Employee Advocates: Unlocking Their Power Through Internal Communication

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Scholars will frequently refer to employees as one of the most important publics for organizations (Grunig et al., 2002; Kang & Sung, 2017). In addition to their productive role, "employees are becoming the ultimate reputation makers or breakers in a world where every organization sells experiences rather than products and where the truth is more accessible and shareable than ever—particularly by those on the 'inside'" (Frank, 2015, p. 144). The in-depth knowledge they have of their organizations makes them credible sources of information for many publics, including customers (Dortok, 2006; Shinnar et al., 2004). Given employees' strong reputational role, the communication and business community are increasingly paying attention to a concept that has rapidly become a buzzword: employee advocacy.

Despite the interest generated by employee advocacy among communications and marketing practitioners, it remains an understudied topic

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75

in the public relations literature (Men, 2014). However, previous studies have begun to shed light on this research area (e.g., Lee & Kim, 2020; Men, 2014; Thelen, 2018, 2020; Walden & Kingsley Westerman, 2018). The impact that employees can have on an organization's reputation and relationship with external publics when they use their personal networks to promote their organizations has been recognized by scholars (Kim & Rhee, 2011; Men & Stacks, 2013). This understanding has led to the growing awareness of the necessity to develop strategies that can manage and guide employees' advocacy behaviors (e.g., Lee & Kim, 2020; Thelen, 2020; Walden & Kingsley Westerman, 2018). Drawing from this scholarship, this chapter seeks to answer the following four questions: (1) What is employee advocacy? (2) Why are employee advocacy behaviors important for organizations? (3) What factors drive employee advocacy? (4) How does strategic internal communication influence employee advocacy?

Defining Employee Advocacy

Although the literature on employee advocacy is scarce, there currently exist several definitions. Some have defined advocacy as "employees' willingness to act as 'part-time marketers' of the organization to both potential customers and potential employees" (Schweitzer & Lyons, 2008, p. 563). Similarly, Božac and colleagues have argued that advocacy refers to "the promotion of an organization by its employees, where the workforce acts as the voice of the company" (2017, p. 25). Advocacy is also understood as a boundary-spanning employee outcome that can help spread goodwill with external publics (Vlachos et al., 2017). What unites these definitions is that they view advocacy as a positive word-of-mouth behavior in which employees support their organizations to external publics by, for example, recommending their products and services or highlighting the work environment (Bettencourt & Brown, 2003; Schweitzer & Lyons, 2008; Tsarenko et al., 2018).

Other scholars have argued that in addition to positive word-of-mouth, employee advocacy also entails defending an organization from criticism (Men, 2014; Walden & Kingsley Westerman, 2018). As noted by Madsen and Verhoeven (2019), employees embody, promote, and defend their organizations externally. Employers are increasingly needing employees who can support them by defending their position when they are under scrutiny (Weber Shandwick, 2014). In other words, scholars who view

employee advocacy as more than positive word-of-mouth, define this behavior as a "voluntary promotion or defense of a company, its products, or its brands by an employee externally" (Men, 2014, p. 262).

Despite these differences, most of the literature has consistently defined employee advocacy as a verbal behavior directed toward external publics. However, a recent study incorporated two additional elements to our understanding of employee advocacy (Thelen, 2020). First, it suggested that advocacy can also be expressed nonverbally. Two common nonverbal advocacy behaviors include using company swag (e.g., shirts, keychains) and volunteering in community relations activities. Second, the study highlighted that employee advocacy behaviors could also take place within an organization. In other words, advocacy behaviors can be directed to external publics (e.g., family, friends, and acquaintances) and internal audiences (e.g., other employees). As these two elements broaden the influence and scope of advocacy behaviors, the following definition was proposed: "Employee advocacy is a verbal (written and spoken) or nonverbal voluntary manifestation of support, recommendation, or defense of an organization or its products by an employee to either internal or external publics" (Thelen, 2020 p. 8).

The Importance of Employee Advocacy

When employees advocate and transmit an aspired brand image to diverse publics, they help organizations drive brand awareness. A survey conducted by Trapit, a company that enables social media content sharing by employees, found that 43% of employees state that their sharing helps increase their company's brand awareness (Springer, 2015). Employees' interactions with external publics can positively impact public relations outcomes such as reputation and organization-public relationships (Kim & Rhee, 2011).

Building high-quality relationships with employees who encourage behavioral outcomes such as employee advocacy contributes to organizational effectiveness and provides monetary value to the organization (Grunig et al., 2002). Scholars have argued that, for example, positive word-of-mouth impacts an organization's success and influences its growth and revenue (e.g., Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Gremler et al., 2001). When employees are genuinely excited about their employer's products and service, they will be more likely to speak about them enthusiastically. As employees know the products of their organizations better than anyone

else, they are in an ideal position to influence sales and growth. According to a study conducted by Hinge Research Institute and Social Media Today (2015), nearly two-thirds (64%) of organizations with formal employee advocacy programs in place state that they have helped them attract and develop new business (Frederiksen, 2015). At the same time, research has shown that when organizations acquire customers through employee endorsements, both the contribution margins and retention rates are higher (Schmitt et al., 2011; Villanueva et al., 2008). Given this reality, it is not surprising that empowering and motivating employees to engage in this behavior reinforces an organization's financial performance (Miles et al., 2011).

In addition to acquiring customers, employee advocacy positively impacts human capital in several ways. First, it helps organizations recruit suitable employees and attract highly skilled human capital (Cervellon & Lirio, 2017; Collins & Stevens, 2002). A study conducted by Wilden and colleagues (2010) found that prospective employees seek credible employer information through personal relationships and consider employee referrals as the most credible sources of information. Hence, having employees who are willing to act as brand ambassadors will help organizations share relevant brand messages to job seekers (Wilden et al., 2010). Second, advocacy also influences employee retention and engagement. Organizations with successful employee advocacy programs are not only 58% more likely to attract talent but also 20% more likely to retain employees (Levinson, 2018). Regarding engagement, research shows that employees feel more connected and enthusiastic about their organizations after sharing work-related content (Altimeter, 2016).

Finally, employees have the power to shape an organization's reputation when they describe their experiences within a company in a way that humanizes the brand and builds goodwill. When employees say positive things about their organization or volunteer on behalf of the organization they are building favorable perceptions and goodwill among community members that can have a positive effect when facing issues and even crises (Thelen, 2020).

Drivers of Employee Advocacy

Drivers of employee advocacy can be separated into three basic categories: individual, group, and organizational. Individual factors focus on individual differences in employees and are person-specific. Group factors are

concerned with variables such as role, status, norms, and cohesiveness within groups of two or more individuals working for a particular objective. Finally, organizational factors are concerned with the structure and working culture of an organization.

Individual factors: Regarding individual factors, research has suggested that attitudes such as job satisfaction, organizational identification, and organizational commitment play an important role in driving employee advocacy (Thelen & Men, 2020). Committed employees feel identified, involved, and psychologically attached to their organizations and are willing to contribute to the organization's wellbeing by giving something of themselves (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986; Tsarenko et al., 2018). Although in-role performance (i.e., those activities relevant to employees' formal job assignment) can be considered an antecedent of employees' commitment and satisfaction toward their organizations, extra-role performance (i.e., activities that aid the organization but are not explicitly required of employees) is expected to be a consequence of these attitudes (MacKenzie et al., 1998; O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986). Similarly, employees will engage in brand-building behaviors when they trust their organization (Punjaisri et al., 2013).

Feeling organizational pride and person-organization fit are two additional individual factors that can lead to employee advocacy behaviors (Thelen & Men, 2020). Working for successful companies or organizations with a meaningful purpose contributes to developing a sense of pride among employees. Finally, an individual's personality and whether or not they perceive advocacy as a means to some end (e.g., boosting their personal brand) may also play an important role in driving advocacy behaviors (Thelen & Men, 2020). Employees that desire positive recognition and are eager to promote themselves and their traits, may see online employee advocacy as an opportunity to share their organizational identities (e.g., Fieseler et al., 2015; Marwick & Boyd, 2011; van Zoonen et al., 2018). Having said this, it is important to note that a study conducted by Lee and Kim (2020) found that self-enhancement had no significant effect on an employee's willingness to advocate on behalf of their organization on social media. On the other hand, altruistic (i.e., helping the organization) and hedonic (i.e., enjoyment) motives increase advocacy intentions among employees (Lee & Kim, 2020).

Group-level factors: Group factors are a second broad area that can encourage advocacy behaviors. Among group factors, leader-member relationships, which refer to the degree of confidence, trust, and respect

that subordinates have in their leader, can play a significant role in predicting advocacy behaviors (Thelen & Men, 2020). When leaders and supervisors exhibit a transformational style of leadership by, for example, acting as a coach and mentor, living the organization's brand values, expressing a unifying brand vision, and allowing employees to individually determine the role of a brand representative, they enable employees' motivation and increase their commitment, authenticity, and proactivity, which are referred to as the core characteristics of a brand advocate (Morhart et al., 2011). However, it is important to clarify that while scholars believe that the transformational approach is more effective in enhancing advocacy behavior than transactional leadership (MacKenzie et al., 2001; Morhart et al., 2009), research also suggests that leaders should not completely refrain from transactional leadership (Morhart et al., 2009, 2011).

A study conducted by Morhart et al. (2011) suggested that the best way to increase employee advocacy is by exhibiting a combination of a high level of transformational and a moderate level of transactional leadership behavior. Servant leadership, which has been described as a more people-centered and ethical theory of leadership (Clegg et al., 2007), has also been found to have a positive relationship with employee advocacy (Thelen, 2019). Finally, group cohesion is another factor that can play a role in advocacy behaviors (Thelen & Men, 2020). In other words, when group members support and validate one another while at work, they are more likely to advocate for the organization.

Organizational-level factors: Organizational factors also play a relevant role in generating advocacy behaviors. Among these organizational factors, top management and the culture of an organization are additional factors that can impact employees' willingness to advocate on behalf of their organizations (Thelen & Men, 2020). Additionally, internal communication and communication management (i.e., the way an organization communicates with its employees) can also influence advocacy behaviors.

Researchers have found that there is a positive relationship between internal branding and employee-related outcomes such as commitment (King & Grace, 2008) brand identification, loyalty (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011), person-organization fit, and intention to stay (Matanda & Ndubisi, 2013). By educating employees on the organization's business proposition and brand values through communication and focusing on ensuring that employees adopt and deliver the brand promise to external publics (Foster et al., 2010), internal branding increases the likelihood

that employees will advocate on behalf of the organization (Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014). Similarly, research has found a positive relationship between an employee's internal brand knowledge and their propensity to endorse their organization (Morokane et al., 2016). The formal and informal messages that employees receive from their organizations and internal communication teams increase employees' level of internal brand knowledge. These messages also help construct the psychological contract, defined as the perceptual, and often tacit, implicit, and subjective agreement of the exchange relationships that employees establish with their organizations (Conway & Briner, 2005; Mangold & Miles, 2007). Researchers have found that perceived psychological contract violations decrease employees' levels of trust, satisfaction, and commitment toward their organizations (e.g., Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Robinson & Morrison, 1995; Rousseau, 1995), and can therefore have an indirect negative effect on employee advocacy.

Strategic Internal Communication and Employee Advocacy

Research has shown that internal communication can help generate positive employee attitudes such as trust (Jo & Shim, 2005), job satisfaction (Gray & Laidlaw, 2004), and organizational identification (Smidts et al., 2001). These attitudes lead to outcomes such as favorable employee communication behavior (Kang & Sung, 2017; Kim & Rhee, 2011), higher productivity, and improved performance (Berger, 2008). A study conducted by Kim (2018) found that internal communication may increase organizational social capital and the likelihood that employees will have strong interpersonal relationships and share organizational information.

An exploratory study conducted by Thelen and Men (2020) looked at the role that internal communication plays in employee advocacy and what internal communicators should focus on to encourage this behavior. The results indicated that the factors could be separated into two layers: corporate communication strategies (macro-level) and employee advocacy management factors (micro-level). A visual display of the role played by internal communication in employee advocacy is found in Fig. 5.1.

Corporate communication strategies: The corporate communication strategies were separated into four categories. The first of these categories is *openness and transparency*. Public relations scholars have examined the
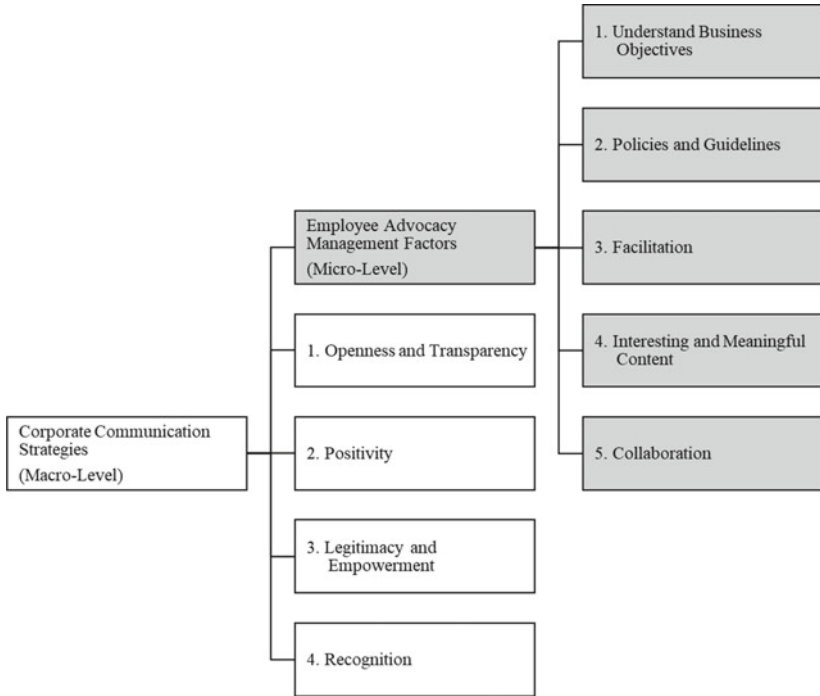
Fig. 5.1 Internal communication and employee advocacy behaviors

relationship that transparent communication (Rawlins, 2008, 2009)—
an organization's intentional distribution of information that is truthful,
substantial, and complete (Men & Bowen, 2017)—has with employee
outcomes. As a result of these studies, a positive relationship between
transparent communication and outcomes such as engagement (Jiang
& Men, 2017) and EORs (Men & Stacks, 2014) has been estab-
lished. J. E. Grunig (1992) proposed that symmetrical communication,
which emphasizes "trust, credibility, openness, relationships, reciprocity,
network symmetry, horizontal communication, feedback, adequacy of
information, employee-centered style, tolerance for disagreement, and
negotiation" (Grunig, 1992, p. 558), is one of the key components of
an excellent internal communications program. He also suggested that
excellent employee communications could lead to high-quality relation-
ships with employees and supportive employee behaviors toward their

employers (Grunig, 2001). Several studies have confirmed that an organization that communicates symmetrically with employees by emphasizing aspects such as openness, will be more likely to develop high-quality relationships with employees that can lead them to speak positively about their organizations (e.g., Kang & Sung, 2017; Kim & Rhee, 2011). The second category is *positivity*. In addition to being open and transparent, internal communicators should not forget to emphasize all of the positive things that are happening within an organization. This idea is related to the concept of positivity, which was conceptualized by Hon and Grunig (1999) as "anything the organization or publics do to make the relationship more enjoyable for the parties involved" (p. 14). By promoting the positive things occurring within an organization, employees may feel more proud of where they work, and as a result, more vocal about their place of work (Thelen & Men, 2020).

Legitimacy and empowerment is a third environmental category that was highly emphasized in Thelen and Men's study (2020). In other words, internal communicators need to focus on legitimizing employees' concerns by giving them a voice, listening to their needs, and asking for their feedback. Regarding empowerment, internal communicators need to facilitate the development of opportunities for employees to assume responsibilities in driving the conditions and experiences they desire in the workplace. These insights are aligned with research suggesting that the more opportunities employees are provided to get involved in decision-making processes, the more satisfied they will feel toward the work itself (Niehoff et al., 1990). By empowering employees and making them feel that they work in an inclusive environment where everyone has a voice, they will be more likely to advocate for the organization (Thelen & Men, 2020). The fourth environmental factor mentioned by the study is the importance of *recognition*, and the role that internal communication can play in developing a culture that acknowledges and appreciates the behaviors of employees in an organization (Nelson, 2005). As employee recognition has the potential to increase employee engagement and satisfaction (Gostick & Elton, 2007), it seems plausible that it can also be connected with employee advocacy behaviors.

Employee advocacy management factors: The micro-level employee advocacy management strategies were separated into five categories (Thelen & Men, 2020). The first category concerns *understanding the business strategy*. Internal communicators need to be focused on the drivers and objectives that are most important to an organization at a

particular point in time. In addition to understanding the business objectives, the second category refers to *developing or updating social media policies and guidelines* and taking the time to educate employees on employee advocacy. The third category is *facilitation*. In other words, the organization needs to make sure that they are making it easy for employees to share and communicate (Cervellon & Lirio, 2017). As noted by Frank (2015), "we need to make the tools and channels simple and available, if we are to turn engaged employees into regular, active advocates" (p. 145). Given today's digital world, scholars have researched the best ways to encourage employee advocacy on social media. As many employees lack confidence in their social media competence and have developed psychological barriers toward engaging on social media, Cervellon and Lirio (2017) recommend encouraging digital natives to take the initiative and help their peers increase their proficiency in social media. In other words, peer-to-peer communication can play a role in increasing advocacy behavior.

The fourth category refers to the importance of *creating interesting and meaningful content*. If employees are to advocate on behalf of the organization, the organization needs to generate compelling, relatable, inspiring, or emotional stories that they will be excited to share (Cervellon & Lirio, 2017; Springer, 2015). A study conducted by Altimeter (2016) found that job postings, daily workplace life (e.g., office pictures), company accomplishments/news, community involvement, and product information are the five most popular types of content that employees share about their work-life through social channels. Finally, the fifth category emphasizes that internal communicators should *collaborate and build synergistic relationships with other departments*, such as external communications and human resources. This will help them develop new opportunities for employee advocacy.

Conclusion

As employee advocacy is becoming such a relevant topic among organizations, additional empirical and theoretical research on this topic is necessary. This chapter examined the definition of employee advocacy, its importance, the drivers of this behavior, and the role that internal communication plays in influencing advocacy. Overall, this chapter suggests that employee advocacy is an extended behavioral outcome of internal communication. Employees will not genuinely and voluntarily

praise, recommend, and defend their organization out of thin air. These behaviors are the result of a reputable organization that is engaging and building high-quality relationships with its employees via strategic internal communication.

Prior to the existence of social media, it would have been practically impossible to reward an employee's advocacy behavior. However, social media has given employers the opportunity to track what their employees are saying online (Altimeter Group, 2015). Several businesses offering employee advocacy programs are currently recommending companies to tangibly and intangibly reward employee advocates through monetary rewards (e.g., Amazon vouchers, movie tickets), learning opportunities (e.g., seminars and training programs), fun and wellness activities (e.g., hosting an off-site event), or employee recognition (e.g., congratulating employees) (Green, 2017). Hence, while offline, face-to-face advocacy seems harder to reward, some organizations are currently rewarding online advocacy. This situation presents a dilemma that requires further investigation: Should organizations reward employees for engaging in advocacy behaviors? Does it depend on the type of reward? Future research should answer these important questions, which may help practitioners implement successful employee advocacy programs.

Interview with Ethan McCarty (CEO, Integral Communications Group)

What should internal communicators focus on to encourage advocacy behaviors?

I typically shy away from the word "internal"—so let's say employee communications professionals. As a profession, we should focus on business strategy. Launching employee advocacy software is not going to help unless you're going to use it in a way that serves the business strategy. Communicators will often describe themselves as the storytellers of their organizations. There's nothing wrong with telling great stories; however, our role needs to go beyond that. We can start by asking ourselves: how will our programs change employees' behaviors, roll back into the business strategy, and enhance business outcomes?

What steps should organizations take when they begin to develop an employee advocacy program?

The first impulse that I typically see among organizations is to immediately start shopping for advocacy software as a tool to increase the number

of employees sharing company news. That's the wrong approach. The most valuable first step will be listening. When communications teams read or listen to what their employees are saying online, they can gather relevant insights. For example, it can be very telling to see what employees do on LinkedIn. Do they have complete profiles? Do they follow your company's page? Did anyone comment or share anything? Companies can also look at what their competitors do in this same regard. The second step is to look at the company's social media policy and see if it needs revision. And finally, as I mentioned previously, the communication strategy needs to align with the business strategy. Why develop this employee advocacy program? Organizations generally promote employee advocacy to achieve one or more of three things: (1) to better sell or market the company, (2) to recruit and retain talent, and (3) to successfully address issues management. In other words, the advocacy program needs to align with the current needs of the organization.

What's your position on rewarding employees for engaging in advocacy behaviors?

If you create short-term incentives, you'll get short-term behaviors. For example, if a company gives out an iPad, they will definitely get employees to advocate on their behalf. But the minute they stop the incentive, they'll see the behaviors also come to an end. The more durable programs I've worked on with clients will have an intrinsic reward system. When I worked at Bloomberg, our company would reward employees for doing volunteer work through matched giving. If you did volunteer work for a certain number of hours each year, the company would write a check to the nonprofit of your choice. We also linked our social media advocacy program with that same idea. If you shared content about Bloomberg's philanthropic efforts and innovation programs, you could earn money for a charity of your choice by engaging in these social media activities. Finally, I think it's important to add that as a consultant, I would never advise an organization to set up any kind of advocacy program with a monetary reward without disclosure.

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