

# Driving Employee Engagement: The Expanded Role of Internal Communications

International Journal of  
Business Communication  
2014, Vol. 51 (2) 183–202  
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Business Communication  
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sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/2329488414525399  
job.sagepub.com



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## Abstract

Increasingly, organizations and their public relations professionals are recognizing the importance of strengthening internal communication with employees. Internal communication is important for building a culture of transparency between management and employees, and it can engage employees in the organization's priorities. This exploratory study uses findings from interviews with public relations executives to explore the growing role that internal communication plays in employee engagement. Executives employ a variety of communication methods, including face-to-face communication, to communicate with employees. The executives' chosen communication strategies aim to build trust and engagement with employees. In doing so, public relations executives find themselves in an expanded role of fostering employee engagement.

## Keywords

internal communication, employee engagement, public relations, trust

## Introduction

A study by the Great Place To Work Institute found that employees enjoy working in an environment where they “trust the people they work for, have pride in what they do and enjoy the people they work with” (Carroll, 2006, p. 1). Such positive work

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environments are typically characterized by open communication. Business ethics scholar Carroll (2006) argued that ethical organizations take care of their employees, working to build trust through positive communication efforts, as well as demonstrating respect for employees and acting with integrity in all employee relations. Carroll further argued that employees trust their managers to the extent that they demonstrate honesty, transparency, genuine caring, support, and a willingness to listen. More recently, the Edelman Trust Barometer (2012) also found that businesses that are more trusted “treat employees well” and openly share information. This honest and transparent internal communication is best received when it comes from a direct manager. Wright (1995) declared that it was not enough for public relations professionals to be concerned with external communications, and that they are the best qualified people in the organization to bridge that external message to employees, treating them as another important public. Strong internal communication directed by public relations professionals can build trust and commitment with employees, which can in turn lead to employee engagement.

This study examines the relationship between internal organizational communication and employee engagement. Foundationally, communication involves a two-way exchange of information. Internal communication occurs between managers and employees. Employee engagement, which internal communication promotes, is “the degree to which an individual is attentive and absorbed in the performance of their roles” (Saks, 2006, p. 602). Prior studies have found that managers’ internal communication with their employees motivates their subordinates to provide superior service to customers (Lowenstein, 2006). Employees’ knowledge and skills about both their jobs and the organization provide them with the opportunity to become organizational advocates with the customers, who in turn can enhance the firm’s reputation (Gronstedt, 2000). Internal communication enhances a number of important bottom line outcomes for the organization including increased productivity and profitability (Gallup, 2012). Internal communication boosts productivity by streamlining organizational roles and duties (Benner & Tushman, 2003). Pounsford (2007) found that communication strategies such as storytelling, informal communication, and coaching led to greater employee engagement, as well as increased levels of trust in the organization and increased revenue due to greater customer satisfaction. Furthermore, Chong (2007), studying Singapore Airlines, found that focusing on face-to-face dialogue between management and staff helped the airline deliver its brand promise to its customers through its employees.

The issue of whom in the organization owns internal communication as part of the overall strategic communication or organizational communication is critical. Academia has been at the forefront advocating an integration of both internal and external communications so that there would be a more consistent message to all stakeholders, including employees. While this has been a primary focus for academia, practitioners have been slower to embrace this in their organizations. That is, internal communications were seen as the purview of human resources while external communications was responsible for external communications. In order for all stakeholders to recognize a consistent message from the organization, both internal and external

communication cannot be created in silos—they must be integrated in order to be most effective. As a result, this study aimed to find out the extent to which public relations professionals had embraced internal communications as a part of their job responsibilities.

## Literature Review

### *Internal Communication*

Internal communication is communication between the organization's leaders and one of its key publics: the employees (Dolphin, 2005). It is "social interaction through messages" (Kalla, 2005, p. 303) and reflects management's ability to build relationships between internal stakeholders at all levels within an organization (Welch & Jackson, 2007). Quirke (2008) noted that the role of internal communication is to "illuminate the connections between different pieces of information" (p. xv), and its job is "to provide employees with the information they need to do their job" (p. xv). D'Aprix (2009) posited that "communication is the undoubted lubricant to prevent the corporate machinery from self-destructing from the friction of change" (p. xxiii). Thus, in both theory and practice, internal communication is critical to building relationships with employees.

Historically, employees as a public have been understudied by public relations scholars and undervalued by public relations professionals in favor of external publics (Chong, 2007; Wright, 1995). This may have reflected managers' lack of concern with their own employees or employees' declining power in an increasingly competitive global economy. As Cheney (1999) pointed out, "Amid the rush toward heightened efficiency and competitiveness is a sense that most organizations don't care a great deal about their employees" (p. x). Management's lack of attention to internal communication with employees may have also been as a result of the emphasis organizations have traditionally targeted toward external publics about their products and services through marketing communications such as advertising. Management scholars Thomas, Zolin, and Hartman (2009) indicated, however, that "when employees perceive that they are getting information from their supervisors and coworkers that is timely, accurate, and relevant, they are more likely to feel less vulnerable and more able to rely on their coworkers and supervisors" (p. 302). Several scholars have highlighted the positive influence of internal communication on employee engagement (Chong, 2007; Saks, 2006; Welch & Jackson, 2007). Thus, internal communication between managers and employees should enhance trust between them and lead to greater employee engagement with the company.

Focusing on internal communication, therefore, may endow the organization with several benefits. Kennan and Hazleton (2006) highlighted the need for organizations to recognize employees as a distinct public worthy of individualized attention through internal public relations.<sup>1</sup> Kitchen and Daly (2002) argued that internal communication is crucial for both organization success and for its day-to-day existence. This may be because internal communication can engage employees' "intellectual and creative

assets to produce value” (Quirke, 2008, p. xv). The question remains, however, regarding who should be responsible for ensuring that communication occurs and evaluating its effectiveness: public relations, human resources, or the first-line supervisor. Argenti (1996) explained that internal communication is an appropriate role of the corporate communications function (often referred to as “public relations”) to inform employees about corporate changes during times of change or crisis. More generally, Cheney (1999) suggested that values in the workplace can be evaluated by the role communication plays. Transparent organizations share information widely. Broom, Casey, and Ritchey (2000) agreed that communication is a critical aspect of how relationships between the organization and its publics are evaluated, meaning that open communication indicates a stronger relationship. The study of internal communication is well documented, and continues to grow as a profession. A recent 2012 University of Southern California Generally Accepted Practices study (Annenberg School of Communications, University of Southern California, 2012) found that internal communications positions grew by 11% in just 1 year.

### *Trust*

Internal communication has also been shown to improve trust between employees and managers (Gavin & Mayer, 2005). As Chia (2005) affirmed, “trust and commitment are byproducts of processes and policies which are designed to make the relationship satisfactory for both parties, such as open, appropriate, clear and timely communication” (p. 7). Trust defined as “concern” for each other’s interests can also be built through open communication (Denison & Mishra, 1995; Mishra & Mishra, 1994). Additionally, Mishra (1996) found that “the extent to which the trusted person engages in undistorted communication . . . reinforces the trust (in terms of openness) placed in him or her” (p. 276). Spreitzer and Mishra (1999) found that clearer communication improved trust and business unit performance. More generally, Dolphin (2005) affirmed that “sound relationships can only be developed on the basis of trust and reliable information” (p. 185).

The public relations literature considers trust a critical aspect of the organization-public relationship (Botan & Taylor, 2004). Wilson (1994) found that both employees’ and public perceptions of commitment, trust, and mutual respect are important for understanding organization-public relationships. For example, Bruning and Ledingham (2000) found that trust had a significant, positive, impact on customer satisfaction. Ki and Hon (2007) concluded that “trust is one of the main constructs used to measure a successful relationship between parties” (p. 422) because it measures the levels of honesty and reliability. Communication is one critical factor influencing both trust and relationships, but in some cases “management credibility and trust are under attack from confused and poorly integrated communications” (Quirke, 2008, p. 15).

Paine (2003), for example, specified that organizations should ask several questions prior to measuring trust within their organization in order to understand the best way to communicate, including “Which channels of communication were used and/or deemed most important to use in disseminating the messages? (e.g., the media . . .

word-of-mouth . . . direct mail . . . special events?)” (p. 11). Of this list, face-to-face communication is considered the richest form of communication with employees because it has the greatest potential for resolving ambiguity and uncertainty (Daft, Lengel, & Trevino, 1987).

### *Face-to-Face Communication*

An organization’s communication practices have an important influence on the degree to which employees trust their managers and the organization’s top echelon, as well as their commitment to the organization. Quirke (2008) and D’Aprix (2009) define face-to-face communication as a combination of information and interaction, noting as well that it is the most valuable technique for providing credible communication. This is because face-to-face interaction provides visual and verbal clues that complete our understanding of the information being shared. Cheney (1999) also observed that face-to-face communication is considered more reliable than written communication in a business context because it provides greater information to the other party. Face-to-face communication, for example, includes verbal cues such as tone of voice and non-verbal cues such as body language and facial expressions. It is also considered more reliable if receivers of face-to-face communication perceive a match between the message and the nonverbal cues.

Wright (1995) found that effective communication is two-way communication, where both employees and managers listen to one another. Argenti (1998) also argued that the most effective internal communication is two-way communication because it provides an opportunity for informal interaction between employees and managers. Kalla (2005) also maintained that integrated internal communications involved both formal and informal communication taking place at all levels in the organization. Effective face-to-face communication does require a certain level of expertise and public relations (PR) professionals are trained in both formal and informal communications. PR professionals communicate using different methods depending on their level in the organization’s hierarchy. Kelleher (2001) found that PR *practitioners* relied more heavily on written communication, whereas PR *managers* relied more on face-to-face communication. His findings indicate that lower level PR professionals spend more of their time providing technical support which allows the manager to have more time for face-to-face conversations with colleagues and clients.

### *Employee Engagement*

Kahn (1990) defined engagement in the management literature as the ability to harness an employees’ personal enthusiasm in their work roles. In the internal communications literature, Quirke (2008) defined engaged employees as “feeling a strong emotional bond to their employer, recommending it to others and committing time and effort to help the organization succeed” (p. 102). Hewitt Associates (2009) defined an engaged employee as “the measure of an employee’s emotional and intellectual commitment to their organization and its success” (p. 1). Under this definition, employees who are engaged are more

likely to contribute to a high-performance organization. In other words, they are more likely to talk positively about the organization, remain with the organization, and help their organization perform more effectively every day. In fact, a Gallup Management study (Robison, 2012) found that engaged employees “are deeply committed to their employer, leading to key improvements in business outcomes, including reductions in absenteeism, turnover, shrinkage, safety incidents, and product defects” (p. 1).

Efforts to engage employees are especially critical early in an employee’s tenure. Caywood (1997) encouraged PR professionals to develop organizational initiatives that would engage employees. One study found that even as employee engagement starts high with an employee’s initial entry into the organization, it can drop the first year and up to 5 years after entry (Trahan, 2009). This means that it is critical for internal communication professionals to be involved immediately with employee stakeholders by orienting them to the organization, developing their professional skills, asking for feedback, and taking time to listen to their concerns.

Previous research has found that several organizational communication practices enhance employee communication and engagement. Therksel and Fiebich (2003) identified the importance of employee publics to the organization. They found that the front-line supervisor was a key to employees’ organizational engagement. When employees perceive greater support from their supervisors, the employees respond, according to Saks (2006), by becoming more engaged in their job. Saks (2006) also emphasized the need to communicate with employees clearly and consistently to achieve employee engagement, suggesting that employees who are more engaged will have a more positive relationship with their employers. Indeed, Welch and Jackson (2007) identified internal communication as crucial for achieving employee engagement. They felt that managers were critical in sharing reliable and open communications with their employees in order to promote a sense of belonging and commitment as well as helping employees to better understand the goals of the organization. A Watson Wyatt (2008-2009) study found that those strategies that engage employees include communication from managers, leadership communication, and a focus on internal communication.

Clearly, prior research has shown that internal communication is a key to numerous positive outcomes, including employee commitment, and trust between employees and managers. Cheney (1999) argued that it is important to begin to link internal and external publics to harness employee enthusiasm for improved customer service (Gronstedt, 2000). When an employee feels engaged in the organization, it is presumed that he or she will be more likely to develop positive relationships with other stakeholders both within and beyond the firm, thus exhibiting engagement. When an employee develops a relationship with external stakeholders, he or she can become an ambassador or advocate for the firm (Chong, 2007; Gronstedt, 2000). Evidence of this concept continues to emerge; indeed, a recent Edelman (2012) study found that conversations between customers and technical employees were trusted as a credible source of information about the organization more than corporate advertising and information from CEOs. This provides evidence that there is a role for PR professionals to coach managers in effective communication with employees in order to become a trusted source of information.

## Research Question

This exploratory study seeks to understand the expanded role that PR professionals play related to internal communication, focusing specifically on employee engagement. This study used exploratory, semistructured interviews conducted with managers responsible for PR and/or internal communication at their firms.

## Method

The authors conducted interviews either in person or via the telephone. Each conversation was recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to understand how and what executives think about communication within their company. The participating executives were alumni and visitors of the first author's university, and all worked in the field of internal communications. The six executives interviewed for this study represented many different industries, including financial services, utilities, and retailing, and were recruited using a snowball technique. This was appropriate for this study because some degree of trust is helpful between the researcher and the interviewee to understand their role in internal communication (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). Not all the executives were able to meet in person, and some preferred telephone interviews or the opportunity to answer the interview questions by e-mail. For those who answered the questions by e-mail, follow-up or clarifying questions were exchanged in some cases, inviting the executives to elaborate on their responses. The text of the e-mail messages were combined with the recorded conversations (in person or via phone) and used for the analysis. The interview questions specifically asked how each participant executes internal communications at his or her firm.

The interview data were coded using cluster analysis (Foss, 2004). First, the interviews were analyzed for key terms based on frequency or intensity. Second, the interviews were mapped for other terms clustered around the key terms, such as those found near a key term or those that may connect to a key term. Finally, the analysis examined patterns of association or links to identify which clusters are most interesting, most frequent, or of greatest importance. To visualize the clusters, a mindmap (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004) of the analysis was developed. The mindmap procedure, a tool in the interactive qualitative analysis process, has been used by scholars in the fields of health, philanthropy, political science, and exercise science. The results of the mindmap are described later.

## Interview Findings

All the executives were responsible for internal communications and/or PR as a significant aspect of their job. The executives interviewed included

1. Mary Beth, vice president of corporate communications, financial services firm
2. Keith, vice president of corporate communications, energy firm



3. Karen, director of internal communications, a software firm
4. Sharon, manager of employee communications, a utility firm
5. Katherine, corporate board secretary (and family member) with communications responsibility of a medium-sized, family-owned construction materials firm
6. Gwen, district manager of an international retail firm, with responsibility for internal communications.

Five of the executives are female, while one is male. Four of the executives have specific responsibility for corporate or employee communications and two hold other roles that lead them to have significant influence on communications within their firms. This profile of women (83%) versus men is similar to a study of the PR field that found that 85% of women hold PR positions (Sebastian, 2011).

Themes that emerged from the cluster analysis of the executive interviews were the goals of engaging employees, managing reputation, building trust through dialogue with key audiences, owning all channels of communication, and face-to-face communication. The following sections present the key findings surrounding each theme.

## Results

### *Employee Engagement*

All of the executives mentioned employee engagement as an important goal of internal communication. When asked to define their job or their primary role, three of the executives, Mary Beth, Keith, and Sharon mentioned “employee engagement” as one of their top priorities. This fits with Wright’s (1995) findings indicating that PR professionals understand the priority of employee communication. The executives explained that employee engagement was a relatively new way for their firms to envision the communications role, and that their CEOs communicate this perspective down to them. This, too, is in keeping with the literature as Wright (1995) found that CEOs were a catalyst for promoting employee communication. All participants believe that employees must feel they are contributing to the company’s goals in order to be “engaged.” According to Keith, engagement can be a process of ensuring employees understand the company mission and “how they fit into it.” Similarly, Sharon said she believes it is essential for employees “to be aware of and have access to information” in order to become engaged employees.

Keith also mentioned that when he started his job, he spent the first year reorganizing the entire corporate communications department and toyed with the idea of making his title “director of employee engagement.” He said, that for his firm,

The bigger, sort of the higher-level, picture of the employee communications role is to increase the engagement of employees into what the company is trying to do. Helping the employees understand what the company’s goals and objectives are, how they fit into it, helping them buy into the strategy . . . the research shows the more employees understand



and feel like they're contributing or in line with the company strategy, the more productive they are and the higher the morale and lower turnover.

Some of the executives also recognize that employee engagement presents challenges. Keith believes that the goal of employee engagement is an exceptionally important part of his job and his department's responsibility, yet he noted having a difficulty finding qualified people to fill new positions for his department. He believes that this challenge relates to the job's shift toward focusing on employee relations and away from media relations, which has traditionally existed at large companies. He noted,

Media is sexy and visible, but employee relations have impact. There are all kinds of varied defensible numbers to show that an engaged workforce is a happier workforce and a more productive workforce. So, it's worth the investment. To that end, we end up getting into all those kinds of things [such as] employee meetings, web casts—you know working with senior managers on presentations—they're giving road show presentations to employees [and] creating feedback mechanisms for employees and constantly evaluating our tools to see how we can communicate with employees. [This puts into] context the things that the company's doing.

### *Managing Reputation*

The second priority many of the executives expressed was protecting and managing their company's reputation. Mary Beth, the vice president of corporate communications from the financial services firm, said, "I feel [as if] corporate communications is helping [the] corporation manage its reputation with all of its stakeholders." Mary Beth believes that her firm's reputation, both internally and externally, is driven by behavior and not corporate communication slogans. She expressed it this way:

The management decisions that you make about how you're going to treat customers and employees will determine what your reputation is no matter what we tell the news media. No matter what statement we make, it's really about your behavior. We always want our statements to be honest and accurate, so it starts with your behavior and the decisions you make to determine what we can then say about them.

Keith agreed that managing the firm's reputation was a priority in his position and that it impacted employees and other stakeholders. He said,

I think reputation is one of our most important roles. Managing and protecting the reputation of the company. Positioning the company in the marketplace with customers, with key stakeholders, with employees, and to some extent with investors and shareholders, although that kind of bleeds over into investor relations. What is our story and how do we promote that story and also reputation protection? How do you protect a company when bad things happen that threaten the image or reputation of the company?

In contrast, Gwen, measures her company's reputation based on how well a store is doing financially and how close they are to their customers. She believes that the

stores that do best are those with “authentic” employees who are able to be their same selves at work as they are with friends or colleagues. She noted, “It’s not authentic if it’s not the voice you use all the time.” She believes that “respect and dignity” in the way employees communicate with each other cultivates this authenticity. She feels as if this authenticity is also evident to customers, which keeps them coming back.

In summary, the second theme that emerged from the executive interviews was a focus on managing and protecting the firm’s reputation.

### ***Building Trust Through Dialogue With Key Audiences***

The third theme identified when analyzing the executive interviews is their goal of building trust by promoting dialogue with key audiences, including employees and external stakeholders. Along with promoting employee engagement and managing the company’s reputation, these executives believed that their role included building trust through two-way communication with their key audiences or stakeholders. For example, Sharon described her job as promoting “dialogue from the company’s leadership with various audiences—media, key leaders, employees. We place a huge emphasis on relationships with our elected officials and regulators. To maintain those relationships, we have to be perceived well by our customers.” The participants also relayed how dialogue with key audiences influenced employee relations. Sharon described the importance of internal relations, indicating that employee communication was critical to rebuilding trust in her firm after a recent merger. She explained,

That cynicism is also due to the fact that Florida was acquired in the merger. They feel the previous management team was not straight with them, and so there’s a lot of lingering distrust. In the Carolinas, most employees are happy to work for this company. The company pays well, particularly compared with others in some of the rural communities where our facilities are located. So, you start off with most folks feeling pretty positive.

Karen also described her department’s goal as “letting [employees] know the company.” She wants her efforts to help employees become more knowledgeable about the company and their place in it.

Keith also agreed that his job is to “facilitate communication.” He said,

You’re trying to accomplish something to make people feel part of a team and understand what the company’s doing. It’s pretty important, and I think more and more CEOs and companies are recognizing the value of that.

In summary, these executives identified one of their roles as opening a dialogue with key audiences, including employees and external stakeholders. One of the goals of this communication outreach is to build trust.

### ***Owning All Channels of Communication***

The fourth theme that emerged from the interviews is that these executives feel that they have an array of communication channels accessible to disseminate messages to

employees. All of the executives said they are responsible for all channels of communication with employees, including company intranets, company e-newsletters, social media such as forums and company blogs, and traditional employee communication such as employee meetings and print materials. Keith described his firm's approach:

For employee communications, we own all the channels to communicate to the employees. For all of our electronic communications, we have a daily electronic newsletter. We have several other regular communications vehicles that go out to employees from human resources, IT and things like that. That's one big chunk of the work—it's managing that process of delivering the information.

One of the tasks these executives described in their interviews was determining which communication vehicles to use, when, and for what purposes. Mary Beth finds that her internal clients, whom she counsels on internal communication, prefer to communicate with their direct reports by issuing written memos either in hardcopy or by e-mail. She believes, however, that occasions arise (such as performance feedback) that call for a more intimate approach, such as face-to-face communication. She tries to help her clients determine the most appropriate approach for each situation.

Keith believes that rather than guessing how employees want to receive communication, he asks them to express their preferred information channel for receiving information on important issues. In his experience, employees want to receive any information about their company benefits in writing, so that they can take that information home to read and digest the details. He explained,

What you have to do is you really have to find out from employees how they like to be communicated to. There's been plenty of research on things that are effective, but what you find is there are certain kinds of information that people like to get a certain way. For example, for HR information, benefits, and things like that, most employees like to get a printed document. If it's to review their health plan and their benefits, we still find that employees like to have something to look at in front of them. But, if it's just like quick company information, announcements, and things like that, they like e-mail or electronic newsletters.

Katherine acknowledges that the intention of the communication is just as important as what form is chosen. She explained,

In our task-focused, operations-driven business consistent management announcements made in weekly meetings along with the proper follow up from management have been successful. Additionally, small groups or one-on-one meetings have proven to be successful. Even a quick email from a manager when the week's production goals have been met can go a long way. When employees feel like they're important and their contributions matter they feel like a part of the company's overall success. Most of the time people simply want to feel like they're valued. Whether it's a quick lunch with a supervisor or a well thought out incentive program that has the employee's best interest at heart, good employees will sense when management cares about them. It's up to management to come up with creative ways of communicating with their employees.

Several of the executives mentioned that it was also important to match the medium with the message. Sharon noted that her firm has found that the mode of communication depends on the circumstance for the communication. She noted,

We've seen in our research a strong and growing preference for electronic communication. For us that means the daily e-mail and the intranet. However, this format works best to inform. Major change management initiatives—where employees actually have to take action or face radical changes to their work—are better done through some sort of face-to-face interaction. I think there is also a role for print, particularly if you need to educate employees around a particular set of issues.

In summary, these executives find that they have a range of communication vehicles from which to choose when communicating with employees. They also believe, however, that it is best to ask employees how they want to receive specific types of information. The next theme is the executives' belief that despite this breadth of communication vehicles, face-to-face communication still plays an important role in the way they communicate with employees.

### *Face-to-Face Communication*

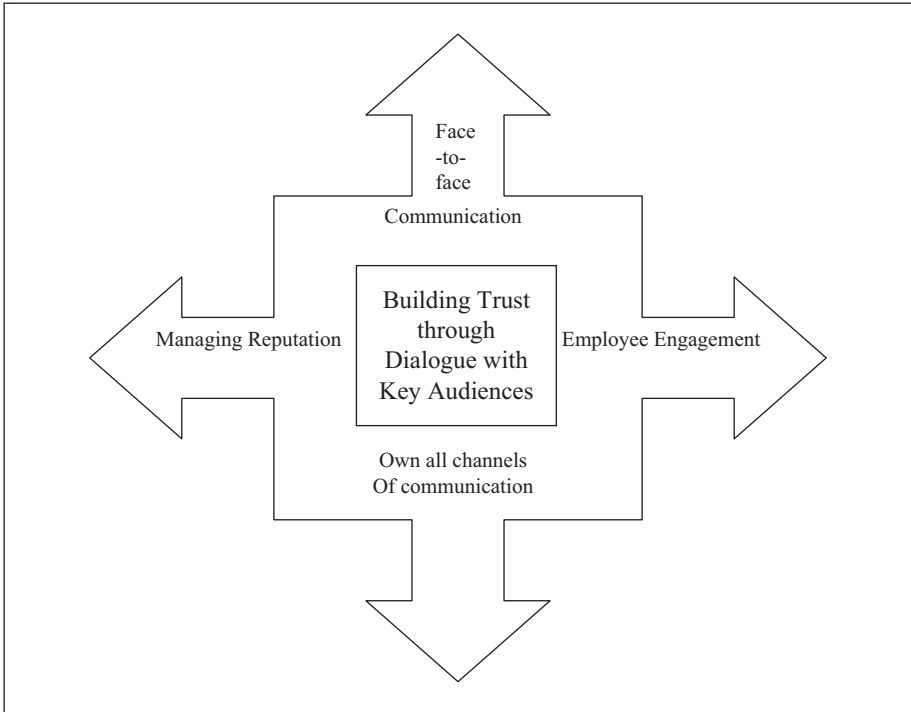
Despite the variety of media available to the executives interviewed, they all believe in the benefit of maintaining regular face-to-face communication. Karen summarized the general feeling of all the executives: "There is nothing better than face-to-face communication." Mary Beth discovered that when her firm conducted its own in-house employee communication study, the response "face-to-face communication with my boss" was the most satisfactory way employees in her firm said they wanted to receive information. She explained,

We [can] say based on what we know from social science and based on what we know from our own surveys of employees, that the most effective communication is one-on-one with [the] manager. Then, I would say beyond that would be in a meeting—a face-to-face meeting with your manager [with] five to ten people there or a hundred people there. A face-to-face meeting would be the most effective way because people get the body language, and they can make a decision as to whether or not they think it's credible. They can ask questions if they don't understand something.

Gwen believes that face-to-face communication is critical for store-level employees and their bosses. She said, "Our whole goal is respect and dignity in how we communicate, and it translates to the partners as well as to the customers."

Keith underscored the benefit to employees of regularly receiving face-to-face communication:

Face to face communication is the most effective in terms of getting people to understand. There are certain things you want the CEO and senior managers to [communicate], but if you really want people to buy and believe [a message], they need to hear things and have it echoed from their day-to-day supervisors or one level up.



**Figure 1.** Mindmap of executives’ perceptions of their role in promoting internal communication.

In summarizing the executives’ responses about face-to-face communication, the data show that this type of communication serves a dual purpose. First, it keeps employees informed, and second, it helps them feel secure about their place in the company because they are getting information directly from their boss.

### *Executive Interview Summary*

The interviews revealed that the executives’ primary goals are to promote dialogue to build trust with key audiences, manage the reputation of the company’s brand and image, and promote employee engagement. The executives identified a full-range of communication vehicles they used to implement these goals with employees, yet believed that face-to-face communication between an employee and his or her manager was the preferred and most effective channel. These executives found that face-to-face communication reduced turnover and promoted a sense of community among employees. Finally, they saw their work as overlapping yet distinct from the marketing department, which they consider more tactical than strategic.

As noted, Figure 1 illustrates the mindmap created from the cluster analysis of the executive interviews. The data in the figure were drawn from the interviews and relate that information back to the internal communications literature. The executives

frequently mentioned that the focal point of their activities is engaging in or promoting dialogue among key audiences in order to build trust. This concept, therefore, occupies the center of the diagram. The purpose of the executives' dialogue includes both managing the firm's reputation and employee engagement. The diagram's horizontal arrows reflect these concepts. In addition, the mindmap illustrates that these communication executives have a range of communication vehicles from which to choose (both on-line and off-line) when communicating with employees. They believe, however, that face-to-face communication occupies a distinct and important place in talking with employees. The diagram's vertical arrows reflect this concept. The executive interviews corresponded most closely with the relationship management and PR literatures, including aspects of building relationships. The mindmap, however, uses the words the executives used to describe their relationship management practices.

## **Discussion and Contributions**

One key contribution of this study is highlighting the importance that PR executives place on face-to-face communication in their communications with employees. As fostering employee engagement is seen as an increasingly important aspect of their jobs, PR professionals rely on transparent communication with employees (Dolphin, 2005). Another contribution of this study is identifying the need for PR executives to serve as internal coaches in their own organizations to train front-line managers to listen and provide feedback. The PR executives we interviewed shared how they must coach their internal clients and managers on relating effectively with employees. They also stated that their clients and managers would rather send out a memo than walk over and talk to an employee. This could be because a memo is faster and less "messy" than getting involved in a potentially long conversation. Managers might also shy away from face-to-face communication because they might not be well equipped to handle such personal interactions. Recognizing this propensity, Wright (1995) suggested that PR professionals work with supervisors to help them communicate more closely with their employees to help manage this deficiency. PR professionals in this study indicated that they already provide a coaching role to managers so it follows that they could teach listening and feedback skills to them to help them feel more comfortable in this role.

This study also contributes to our understanding of the importance PR executives place on their role in maintaining and improving their firm's reputation. Research has shown that organizations that invest in employees are viewed more favorably by external audiences as being better employers (Gill, 2010). The interviewed executives understand the importance of their work in influencing their company's reputation. The bank executive, Mary Beth, mentioned that she closely watches the American Customer Satisfaction Index ratings for her bank ([www.theacsi.org](http://www.theacsi.org)). Furthermore, she knows that the actions she takes on behalf of internal communications directly affect these customer satisfaction rankings. All the executives know that the work they do communicating with all stakeholders through both traditional and social media channels impacts firm reputation.

An additional contribution of this study is understanding how PR professionals view the toolbox of communication channels they have at their disposal and how they perceive the strengths and weaknesses of each method in communicating with their internal publics. Because PR professionals have a variety of communications channels available to them (including on-line and off-line communications), they need to ask employees how they prefer to receive information. While studies have suggested that face-to-face communication is more credible (D'Aprix, 2009; Quirke, 2008), there may be times and circumstances where employees prefer to receive certain types of information via the intranet or company newsletters. Executives recognize that many communication vehicles are available to them to send messages to employees, and they do not always see face-to-face communication as the fastest, easiest, or most effective method. In one sense, however, executives recognize that certain other methods are preferable for specific types of information. Employee benefits, for example, are best communicated using hardcopies because employees want something on paper to take home with them.

An important contribution of this study is recognizing the role of trust in transparent communication and employee engagement. The Edelman Trust Barometer (2012) exhorts companies to "practice radical transparency" which by definition includes talking to employees first. In addition, Edelman found that trusting behaviors include *communicating frequently and honestly* and *has a transparent and open business*. If the company shares information widely, employees feel a sense of belonging and a shared mission with their employer. This develops a bond of trust between the organization and the employee, which leads to employee engagement.

Finally, this study contributes to our knowledge of the expanded role of employee engagement for PR and internal communications executives from *their* perspectives. As it turns out, this expanded role is critical confirmed by a *Gallup Management Journal* study that found that the stronger the engagement, the more likely the employee will act in the interests of the employer (Nink & Welte, 2011). As Keith noted, he is having a hard time finding qualified employees to hire for his employee engagement staff. This represents a challenge for PR university programs to include employee engagement curriculum so that graduates are prepared for this new and expanded role as they enter their internships and professional careers.

### *Limitations and Future Directions*

This study has some limitations. Although they represented a variety of firms, this exploratory study interviewed only six executives. These executives are still representative of the PR field as their responsibilities encompass both the tactical and managerial aspects that Kelleher (2001) uncovered in his research. One other limitation is that this study is not a longitudinal study, but examined these executives at one point in time. Future research should follow PR professionals over time to understand how internal communications affect employee engagement in different ways at different points in time to understand how it affects organizational outcomes.



Grunig (1993) suggested that various publics can perceive a difference between symbolic and behavioral communication and noted that one-way communication is inherently symbolic in that it says something, but does not require follow-up. Two-way or behavioral communication, on the other hand, suggests that the provider is willing to engage in dialogue and actually make changes as a result of that dialogue. If the executives are only planning communication and not implementing it, they will not be able to measure how effective their communication was. Future research should examine the effectiveness of including either employees or their front-line managers in planning and executing communication efforts.

Future research should consider studying a larger group of both employees and executives from a single firm to determine if that firm's employee engagement activities are building trust and creating an open atmosphere for both employees and their managers to communicate well with one another. By hearing from both employees and executive at one firm, researchers could follow the executives' intentions and then follow up with employees to discover the result.

Executives see face-to-face communication as one method among many to promote dialogue with their key audiences. They disclosed, however, that their managers are not always equipped to deal with their direct reports face-to-face. Future research should evaluate managers' level of expertise and confidence in conducting face-to-face communication, including their ability to listen and deliver constructive feedback. In addition, future research should examine if managers have had training in interpersonal communication, which would aid in delivering internal communications effectively. Another line of future research could examine a firm's efforts to build trust after an organization works with managers to improve their communication skills. Such a study could evaluate the level of trust in the organization prior to the manager skills training and examine how that level of trust changes in the organization after managers received skills training. A future study should also measure specific dimensions of trust, rather than evaluating a general feeling of trust and how this leads to employee engagement.

In the present study, the term *employee engagement* emerged from the interviews with executives as a critical component of their job responsibilities. The executives in this study described their responsibilities as building trust through a dialogue with key audiences, which included both an internal component of employee engagement and an external component of managing their firm's reputation. These executives were aware that their employees are an important public and considered them equal in value to investors or external customers. In fact, three of the firms had departments specifically designed to manage relationships with employees. Future research should focus specifically on employee engagement as a role an internal communications executive plays and how such efforts build trust between employees and the organization. In addition, future research should look more closely at the goals of employee engagement as opposed to engagement for its own purpose. Finally, future research should examine the role resulting employee engagement has on relationships with other stakeholders, including customers, and the levels of trust engagement achieves.

## Conclusion

Efforts to build trust with employees through internal communication can provide benefits for both employees and the firm. Employees feel more engaged, build trust with their supervisor and the firm, and are therefore more empowered to build relationships with customers on the firm's behalf. More effective internal communication can enhance this engagement.

Internal communications professionals can enhance their role by equipping front-line managers with more effective face-to-face communication skills in order to carry out the organization's communication plans. If PR executives are relying on front-line managers to be their messengers, then the messengers need better training in interpersonal communication to build trust with employees on behalf of the entire company.

Furthermore, Larkin and Larkin (2005) advocated for managers to understand which channels of communication are best suited for the message. Executives like having a variety of channels available to them, but they must conduct a communications audit (D'Aprix, 2009) to determine how employees prefer to receive certain types of communication. Employees will be more likely to respond and engage when they receive information in a form and channel that they prefer. As social media becomes an increasingly important component of the PR professional's role, it will be critical to learn how to harness the two-way communication aspect of social media to listen, monitor and participate in conversations, monitor social networks, and use analytics to measure success (Marketwire, 2012).

D'Aprix (2009) concluded that organizational leadership has lost credibility because it has not been truthful with employees about a variety of issues that impact the company and its customers. One essential way for leaders and organizations to regain their credibility is to be open and truthful with information that employees and other stakeholders value and listen to concerns. Once a dialogue has taken seed, effective internal communication can begin to grow. The 2012 Edelman Trust Barometer identifies transparent communication as a key attribute for a trusted company. As trust in CEOs decline while trust in company employees rise (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2012), PR professionals will help drive employee engagement by supporting CEOs in providing transparent communication. This effort will benefit the company, the employees, and the general public.

## Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank the editor and the following reviewers for their helpful comments on previous drafts of this article: Dr. Peter Smudde at Illinois State University and Dr. Thomas Hove at Michigan State University. The authors would also like to thank Ms. Leslie Wilhelm for her expert editing assistance.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Note

1. Researchers William Kennan and Vincent Hazleton credit public relations scholar Carl Botan with prompting them to label the term *internal public relations* (V. Hazleton, personal communication, 2007).

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