was used for model estimation.

CFA

The test results of the initial measurement model indicated adequate but not good fit with the data: $\chi^2(129) = 580.42, p < .001, \chi^2/df = 4.50$, RMSEA = .09 (90% confidence interval [CI] = .08–.10), SRMR = .03, Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) = .91, and CFI = .93. The model was then modified accordingly. Byrne (2010, p. 111) argues that “forcing large error terms to be uncorrelated is rarely appropriate with real data.” Allowing error covariance within the same construct can also explain content redundancy. Following this line of thinking and based on model modification indices, one error covariance between items one and six of the symmetrical communication measure was added.\(^{16}\) This modification significantly improved data–model fit ($\Delta \chi^2 = 116.57, \Delta df = 1, p < .001$), and the modified model demonstrated satisfactory fit with the data: $\chi^2(128) = 463.85, p < .001, \chi^2/df = 3.62$, RMSEA = .08 (90% CI = .07–.09), SRMR = .04, TLI = .93, and CFI = .94. Thus, it was retained as the final CFA model.

The standardized factor loadings in Table 1 indicate that all four constructs had the satisfying validity. The minimum factor loading was .51 in the indicator of “higher performance expectation” in the latent variable of transformational leadership. Except for two other items (on symmetrical communication), all factor loadings exceeded .70, suggesting that the hypothesized measurement model had the desired validity.

Structural Model Analysis

The multivariate normality assumption of SEM was evaluated in AMOS before the hypothesized model was estimated. The sample data showed significant positive multivariate kurtosis. Therefore, bootstrapping\(^{17}\) ($N = 2,000$) through the maximum likelihood method was performed to address the multivariate non-normality of the data. The bootstrap parameter estimations did not deviate from those based on normal theory, indicating that the significant results in Figure 2 remained significant in bootstrapping and the non-significant results remained non-significant.

The hypothesized structural model in Figure 2 adequately fit the data: $\chi^2(128) = 463.85, p < .001, \chi^2/df = 3.62$, RMSEA = .08 (90% CI = .07–.09), SRMR = .04, TLI = .93, and CFI = .94. Four structural paths demonstrated significant results at the $p < .001$ level.

The hypothesized model was simplified by eliminating nonsignificant paths. Kline (2005) suggested that models can be trimmed according to empirical considerations, such as statistical significance. The simplified model (Figure 3) was recalculated and compared with the hypothesized model via nested model comparison. The hypothesized model had no significantly better

\(^{16}\)The error covariance between item one (“I am comfortable talking to my manager about my performance”) and item six (“I am comfortable talking to my manager when things are going wrong”) was .52.

\(^{17}\)Byrne (2010) described bootstrapping as a procedure in which small random samples are repeatedly obtained from a sample to develop empirical estimates of the standard errors of any parameter. Bootstrapping is commonly used to address multivariate non-normality.
FIGURE 2 Results of the hypothesized model. Coefficients are standardized regression weights. For the sake of brevity, only the path model is demonstrated. The confirmatory factor analysis model pattern coefficients, error terms of indicators, and disturbances of endogenous variables were omitted from the figure. \( ***p < .001 \).

### TABLE 1
Standardized Coefficient of Measurement Indicators in the Final Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) Model \( (n = 402) \)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Latent variable</th>
<th>Indicator variable</th>
<th>No. of Items</th>
<th>Std. loading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transformational leadership (TL)</td>
<td>TL1: Articulating a vision</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TL2: Providing an appropriate model</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TL3: Fostering group goals</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TL4: High performance expectation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TL5: Individual support</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TL6: Intellectual stimulation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symmetrical communication (SC)</td>
<td>SC1: Comfortable talking to manager about performance</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SC2: Communication is two-way</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SC3: Encouraging difference of opinions</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SC4: Purpose of communication is to be responsive</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SC5: Informed about major changes</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SC6: Comfortable talking to manager when things go wrong</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee–organization relationships</td>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control mutuality</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee advocacy (EA)</td>
<td>EA1: Speaking favorably about company in public</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EA2: Recommending the company’s brands, products, and</td>
<td></td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>services to others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. \( N = 402 \), CFA model fit indices: \( \chi^2(128) = 463.85, p < .001 \), \( \chi^2/df = 3.62 \), root mean square error of approximation = .08 (90% confidence interval: .07–.09), Standardized root mean square residual = .04, Tucker–Lewis Index = .93, and Comparative Fit Index = .94. All standardized factor loadings are significant at \( p < .001 \).
fit than the simplified model: $\Delta \chi^2 (2, N = 402) = .774, p = .68$. Therefore, the more parsimonious model was used as the final model to interpret path coefficients. The model fit indices of the initial and final CFA models as well as the hypothesized structural and simplified final structural models are presented in Table 2.

**Hypothesis Testing**

The study proposed eight hypotheses, six of which were fully supported by the data. The other two were rejected. The results of each hypothesis test are presented as follows.

**Direct effects.** Hypothesis 1 predicts the positive effect of transformational leadership on symmetrical communication. This hypothesis was supported by the data (Figure 3). In particular, transformational leadership demonstrated a large positive effect on symmetrical internal communication, $\beta = .77, p < .001$, indicating that strategic leadership plays a critical role in shaping the organization’s symmetrical communication system.

Hypotheses 2 and 3 propose the positive effects of symmetrical internal communication on employee–organization relationships and employee advocacy. Consistent with previous findings (e.g., J. Kim & Rhee, 2011), the results supported hypothesis 2. Symmetrical communication

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**TABLE 2**

Data-Model Fits for Two-Step Structural Equation Modeling ($n = 402$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>$p$</th>
<th>$\chi^2$/df</th>
<th>CFI</th>
<th>TLI</th>
<th>SRMR</th>
<th>RMSEA$^a$</th>
<th>$\Delta \chi^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial CFA model</td>
<td>580.42</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.09 (.08, .10)</td>
<td>116.57***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final CFA model</td>
<td>463.85</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.08 (.07, .09)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypothesized structural model</td>
<td>463.85</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.08 (.07, .09)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final structural model</td>
<td>464.62</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.08 (.07, .09)</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. CFI = Comparative Fit Index. TLI = Tucker–Lewis Index. SRMR = standardized root mean square residual. RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation. $^a$90% confidence interval (low, high).
significantly and positively affected employee–organization relationships ($\beta = .60, p < .001$). When the organization’s internal communication system is characterized by openness, two-way dialogues, collaboration, and concern with employees’ welfare and voices, a quality organization–employee relationship is most likely to develop. Surprisingly, however, symmetrical communication had a negligible direct effect on employee advocacy because of the strong mediation effect of employee–organization relationships. Therefore, hypothesis 3 was rejected.

Hypothesis 4 posits a direct positive effect of employee–organization relationships on employee advocacy. This hypothesis was supported (Figure 3): employee–organization relationships significantly and positively affected employee organizational advocacy ($\beta = .79, p < .001$). This result implies that employees who perceive a mutually beneficial relationship with the organization characterized by trust, control mutuality, commitment, and satisfaction are more likely to publicly advocate for the organization.18

Hypotheses 6 and 7 predict the positive effects of transformational leadership on employee–organization relationships and employee advocacy, respectively. The results supported hypothesis 6 but rejected hypothesis 7 (Figure 3). In particular, transformational leadership demonstrated a large positive effect on employee–organization relationships ($\beta = .30, p < .001$). Employees led by transformational leaders are more likely to develop a positive relationship with the organization. However, the direct effect of transformational leadership on employee advocacy was non-significant because of the mediation effects of symmetrical communication and employee–organization relationships.

**Indirect (mediation) effects.** A formal test of indirect effects through a bootstrap procedure ($N = 2,000$) was conducted to test hypotheses 5 and 8. The indirect effects on paths from symmetrical communication to employee advocacy through employee–organization relationships were significant ($\beta = .61, p = .001, 95\% CI = .43–.85$). The indirect effects on paths from transformational leadership to employee–organization relationships through symmetrical communication ($\beta = .44, p = .001, 95\% CI = .35–.53$) and from transformational leadership to employee advocacy through symmetrical communication and employee–organization relationships were also significant ($\beta = .57, p = .001, 95\% CI = .44–.71$). Therefore, hypotheses 5 and 8 were supported. Employee–organization relationships mediate the effect of symmetrical communication on employee advocacy. Symmetrical communication mediates the effects of transformational leadership on employee outcomes.

**DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION**

The internal communication system of an organization functions as a critical condition and a part of excellent public relations (J. E. Grunig, 1992). As an extensive effort to expand knowledge on excellence in internal communication, this study investigated the linkage among organizational leadership (i.e., transformational leadership), the internal communication system (i.e., symmetrical communication), and related employee outcomes (i.e., employee–organization relationships and employee organizational advocacy). Results provided important implications for scholars and professionals of public relations and organizational communication.

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18Keith (2006) proposed that a standardized coefficient ($\beta$) of $<.05$ suggests a negligible effect, $05–.10$ a minimal but meaningful effect, $.10–.25$ a moderate effect, and $>.25$ a significant effect.
Transformational Leadership and Symmetrical Internal Communication

Leadership is the nucleus of the organization’s internal communication process (Mast & Huck, 2008). This study revealed the critical role of transformational leadership in shaping the symmetrical internal communication system of the organization. In particular, employees supervised by transformational leaders are more likely to perceive the organization’s communication as symmetrical. This finding can be explained by the fact that transformational leaders motivate employees by appealing to their higher-order needs and care about their welfare, concerns, and personal growth and development. To that end, transformational leaders encourage two-way exchange in communication (Bass, 1998) and listen to the feedback and opinion of employees. They often practice “management by walking around” and interact with employees face-to-face. Transformational leaders also encourage innovativeness and creativity among their followers and are tolerant of individual differences and value different opinions. Such leaders align the individual goals of employees with group and organizational goals and foster collaboration among followers (Podsakoff et al., 1990; Podsakoff et al., 1996). Transformational leaders also delegate power and tasks to develop followers. Thus, by listening effectively to employees, responding to employees’ higher-order needs, caring about employees’ interests, and empowering employees, transformational leadership communication reflects the key attributes of symmetrical communication, by which employees discern a balance of power, feel cared for rather than controlled or manipulated, and value collaboration. Such interactive, visionary, inspiring, relationship-oriented, and empowering leadership communication (Bass, 1998; Hackman & Johnson, 2004) forms a major part of the organization’s symmetrical communication system and promotes positive employee outcomes.

Transformational Leadership and Employee–Organization Relationships

Transformational leadership positively affects the job attitudes and behavior of employees (e.g., Behling & McFillen, 1996; DeGroot, Kiker, & Cross 2000; Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Dumdum, Lowe, & Avolio, 2002; Dvir, Eden, Avolio, & Shamir, 2002; Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Bommer, 1996). Men and Stacks (2013) found that transformational leadership at the organizational level positively influences employees’ perception of organizational reputation. Similarly, this study revealed that transformational leadership significantly and positively affects employee–organization relationships. Employees perceive a desired relationship with the organization when they perceive their managers to be engaging, visionary, inspiring, empowering, and caring. How employees feel about the organization is largely affected by how they are treated by their direct managers.

Transformational leadership also indirectly affects employee–organization relationships via symmetrical communication. Transformational leaders create an open, symmetrical, reciprocal, horizontal, and employee-centered communication climate and system and thus engage employees in a quality relationship with the organization. Such a setting also produces positive relational outcomes, such as employee trust, control mutuality, commitment, and satisfaction. Therefore, through exerting influence on every aspect of the organization, transformational leadership, as an organizational contextual factor, not only provide a hospitable environment where excellent public relations is nurtured, but also directly contributes to the development of...
the organization’s symmetrical communication system and the cultivation of quality employee–organization relationships. The excellence researchers (Dozier et al., 1995; J. E. Grunig et al., 1992; J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, 2011; L. A. Grunig et al., 2002) have noted that management behaviors (i.e., empowerment) and organizational infrastructures (i.e., organic structure, participative culture) are fundamental influencers of the organization’s symmetrical communication. In this regard, the study was among the first to provide empirical evidence on how a particular leadership style, transformational leadership, facilitates the establishment of the organization’s internal communication system and influences communication outcomes.

Symmetrical Internal Communication, Employee–Organization Relationships, and Employee Advocacy

This study provides empirical evidence for the effectiveness of symmetrical internal communication in nurturing quality employee–organization relationships (e.g., L. A. Grunig et al., 2002; Jo & Shim, 2005; J. Kim & Rhee, 2011; Smidts, Pruyn, & van Riel, 2001). When the organization advocates open, two-way, and responsive communication, addresses the opinions and concerns of employees, and boosts mutual understanding and collaboration, employees perceive a positive relationship with the organization. Having employees involved indicates the organization’s confidence and trust in employees and concern for them and thus provides employees a sense of ownership regarding the organization and nurtures employee–organization relationships.

This study also established the linkage between employee relational outcomes and the behavioral consequence of employee advocacy. The excellence study (e.g., L. A. Grunig et al., 2002) suggests that long-term, positive relationships represent the value of public relations in that such relationships may stimulate supportive public behavior while preventing destructive behavior. However, empirical evidence on how quality relationships predict positive public behavior toward the organization remains inconclusive (Ki & Hon, 2007). J. Kim and Rhee (2011) revealed that employees with good relationships with the organization engage in microboundary-spanning activities (i.e., self-propelled information seeking, selecting, forwarding, and sharing) to support the organization. Similarly, our study found that employees who trust the organization are satisfied with, and committed to, the organization, and agree on mutual influence are likely to become corporate advocates that compliment, protect, and defend the organization in public and recommend the organization, its product and services, and its brands to their personal networks. In sum, the study indicates that the symmetrical internal communication system should be in place for an organization to cultivate long-term, positive relationships with employees, which in turn, increase the likelihood of employee advocacy behavior. Therefore, transformational leadership and communication style should be developed to effectively and efficiently unlock such internal advantage, maximize internal communication efforts, and eventually contribute to business performance and organizational effectiveness.

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of the study provide important theoretical and practical implications for public relations, organizational communication, and management. Theoretically, first, by demonstrating the impact of transformational leadership on symmetrical internal communication and employee
outcomes, this study empirically linked leadership to internal communication. It introduced a new perspective to examine leadership in the context of public relations and a construct that can promote understanding of how organizational management and infrastructure affect the effectiveness of internal communication. Past studies have acknowledged the nucleus role of leaders in internal communication as information catalysts and employees’ most trusted source of information (e.g., De Vries, Bakker-Pieper, & Oostenveld, 2010; Holladay & Coombs, 1993; Men & Stacks, 2013). However, a systematic and empirical examination of leadership impact on internal communication is lacking. Thus, the questions about leadership communication included in this study open up a broad new territory for both public relations and organizational research. Second, the findings of the study help advance the theories of relationship management in the internal setting. Aside from symmetrical internal communication, transformational leadership was found to be an important antecedent factor for positive employee–organization relationships, and employee advocacy to be a behavioral consequence of such relationships. These concepts and the hypothesized model specified how to enhance relationships internally and ultimately create supportive public behavior and maximize the success of external communication efforts. The increasing and undeniable importance of employees as the informal public relations force and communication assets of organizations necessitates the adoption of a context-specific and stakeholder-specific theory of internal relationship management to guide practice. In addition, this study theorizes on employee advocacy (a buzzword in professional publications on public relations) as an ultimate outcome of internal communication efforts and thus contributes to the theory of the value of public relations. That is, the value of public relations lies not only in shaping favorable perceptions or building positive public relationships but also in engendering supportive public behavior.

Practically, the findings provide implications for internal communication professionals on how to nurture best practices, breed internal excellence, and generate positive employee outcomes. In particular, this study suggests that a two-way, employee-centered, and responsive symmetrical communication system should be developed to guide daily communication practices and optimize employee communication. For example, organizations could establish an internal listening center that specializes in gathering and analyzing employee feedback through all available channels. Second, this study suggests that internal communication efforts are affected by management effectiveness and leadership behavior. The realm of public relations interacts with other subsystems in the organization to achieve business goals and objectives. For best practices of internal communication, public relations professionals should consider all influencing contextual factors such as leadership, organizational culture, structure, and diversity (L. A. Grunig et al., 2012; Men, 2011a, 2011b; Men & Stacks, 2013) to develop an inherently cross-enterprise and optimized communication system encompassing all leaders, managers, and employees. In such an integrated communication system, leaders are critical influencers and should thus be enabled and empowered to be excellent communicators (Berger, 2008; Men & Stacks, 2013).

To that end, public relations and internal communication professionals should provide managers at all levels with accurate information aligned with organizational values and goals; identify, describe, and celebrate role models among employees; offer necessary training sessions to develop the transformational leadership style, communication competence, and skills of leaders; and embrace modern-day changes to equip leaders with an arsenal of tools that facilitate internal communication. Leaders should be encouraged to adopt open-door policies that enable them to listen to employees, solicit opinions and ideas, and facilitate upward communication. Social media channels (e.g., instant messengers, blogs/microblogs, and social network sites)
with two-way, interactive/dialogical, communal, and relational features should be harnessed to promote employee participation, engagement, and community building. Most essentially, communication managers should link leadership/internal communication to corporate returns on investment or business outcomes and develop effective measures and metrics (e.g., at the dyadic, group, and organizational levels) to evaluate internal programs. Successful measurement not only assists top management in understanding why internal communication efforts are worth investing in, but also provides a roadmap for best practices. Although building an integrated communication system requires the collaborative efforts of public relations, human resources, management, and even operations, communication managers should coordinate these functions; develop employee-specific, relevant messages; and promote an open, symmetrical, and collaborative communication culture.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite the pioneering explorations of this study, several limitations were encountered and should thus be addressed in future research. The first possible limitation was the common source measurement; the data were collected only from the perspective of employees. To provide a more comprehensive understanding of how leadership influences internal communication, insights from public relations professionals and organizational leaders should be incorporated. Second, the findings can be generalized only to large and medium-sized corporations in the United States. Although probability sampling improves the generalizability of this study, organizations outside the scope of this study or those in other cultural settings should be careful in using the findings as reference. Third, although this study contributes to a general understanding of the relationship among leadership, internal communication, and employee outcomes, a triangulated approach incorporating multiple methods, such as documentary analysis, in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participant observation, would have provided in-depth and valid explanations about how the model works.

Future research may conduct replication procedures to cross-validate the results of this study by using different samples from various organizational or cultural settings. Leadership might exert a different degree of influence on employee communication in Asian organizations because collectivist societies hold different attitudes toward power from those of individualist cultures (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). Qualitative research methods should be used to generate detailed, descriptive, in-depth, and contextual understanding of the proposed model. An open-ended qualitative approach could also facilitate the identification of potential mediators or moderators of the effects revealed in this study. Incorporating the perspectives of public relations managers into an examination of the relationships may provide a more comprehensive picture. Finally, future researchers can incorporate other possible influencers of internal communication, such as organizational culture, organizational structure, diversity issues, and job-related factors to further test the model and expand the nomological network of excellent internal communication.

REFERENCES


