



Evolving Research and Practices in Internal Communication

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Internal communication, sometimes referred to as employee communication, internal relations, or internal public relations, has witnessed significant growth in recent decades as a discipline and profession. Globally, specialized industry associations and organizations have been established to foster research, education, and professional development in this arena, such as the Institute for Internal Communication established in 2010 in the United Kingdom, the Organizational Communication Research Center of the Institute for Public Relations created in 2012 in the United States, and the IC Kollektif, established in 2016 in Canada. In tandem, internal communication has been recognized as one of the fastest-growing specializations in public relations and communication management (Men & Bowen, 2017; Tkalac Verčič et al., 2012). Scholarship on internal communication has also soared in the past decade. According to a recent systematic review (Lee & Yue, 2020) analyzing 223 articles on internal

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communication published in nine communication journals from 1970 to 2019, over half of the studies appeared after 2011.

The evolvement of internal communication practice was partially prompted by the increasing recognition of employees not only as the production force but also as invaluable communication assets for organizations in today's increasingly connected, digitized, and transparent world. As organizational insiders, employees are perceived as trustworthy sources of information for external publics. What employees say publicly about the company often forms the basis for how external stakeholders view the organization. In the social media age, the role of employees as brand advocates, ambassadors, and authentic voices for the organization has become more salient than ever. As such, the line between "internal" and "external" is blurred (Mishra et al., 2014), and anything internal can easily become external. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Airbnb was lauded for its transparent, authentic, and empathetic approach to treating employees when the company announced its plan to lay off 25% of their workers. Forbes called it "a master class for empathy and compassion" (Kelly, 2020). Despite announcing a painful decision, the company's effective internal communication was not only well received by employees, but also projected an external image of a compassionate and authentic organization.

New realities in today's business environment necessitate the re-examination of how internal communication is defined and practiced, particularly from a public relations and strategic communication perspective. What do we mean by internal communication today? What key problems does internal communication address as a sub-discipline of public relations and strategic communication? Below, the definitions of internal communication are revisited, an overview of the recent developments in research and practice in this domain is provided, positioned through the lens of public relations, along with a discussion of emerging trends and issues that are shaping the practice. The chapter will end with the discussion of the vision and goals of the book and an overview of the book's structure and content.

WHAT IS INTERNAL COMMUNICATION?

As an organizational function, internal communication has been broadly defined as "all formal and informal communication taking place internally at all levels of an organization" (Kalla, 2005, p. 304). Multidisciplinary

by nature, internal communication can be positioned between public relations, human resources management and (internal) marketing. However, in practice, it is public relations and strategic communication practitioners that have the best understanding of internal stakeholders (Tkalac Verčič & Špoljarić, 2020).

Adopting a stakeholder approach, Welch and Jackson (2007) defined internal communication as “the strategic management of interactions and relationships between stakeholders within organizations” and specified interrelated dimensions that include “internal line manager communication, internal team peer communication, internal project peer communication and internal corporate communication” (p. 184). This definition can be recognized as one of the earliest definitions of internal communication from a public relations perspective. Further, this definition positions internal communication as an strategic management function beyond information exchange and acknowledges the essential role of managing “relationships” in the process, which concurs with the modern definition of public relations (c.f., Grunig et al., 2002). Likewise, grounded in public relation’s excellence theory, Men and Bowen (2017) consider internal communication as a process co-created by the organization and internal stakeholders and define internal relations as “the strategic management of internal communication in managing interdependence and building mutually beneficial relationships between the organization and its employees” (p. 12). Following the relationship management paradigm and a systems theory perspective, this definition recognizes the interdependent state between the organization and its employees at various levels and aspires to a win–win situation where long-lasting quality organization–employee relationships can be cultivated. In this sense, internal communication may be understood as a means to an end and is driven by the perceived needs and wants of interacting organizations and internal stakeholders (Jiménez-Castillo, 2016; Welch, 2012). Internal stakeholders, predominantly employees, are active players in the internal communication process, who co-construct meaning with the organization and co-create the relationship as opposed to being merely passive message receivers.

In essence, internal communication is both a management function and public relations specialization. It is strategic in nature which aims to achieve specific internal communication goals that contribute to organizational effectiveness. Hence, internal communication can be more appropriately coined as “strategic internal communication,” which is

distinct from a similar but easily confused term, organizational communication. As a well-established field of study, organizational communication is concerned with studying all communication phenomenon inside the organization (e.g., persons and their characteristics or motivations, organizations, structure, teams, networks, discursive resources, discourse, interpretation, representation, construction of meaning, processes, etc.) (Kuhn et al., 2019) and focuses on how the organization functions, the context of organization, and communication processes (Deetz, 2001).

In practice, internal communication involves multiple dimensions: hierarchical communication (i.e., leadership communication across various levels), corporate internal communication (i.e., communication initiated by the communication department) and, horizontal/peer communication (i.e., employees as communicators, opinion leaders, or message receivers) (Men & Bowen, 2017; Whitworth, 2011). Internal communication requires a thorough understanding of how communication functions to be effective. This entails understanding the communication players, including communicators/message senders (e.g., the organization, the leader, or employees) and internal audiences/message receivers, the communication process (e.g., communication strategies, tactics, channels; how meanings are encoded/decoded, how messages are transmitted, and the feedback loop) and the context of internal communication (e.g., culture, climate, structure, leadership, etc.) (Keyton, 2011). Equally, if not more importantly, as a strategic public relations function, effective internal communication requires understanding of how organization and management work and can clearly see how internal communication fits in organizational strategy and contribute to the attainment of organizational goals and organizational effectiveness.

EVOLVING ROLES AND FUNCTIONS OF INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

What can internal communication do? Functions of internal communication pertain to various roles that internal communication serves in the organization. A significant amount of research has discussed the functions of internal communication and resulting outcomes. Consolidating these perspectives, the evolving roles, and functions of internal communication can be categorized as the following:

Inform. Traditionally perceived as a function of information exchange, a fundamental role of internal communication is to keep employees

informed and updated regarding their job roles, the organization, market, environment, and each other (Berger, 2008; Jiménez-Castillo, 2016; Men & Bowen, 2017). This serves as the basis of operations coordination and a fully functioning organization. Also, employees are the backbone of the organizational production and innovation. They need to be *aligned* with the organization's strategies, decisions, mission, vision, purpose, and long-term goals so that they can make meaningful contribution (Hume & Leonard, 2014). Keeping employees informed is the first step toward aligning employees with the organization's strategic intent and implementing goals and strategies.

Listen. Communication should not be a one-way street. As a strategic management function, internal communication involves listening to gather employee feedback, views, perspectives, and ideas. Symmetrical internal communication which highlights listening, feedback, reciprocity, and an employee-centered approach has been recognized as an important characteristic for excellent public relations (Grunig, 1992). Hume and Leonard (2014) emphasize the importance of incorporating the views of internal stakeholders in organizational strategy development. Active listening constitutes two-way communication, promotes dialogue where meanings can be co-created and mutual understanding can be achieved and also breeds innovation as employee voices and constructive feedback can serve as the source of innovative ideas and intrapreneurship (Park et al., 2014).

Connect. As indicated by the definition, building relationships is a fundamental function of internal communication. To that end, employees need to feel connected inside the organization—with the company, with the leader, and with one another. A deeper level of connection goes beyond an employer-employee exchange relationship. Rather, employee minds, hearts, and souls are bonded with the organization. Employees are committed, identified, and engaged. Such outcomes can only be achieved over time via effective and systematic internal communication incorporating various players at different levels in the organization.

Acculturate and Inspire. Internal communication helps employees make sense of the organization, including its mission, vision, values, beliefs, and purpose (Men & Bowen, 2017). By communicating, interpreting, and instilling the values and beliefs among employees, internal communication helps acculturate employees and create a shared identity inside the organization. Culture not only represents the personality and character of the organization, but also serves as the glue that binds

employees. Culture is intertwined with internal communication (Grunic et al., 2002; Men & Jiang, 2016). While culture provides a context and climate for internal practice, culture is created, reinforced, preserved, and transformed via internal communication. Internal communication exerted at both organizational and leadership levels influences the way employees think and act, which is an important manifest of culture.

Motivate and Engage. An organization's internal communication, especially from the leadership communication perspective, plays an essential role in motivating employees. To motivate is to create a desire to stimulate employee efforts and performance which connects strategies to action and drives goal attainment (Timm & Peterson, 2000). Communicating an inspiring vision motivates employees (Men, 2014a; Mishra et al., 2014). Employees can also be motivated by organizations and leaders meeting intrinsic needs such as the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For instance, leadership communication of positive feedback, encouragement, appreciation, and recognition can meet employee needs for self-efficacy, which then motivates employees (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Internal communication that connects personal employee goals to a higher purpose of the organization can help employees see the meaning and impact of their work, enhancing their intrinsic motivation for the job (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018).

Internal communication engages employees. This linkage has been empirically established in a number of studies (e.g., Mishra et al., 2014; Tkalac Verčič & Vokić, 2017). For instance, in discussing the expanded role of internal communication in driving employee engagement, Mishra et al. (2014) established that internal communication develops a bond of trust between organizations and employees, which leads to employee engagement. Likewise, Tkalac Verčič and Vokić (2017) linked multiple dimensions of internal communication satisfaction with employee feelings of vigor, absorption, and dedication in the organization, further reinforcing the role of internal communication in engagement.

Overall, the role and function of internal communication can be summarized as informational (to inform), relational (to listen, connect), motivational (to acculturate, inspire, motivate), and behavioral (to engage). Various by products can be generated in the process of internal communication such as employee trust, satisfaction, commitment, alignment, enhanced organizational reputation, and customer satisfaction (Mishra et al., 2014), which can eventually lead to financial indicators as

well (Men & Bowen, 2017). Given the modern integration of communication functions and multiple touchpoints employees have with the organization online and offline, and inside and outside of the organization, an emerging role of internal communication is to create a wholistic employee experience based on cumulative interactions employees have with the organization in their journey (from on-boarding to offboarding). This requires an integrated view of internal communication practice and an emphasis on not only employee perceptions and attitudes, but more importantly on actions and behaviors. Organizations also need to think holistically about the entire employee experience in the organization rather than discrete events and recognize that employee relationships with the organization begin before they join the company and persist after they leave (Plaskoff, 2017). While human resources management is critical in crafting employee experience during the process of employment, internal communication needs to go hand in hand. As such, internal communication practitioners play the role of not only facilitators, trainers, relationship managers, motivators, but also experience designers in the organization.

STATE OF RESEARCH IN INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

Decades of internal communication research has yielded an abundance of scholarship. Research in this arena has grown exponentially, particularly after 2000 with a sharp increase in the past decade (Lee & Yue, 2020). Overall, research on internal communication can be broadly categorized as the following streams:

1. Defining internal communication and describing the practice
2. Demonstrating the value of internal communication
3. Exploring best practices/excellence in internal communication
4. Internal communication in various contexts (special topics) such as in change, crisis management, multi/cross-cultural communication context.

(1) **Defining and describing internal communication.** Pioneer public relations scholars (Grunig, 1992; Wright, 1995) highlighted internal communication as a public relations function and specialization over twenty years ago. However, research on internal communication from a public relations perspective has been lagging until the

start of the new millennium. Public relations and corporate communication scholars have since defined internal communication from the tactical channels perspective (Cornelissen, 2004), the integrated, multidisciplinary perspective (Kalla, 2005), stakeholder (Welch & Jackson, 2007), strategic management/alignment (Hume & Leonard, 2014), and relationship perspectives (Jiménez-Castillo, 2016; Men & Bowen, 2017). Efforts have also been made to position the field, describe the functions and practice, and explicate the differences between internal communication and its sister fields such as organizational communication, business communication, or management communication (Kalla, 2005; Men & Bowen, 2017; Tkalac Verčič et al., 2012; Welch & Jackson, 2007).

(2) **Demonstrating the value of internal communication.** An important body of work in the past ten years pertains to demonstrating the value of internal communication. Research has evidenced the positive impact of internal communication on a number of positive employee outcomes, such as employee-organizational relationships (e.g., Kim & Rhee, 2011; Lee & Kim, 2017; Men, 2014a), employee trust (e.g., Men, Yue, et al., 2020), organizational reputation (e.g., Dortok, 2006; Men, 2014b), employee engagement (Kang & Sung, 2017; Mishra et al., 2014; Tkalac Verčič & Vokić, 2017), organizational identification (e.g., Yue et al., 2020), employee advocacy (Men, 2014a; Thelen, 2019; Walden & Westerman, 2018), employee communication behavior (Kim & Rhee, 2011), employee voice behavior (Ruck et al., 2017), organizational citizenship behavior (Men & Yue, 2019), work-life enrichment (Jiang & Men, 2017), and employee life satisfaction (Coric et al., 2020). Beyond these outcomes at cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral levels, internal communication has also been linked to financial indicators, such as employee retention (Kang & Sung, 2017), innovative performance (Jiménez-Castillo, 2016), and intrapreneurship (Park et al., 2014). Recognizing the multiple levels of impact of internal communication on organizational effectiveness, scholars have also devoted effort to providing guidance on measuring the effectiveness of internal communication, which incorporates output, outtake, and outcome measures and is tied to business objectives and organizational bottom lines (e.g., Meng & Berger, 2012; O'Neil et al., 2018; Ruck & Welch, 2012).

(3) **Exploring best practices/excellence in internal communication.** Another important stream of research focuses on the “know-how” of internal communication; that is, how can internal communication be managed/practiced to contribute to organizational effectiveness. Overall,

research has explored internal communication strategies, channels, and other organizational contextual factors that foster excellence in internal communication. For instance, symmetrical (e.g., Kang & Sung, 2017; Kim & Rhee, 2011; Men, 2014a; Men & Stacks, 2014) and transparent communication (e.g., Jiang & Men, 2017; Men, 2014b; Yue et al., 2020) have been consistently demonstrated as excellence characteristics for internal communication that contribute to numerous positive employee outcomes. Authentic, empathetic, responsive, and assertive communications, especially from the leadership perspective (Jiang & Men, 2017; Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018; Men, 2015) have been shown to affect positive employee outcomes such as motivation, engagement, and relational outcomes. A bulk of works have also examined the optimization of communication channels in achieving communication effectiveness. Face-to-face communication (Mishra et al., 2014) and internal social media (e.g., Ewing et al., 2019; Madsen, 2016) have especially achieved enormous scholarly attention and demonstrated the efficacy in engaging employees and fostering positive employee relationships. Scholars have also explored sundry organizational contextual factors that contribute to internal communication effectiveness. Among these factors, organizational culture, and leadership have been most prominently discussed. For instance, participative, innovative, and supportive organizational cultures and positive emotional cultures of joy, companionate love, pride, and gratitude have been tied to excellent internal communication (Grunig et al., 2002; Jiang & Men, 2017; Yue et al., 2020). Leadership factors, including CEO leadership communication style, strategies, channels, and credibility (Men, 2015; Men, Yue, et al., 2020), and supervisory leadership styles, including transformational, authentic, ethical, and servant leadership behaviors have been demonstrated as important organizational antecedents that affect the organization's internal communication practice and effectiveness (e.g., Jiang & Men, 2017; Men, 2014a, 2014b; Men & Stacks, 2014; Thelen, 2020).

(4) **Internal communication in various contexts.** A growing amount of research has examined internal communication issues in various contexts, such as issue or crisis management, change management, multi/cross-cultural communication, corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication, and so forth. For instance, public relations scholars have explored the role of internal communication in different stages of crisis management (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011) and how effective internal crisis communication strategies contribute to positive

employee relational and behavioral outcomes (Kim, 2018; Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2015). Change communication, despite being long discussed in the management literature, has recently caught the attention of public relations scholars. Research has revealed the functions of internal communication/public relations during change (Elving, 2005; Luo & Jiang, 2014) and the impact of internal communication climates, public relations strategies, channels (Men, O’Neil, et al., 2020; Neill et al., 2019), and employee-organization relationships (Men, Yue, et al., 2020) on employee change reactions. In comparison, research on internal communication in the global/cross-cultural or multi-cultural context has been limited. Most studies that incorporated a global or international perspective examined some aspects of internal communication in a different country or cultural context (e.g., Chong, 2007; Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2015). An important work that filled the gap of global and cross-cultural internal communication, by Tkalac Verčič (2019), provided concrete suggestions for multi-cultural organizations to effectively communicate with their global employee base. However, the lack of empirical research on internal communication in the cross-cultural and multi-cultural contexts still warrants opportunity for future research.

The current internal communication scholarship seems to be dominated by the management paradigm. To advance research in this arena, scholars could incorporate other theoretical approaches such as the critical or rhetoric perspective (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018; Pompper, 2012) to better understand the internal discourse and dialogue, address employee needs and experiences, and explore other important but under-researched issues such as gender, diversity, activism, and power in internal communication. Despite being a multidisciplinary area of study where theories from mass communication, human resources, management, and social psychology hold explanatory power, internal communication as a core public relations function and sub-discipline warrants the establishment of a clearer scholarly identity to advance theory development.

CURRENT TRENDS AND ISSUES IN INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

Multiple trends have reshaped the internal communication landscape and practice today. First and foremost, with social, economic, and technological transformations happening at an unprecedented pace, companies and their leaders are challenged to harness disruption in a rapidly changing

environment. Workplace dynamics and culture today have shifted with the dominance of millennials and the entry of Gen Z into the workplace (Men & Bowen, 2017). Today employees demand high levels of transparency and authenticity from their organization and leaders. We have seen more and more employees speak or walk out for or against their employers on controversial social issues or push their companies and leaders to take a political stance (Wingard, 2020). Employee activism is on the rise and changing the workplace. With declining trust in public institutions globally (as shown in Edelman's Trust Barometer study), companies are under pressure to be an important force driving positive social change. Communicating purpose and social conscience and aligning values and mission with business goals has become an important challenge for organizations.

Technological advancements have blurred the line between internal and external. Web 2.0, social media, and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, virtual reality and augmented reality, big data, blockchain, etc., have brought new opportunities and challenges for internal communication and employee engagement. Additionally, the workforce has become more diverse and globalized. Many leaders face increasing challenges in leading global teams comprised of workers from different cultural backgrounds or face scrutiny or even backlash when implementing the same internal messages to culturally diverse internal audiences.

While some of the above-mentioned issues are emergent, others are long-standing. Regardless, the evolving environment, new trends, issues, and audiences are calling for updated internal communication theories, models, research, and practices. Internal communication research has long lagged behind practice until the recent decade (Lee & Yue, 2020; Tkalac Verčič et al., 2012). While scholarship on internal communication especially from a public relations perspective has grown significantly, review work that integrates the accumulated knowledge and research has been lacking. Men and Bowen's (2017) book lays a fine foundation for theorizing internal public relations. The scope and width of book, however, could be extended to cover the emerging internal communication issues that come with current trends. An abundance of recent research in this arena published in the past five years may also be integrated. In that effort, this book assembles a group of top-notch scholars and thought leaders in internal communication from across the globe to provide a comprehensive review of the evolving internal communication research and practice

addressing current trends and emerging issues. Specifically, this edited volume will tackle the following sets of questions:

- What are organizational leaders' internal communication roles? What is the relationship between leadership and communication? What communication channels can leaders utilize to communicate, connect, and engage with stakeholders? How should CEOs lead and communicate in turbulent times such as during a change or crisis (e.g., COVID-19)? [*Chapter 2: Leaders as Communication Agents*].
- How can organizations effectively segment internal publics? What are the implications for internal issue management? How can the situational theory of problem-solving inform this process? [*Chapter 3: Internal Public Segmentation for Effective Internal Issue Management*].
- How can emerging technologies (e.g., internal social media, AI) be integrated into internal communication efforts? What are some potential benefits, challenges, and nuances in adopting internal social media? How can organizational leaders adapt their management philosophy and managerial practices to the new communicative environment enabled by new technologies? [*Chapter 4: Internal Social Media, Emerging Technologies, and Internal Communication*].
- What is employee advocacy? Why is employee advocacy important for organizations from a public relations perspective? How does internal communication drive employee advocacy? [*Chapter 5: Employee Advocates: Unlocking Their Power Through Internal Communication*].
- How do organizations promote dialogue in the workplace through "informed employee voice?" What is the relationship between listening, voice, and dialogue? How are these concepts related to internal communication? [*Chapter 6: Employee Voice and Internal Listening: Towards Dialogue in the Workplace*].
- What is employee activism? What are the roles of internal communication in the rise of employee activism? How should organizations resolve conflicts and manage relationships with employee activists? [*Chapter 7: Employee Activism and Internal Communication*].
- How does internal communication contribute to a purposeful organization? How can organizations involve employees in corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication efforts, and why does it

matter? How to develop purpose-aligned internal CSR communication? [*Chapter 8: Beyond Internal Corporate Social Responsibility Communication (ICSRC): Creating a Purposeful Organization*].

- How can strategic communicators and organizational leaders hinder and promote various aspects of employee wellbeing? How could internal communication affect employee wellbeing? [*Chapter 9: Enhancing Employee Well-being Through Internal Communication*].
- How does internal communication contribute to organizational crisis prevention and management? What is the role of internal communication in the three dynamic stages of a crisis: pre-crisis, the acute phase, and post-crisis organizational recovery and renewal? How are existing crisis communication theories applied to the internal context? [*Chapter 10: Internal Crisis Communication*].
- How does internal communication serve to manage organizational change and disruption? When, how, and what should be communicated to employees regarding organizational change? What are the underlying mechanisms of effective change communication? [*Chapter 11: Strategic Change Communication*].
- How can organizations measure internal communication effectiveness? What should be measured and evaluated in internal communication? What are the new ways of measuring and evaluating internal communication? [*Chapter 12: Measurement and Evaluation Internal Communication*].
- How does culture shape global internal communication? What effect does technology have on global internal communication? What are the necessary competencies for intercultural or multi-cultural communication? What are the most important trends which will be affecting the future of internal communication in a cross-cultural and global context? [*Chapter 13: Internal Communication in a Cross-Cultural and Global Context*].

This book is grounded in solid scientific research and informed by evolving theories and practice in internal communication. Each chapter includes a practitioner's perspective at the end contributed by an industry leader in internal communication, being a professional interview or a mini-case study. Given its depth, currency, and integration of theory and best practices, the book will provide a comprehensive source for internal communication researchers and practitioners.

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