

The Role of Ethical Leadership in Internal Communication: Influences on Communication Symmetry, Leader Credibility, and Employee Engagement

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the contribution of ethical leadership to internal communication effectiveness by examining the influences of ethical leader behaviors, such as fair treatment, role clarification, power sharing, people orientation, integrity, ethical guidance, and concern for sustainability, on symmetrical internal communication, perceived leader credibility, and employee engagement. Results showed that ethical leadership as an antecedent factor plays a critical role in nurturing the symmetrical communication system of an organization, which in turn engages employees. Ethical leader behaviors also help establish leader credibility (i.e., trustworthiness and expertise) as perceived by employees. Symmetrical communication mediates the influences of power sharing and people orientation on employee engagement. Significant theoretical and practical implications of the study findings are discussed.

Keywords: employee, ethics, engagement, leadership, credibility, stakeholders

INTRODUCTION

The importance of internal communication in achieving business success of an organization cannot be overemphasized. Employees have the closest connection with the organization among different strategic publics and play dual roles as organizational production force and public representatives. Numerous scholars had noted the critical role of effective internal communication in nurturing positive employee attitudes, such as job satisfaction (Gray & Laidlaw, 2004), trust, and organizational commitment (Jo & Shim, 2005), as well as positive employee–organization relationships. These outcomes further enhance productivity and organizational performance (Berger, 2008). In addition, quality employee–organization relationships that emerge from best practices of internal

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communication foster positive employee communication and advocacy behavior (Kim & Rhee, 2011; Men, 2014 a), which subsequently affect an organization's intangible assets, such as reputation and stakeholder relations.

A growing number of scholars had highlighted the importance of research in this general topic and suggested sundry factors that contribute to the success of internal communication. For example, L. Grunig, J. Grunig, and Dozier (2002) suggested key factors that facilitate an organization's internal communication, including a participative organizational culture, an organic structure, power symmetry, and gender equality. More recently, Men and Stacks (2013) and Men (2014a, 2014c) argued that organizational leadership as a contextual factor nurtures internal communication in organizations because leaders interact with employees on a daily basis, and leadership communication is a major component of the organization's internal communication system. They further validated this argument by demonstrating the positive influences of transformational and authentic leadership on symmetrical communication within the organization (Men & Stacks, 2014).

Both transformational and authentic leadership have been described as containing an *ethical* component (Kalshoven, Den Hartog, & De Hoogh, 2011), which also concurs with the notion of symmetrical communication (J. Grunig, 1992). While ethical leadership behavior has emerged as a separate positive leadership style, one that is frequently being placed on top of an organization's priority list, the positive influence of ethical leadership on internal communication and employee outcomes in an organization must be speculated. However, such interplay effects have yet to be explored. The current research is therefore an extensive attempt to improve the understanding on the significance of leadership in internal communication by placing a particular emphasis on ethical leadership. Drawing from public relations, organizational communication, and management literature, this study tests the influences of a set of ethical leadership behaviors on symmetrical communication, perceived leader credibility, and employee engagement in an organization.

Leader credibility is of utmost importance in the leadership and communication process (Swanson & Kent, 2014) of an organization because leaders are widely perceived as one of the most important sources of information for employees. Considering the plausible linkage between ethical leader conduct, integrity, and leader credibility, the present study aims to provide empirical evidence on the influences of ethical leadership on leader credibility perceived by employees. Results of this study will provide significant implications for organizational leaders in establishing credibility among employees. Furthermore, this study predicts employee engagement as an important outcome of ethical leadership behavior and symmetrical internal communication. Recognizing the significant difference that engaged employees can contribute to organizational success, a growing number of scholars and professionals across the management and communication fields had explored the sundry factors that drive employee engagement (Robinson, Perryman, & Hayday, 2004). Leadership and communication had been suggested to play central roles in engaging employees (Robinson, et al., 2004). However, empirical research that documents such

observations is lacking. The current study therefore aims to fill this research gap by exploring the contributions of ethical leadership behavior and symmetrical internal communication to employee engagement. The findings of this study will add to the growing body of literature on engagement and shed strategic insights on how to build an engaged workforce through strategic leadership communication.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ethical leadership

Organizational leadership as a form of influence in the organization (Yukl, 2006) provides a critical organizational context for effective internal communication practice. On one hand, leadership influences organizational infrastructures, such as the development of an organizational culture (Yukl, 2006), structure, and communication climate. On the other hand, leaders who are preferred sources of information of the employees play an important role in cascading messages to low-level employees and in relaying employee grievances to top management. Various types of leadership behavior, such as transformational, transactional (e.g., Bass, 1990), inclusive (e.g., Aldoory & Toth, 2004), authentic, shared, and ethical leadership, had been identified by scholars. The present study focuses on ethical leadership, an emerging leadership type that is expected to have positive influences on the attitudes and ethical conduct of employees, and then ultimately on the business unit and organizational performance.

The ethical elements of leadership have long been discussed. For example, Bass and Avolio (2000) noted that an ethical dimension of leadership has been embedded primarily in inspiring, stimulating, visionary, and empowering transformational leadership domains. May, Chan, Hodge, and Avolio (2003) argued that authentic leadership incorporates a positive moral perspective that guides decision making and behaviors such as honesty, altruism, kindness, fair treatment, accountability, and optimism (Yukl, 2006). Such ethical elements, however, “come together to characterize ethical leadership, but none of these aspects, by themselves, constitutes all of what ethical leadership entails” (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005, p. 122). Realizing the conceptual gap, Brown et al. (2005) proposed ethical leadership as separate from other leadership styles and initially defined ethical leadership as “...the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making” (p. 120). Brown et al. (2005) also developed a scale to measure ethical leader behaviors such as acting fairly and honestly, allowing followers' voices to be heard, and rewarding ethical conduct. However, such one-dimensional measure may fall short in uncovering the different mechanics in developing and in implementing ethical leadership. Thus, based on the definition by Brown et al. (2005) and that in extant literature, Kalshoven et al. (2011) redefined ethical leadership as a multi-dimensional construct that has seven distinct dimensions, namely, fair treatment, power sharing, role clarification, people orientation, integrity, ethical guidance, and concern for sustainability.

The first three dimensions (i.e., fair treatment, power sharing, and role clarification) reflect the concept of ethical leadership by Brown et al. (2005), where *fair treatment* refers to ethical leaders acting with integrity and treating others fairly and not practicing favoritism, or avoiding responsibility for their actions. *Power sharing* refers to ethical leaders allowing followers to have a role in the decision making and listening to their opinions and concerns. *Role clarification* requires ethical leaders to be transparent and engage in open communication to clarify on responsibilities, expectations, and performance roles. Kalshoven et al. (2011) defined additional ethical leader behaviors, which include *people orientation*, as leaders genuinely exhibiting care, respect, and support to followers and ensuring that their needs are met. *Integrity* is demonstrated by leaders fulfilling their promises (i.e., word-deed alignment) and being consistent in their behavior. *Ethical guidance* refers to the manner by which leaders communicate about ethics, explain ethical rules, and promote and reward ethical conduct among employees. Lastly, *concern for sustainability* is about environmental orientation that encompasses how leaders pay attention to sustainability issues, ensure the development of other members in the environment, consider the effect of their actions beyond their self-interest and the scope of their own workgroup, and demonstrate care about the welfare of the society.

Research on ethical leadership at all levels in the organization has been increasing. In particular, previous empirical work has demonstrated that ethical leadership predicts outcomes such as employee satisfaction, commitment, job dedication, willingness to report problems to management, and organizational citizenship behavior (e.g., Brown, et al., 2005; Kalshoven et al., 2011). Along the same line of reasoning, the current study investigates the potential influences of ethical leadership on the internal communication system, perceived leader credibility, and employee engagement in organizations.

Symmetrical Internal Communication

According to J. Grunig (2006), the concept of symmetrical communication originated from the concept of co-orientation (Carter, 1965; Chaffee & McLeod, 1968). Unlike traditional approaches of publicity and persuasion, co-orientation emphasizes on the joint orientation between two parties. Similarly, the basic premise of a symmetrical model is how individuals, organizations, and the public use communication to adjust their thinking and behavior rather than to control or manipulate those of other parties. Thus, symmetrical communication favors understanding, collaboration, responsiveness, and the creation of long-term and mutually beneficial relationships (L. Grunig et al., 2002).

In the internal communication context, symmetrical communication is defined as a communication worldview and practice characterized by an emphasis on “trust, credibility, openness, relationships, reciprocity, network symmetry, horizontal communication, feedback, adequacy of information, employee-centered style, tolerance for disagreement, and negotiation” (J. Grunig, 1992, p. 558). Symmetrical communication features two-way information flow and equal dialogues among the organization, its leaders, and low-level employees. In such communication system, the

organization and its managers willingly collaborate with employees “to increase the power of everyone in the organization, for the benefit of everyone in the organization” (p. 564). The organization and its employees engage in open conversations and listen to each other, while internal media disseminate information required by employees to foster mutual understanding and clarity on individual roles. By contrast, asymmetrical communication is a one-way, top-down approach (L. Grunig et al., 2002) designed to sway or control employee behavior according to management requirements. Numerous studies had revealed the positive influence of symmetrical communication on employee attitudinal and behavioral outcomes, such as satisfaction, identification, loyalty, employee–organization relationships, perceived organizational transparency, employee communication behavior, and public advocacy (e.g., L. Grunig et al., 2002; Jo & Shim, 2005; Kim & Rhee, 2011; Men, 2014 a, 2014b; Smidts, Pruyn, & Van Riel, 2001).

Recognizing the effectiveness of symmetrical internal communication, scholars have suggested various antecedent factors, such as an organic organizational structure, participative culture, diversity, and effective leadership (L. Grunig, et al., 2002; Men, 2014a). In particular, Men (2014 a, 2014b) and Men and Stacks (2014) found that transformational (visionary, motivating, empowering, and relationship-oriented) and authentic (self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced procession, and internalized moral perspective) leadership help nurture symmetrical internal communication. Likewise, the present study proposes that ethical leader behaviors, such as fair treatment, power-sharing, role clarification, people-orientation, integrity, ethical guidance, and concern for sustainability, must be demonstrated through two-way and transparent communication, and these ethical leader behaviors reflect the relational, open, empowering, and balancing nature of symmetrical communication. Therefore,

H1: Ethical leadership positively influences the symmetrical internal communication of an organization.

Leader Credibility

Leader credibility issues cannot be neglected because they relate to important employee outcomes such as trust and confidence (Swanson & Kent, 2014) and behavior compliance (Pornpitakpan, 2004). The degree to which an employee will be persuaded to accept ideas and information depends on the credibility of the leaders. Furthermore, source credibility influences the intention of recipients (i.e., intention of employees) to use suggestions made by the source (i.e., leader) regarding the improve performance (Bannister, 1986).

Defined as “the judgments made by a perceiver concerning the believability” of the source (O’Keefe, 2002, p. 181), the concept of source credibility is rooted in the communication and persuasion literature. To date, various dimensions of credibility have been proposed across the literature, including trustworthiness, expertise, dynamics, attractiveness, sociability, and likeability. Most definitions, however, refer to the two most commonly discussed aspects: trustworthiness and expertise.

Trustworthiness, sometimes called “character”, refers to the assessment of whether the communicator will be inclined to tell the truth. *Expertise*, alternatively referred to as “authoritativeness”, “competence”, or “qualification”, pertains to the assessment of whether the communicator is in a position to know the truth and what is right or wrong. In this current study, as defined by Pornpitakpan (2004), expertise of leaders in the eyes of employees is regarded as the extent to which employees perceive their direct manager as a source of valid assertions and as an individual who possesses the necessary skills and knowledge for his or her position. The trustworthiness aspect of credibility is operationalized as the degree of confidence of employees in their direct manager, the degree of acceptance of their direct manager, and the acceptance to the message that the manager communicates.

In their attempts to summarize factors that most likely influence source credibility, O’Keefe (2002) and Pornpitakpan (2004) reported that perceptions can be influenced by numerous factors, including source (e.g., physical attractiveness, gender, experience, training, occupation, and similarity), message (e.g., threat, language intensity and message discrepancy), and receiver variables (disposition, authoritarianism, and issue involvement, among others). However, the antecedents of leader credibility in the leadership context have been under-researched. The current study therefore proposes ethical leader behaviors as a predictor of leader credibility. Previous research (Rawlins, 2008; Men & Stacks, 2014) found that open, unbiased, transparent, and empowering communication nurtures employee trust. Likewise, this study argues that leaders who practice fair treatment, willingly share power, listen to employees, exhibit respect and care about employee concerns, willingly engage in open and transparent communication to clarify expectations and responsibilities, and align their actions and their words will be perceived as more credible. Therefore,

H2: Ethical leadership positively influences leadership credibility.

Employee Engagement

In the past few years, the concept of engagement has received increasing scholarly and professional attention, particularly in the field of communication and management. In a survey by Corporate Communication International on US chief corporate communicators, employee engagement is revealed as among the top three trends that organizations encounter (Goodman, Genst, Cayo, & Ng, 2009). Numerous studies had documented that employee engagement contributes to organizational growth, profit, productivity (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002), organizational citizenship behavior, customer satisfaction (Saks, 2006), and employee retention (Berger, 2011).

As an outcome, engagement has been defined from several perspectives. For example, Kahn (1990), who had conceptualized and theoretically derived the dimensions of employee engagement in organizational studies, defines engagement as “the harnessing of organizational members to their work roles” (p. 694). According to Kahn, an employee can be cognitively, emotionally, and physically engaged. *Cognitively* engaged employees are aware of, attentive to, and absorbed in their mission and roles

in the work environment, and they have what they need to create a difference in their work. *Emotionally* engaged employees sense a deep and meaningful connection with, experience empathy and concern for, and demonstrate dedication in their work roles. *Physically* engaged employees exert considerable energy in performing their jobs.

Rothbard (2001) defines engagement as a psychological state composed of *attention*, which refers to the “cognitive availability and the amount of time one spends thinking about a role”, and *absorption*, which refers to “being engrossed in a role and... to the intensity of one’s focus on a role” (p. 656). Saks (2006) indicated that engagement is characterized by energy, involvement, efficacy, vigor, dedication, and a positive state, as opposed to cynicism and inefficacy. From a behavioral perspective, Haven et al. (2007) define engagement as “the level of involvement, interaction, intimacy, and influence an individual has with a brand over time... a person’s participation with a brand, regardless of channel, where they call the shots” (p. 5). Similar to Kahn (1990), Macey and Schneider (2008) define engagement in three levels: trait engagement (disposition and cognition), physiological state engagement (affection and emotions), and behavioral engagement (behaviors). Although literature across disciplines lacks congruence in defining engagement, several themes had been consistently revealed in the engagement literature, which included attention, absorption, dedication, positive energy, positive affectivity, involvement, and participation. Therefore, as a psychologically motivated state, employee engagement involves elements of active cognition, positive affectivity, and behaviors.

Previous literature across disciplines has suggested multiple drivers of employee engagement, which include leadership, communication, supervisor relationship, and work environment (Parsley, 2006; Robinson et al., 2004; Saks, 2006). In particular, the abilities of leaders to motivate and empower employees via participative decision making and open communication have been argued to be important in enhancing work engagement (e.g., Babcock-Roberson & Strickland, 2010; Tims, Bakker, & Xanthopoulou, 2011). Communication is also considered as another central aspect in engaging employees as the most dominant activity in organizations through which employees share information, create relationships, and establish meanings (Berger, 2008, 2014). However, empirical studies verifying such relationships remain sparse. To fill the research gap, the current study examines ethical leadership and symmetrical communication as engagement drivers. Specifically, ethical leader behaviors of power sharing and people orientation are predicted to increase employee psychological attachment and cultivate a sense of belongingness, resulting in the engagement of employees. In addition, ethical guidance and concern for sustainability may foster positive employee affectivity (i.e., sense of pride and optimism toward the organization), which emotionally engages employees. A symmetrical internal communication system may also enhance employee engagement by empowering them through listening and ensuring balance between power and interests. The symmetrical internal communication system can also nurture positive employee attitude and relational outcomes, which are antecedents of engagement (Robinson et al., 2004). With ethical leadership providing a benign context that nurtures symmetrical communication, the

influence of ethical leadership on employee engagement can be partially mediated via internal communication. Therefore,

H3: Ethical leadership positively influences employee engagement.

H4: Symmetrical internal communication positively influences employee engagement.

H5: Symmetrical communication partially mediates the influence of ethical leadership on employee engagement.

METHOD

Population and Sample

A quantitative online survey was conducted to test the hypotheses. The study population comprised employees at different positions in medium- and large-sized corporations in the United States.¹ Sample selection aimed to cover a diverse range of business communities to enhance the generalizability of data. Instead of participant corporations, individual employees of various corporations were recruited by a multinational sampling firm from its 1.5 million-member research panel in the United States in 2014. Stratified and quota random sampling were implemented to obtain a representative sample across various age groups, income levels, and education levels. A final sample size of 545 was obtained. The sample comprised 59.7% males and 40.3% females. Among the participants, 43.7% were non-management employees, whereas 56.3% were management employees. The average age was 44, and the average corporate tenure was approximately 15 years. The companies of the participants covered various industries, including education, retail, health care, finance, information technology, food, industrial and manufacturing, consumer electronics, and transportation and logistics. Around 65% of the respondents held at least a bachelor's degree.

Measures

Using seven-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), this study measured four focal concepts, namely, ethical leadership, symmetrical internal communication, leader credibility, and employee engagement.² The measure of ethical leadership was adopted from Kalshoven et al. (2011). A total of 28 items measured ethical leader behaviors of fair treatment (e.g., "My direct manager holds me accountable for problems over which I have no control"[reversed], $\alpha = .86$), role clarification (e.g., "My direct manager explains what is expected of each group member", $\alpha = .92$), power sharing (e.g., "My direct manager seeks advice from

¹ Small business companies with fewer than 250 employees (Wiki, 2012) were excluded from the population because leadership and public relations practices are more salient in large and mature corporations.

² Before the actual survey, a pretest was conducted among 50 employees selected from a variety of corporations to ensure reliability and validity of the instrument.

subordinates concerning organizational strategy”, $\alpha = .79$), people orientation (e.g., “My direct manager is interested in how I feel and how I am doing”, $\alpha = .96$), integrity (e.g., “My direct manager can be trusted to do the things he/she says”, $\alpha = .97$), ethical guidance (e.g., “My direct manager clarifies the likely consequences of possible unethical behavior by myself and my colleagues”, $\alpha = .89$), and sustainability (e.g., “My direct manager shows concern for sustainability issues”, $\alpha = .86$). To operationalize symmetrical internal communication, seven items developed by Dozier, L. Grunig, & Grunig (1995) were used (e.g., “Most communication between management and other employees in this organization can be considered two-way communication”, $\alpha = .86$). The measure of leader credibility was adopted from previous literature (i.e., McCroskey, 1966; Men, 2011; O’Keefe, 2002). Ten semantic differential scale items measured leader trustworthiness (i.e., honest–dishonest, trustworthy–untrustworthy, open-minded–closed-minded, just–unjust, fair–unfair, and selfish–unselfish, $\alpha = .96$) and leader expertise (“i.e., experienced–inexperienced, informed–uninformed, trained–untrained, qualified–unqualified, skilled–unskilled, intelligent–unintelligent, and expert–not expert, $\alpha = .95$). Finally, 12 items adopted from Saks (2006) and Men (2011) measured the two dimensions of employee engagement, including positive employee affectivity (“I am proud of this company”, $\alpha = .93$) and level of psychological empowerment (“I believe I can make a difference in this company”, $\alpha = .92$). For data analysis, a series of regression analysis techniques were conducted to examine the influences of independent variables on the dependent variables.

RESULTS

Preliminary descriptive analyses showed that respondents in this study reported neutral to slightly positive attitude toward their leaders’ ethical behaviors ($M = 4.27$ to 5.49 , $SD = 1.24$ to 1.67 , $N = 545$, see Table 1). Respondents, on the average, perceived their organization’s internal communication to be symmetrical ($M = 5.23$, $SD = 1.28$, $N = 545$) and their leaders as credible ($M_{\text{trustworthiness}} = 5.61$, $SD_{\text{trustworthiness}} = 1.43$; $M_{\text{expertise}} = 5.71$, $SD_{\text{expertise}} = 1.30$, $N = 545$). In addition, respondents overall showed medium to slightly high level of engagement with their organization ($M_{\text{positive affectivity}} = 5.10$, $SD_{\text{positive affectivity}} = 1.31$; $M_{\text{empowerment}} = 4.88$, $SD_{\text{empowerment}} = 1.50$, $N = 545$). Correlations between the observed variables ranged from $-.02$ to $.79$.

Table 1

Descriptive of ethical leader behaviors, symmetrical internal communication, leader credibility, and employee engagement (Mean, Standard Deviation, and Correlations).

| | Alpha | Mean | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 |
|---------------------------------------|-------|------|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|
| 1. Fairness | .86 | 4.27 | 1.67 | 1.00 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Role clarification | .92 | 5.49 | 1.30 | .20** | 1.00 | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3. Power sharing | .79 | 4.72 | 1.28 | -.02 | .35** | 1.00 | | | | | | | | | |
| 4. People orientation | .96 | 5.14 | 1.56 | .32** | .58** | .56** | 1.00 | | | | | | | | |
| 5. Integrity | .97 | 5.32 | 1.52 | .34** | .67** | .49** | .75** | 1.00 | | | | | | | |
| 6. Ethical guidance | .89 | 5.39 | 1.24 | .19** | .79** | .38** | .60** | .69** | 1.00 | | | | | | |
| 7. Sustainability | .86 | 4.89 | 1.32 | .10* | .51** | .48** | .60** | .59** | .54** | 1.00 | | | | | |
| 8. Symmetrical internal communication | .86 | 5.23 | 1.28 | .27** | .64** | .51** | .73* | .71** | .65** | .61** | 1.00 | | | | |
| 9. Leader trustworthiness | .96 | 5.61 | 1.43 | .41** | .62** | .48** | .73** | .84** | .63** | .60** | .71** | 1.00 | | | |
| 10. Leader expertise | .95 | 5.71 | 1.30 | .37** | .59** | .45** | .63** | .71** | .59** | .50** | .65** | .80** | 1.00 | | |
| 11. Positive affectivity | .93 | 5.10 | 1.31 | .20** | .49** | .41** | .57** | .55** | .54** | .50** | .77** | .55** | .51** | 1.00 | |
| 12. Empowerment | .92 | 4.88 | 1.50 | .03 | .40** | .46** | .51** | .50** | .47** | .48** | .73** | .46** | .45** | .83** | 1.00 |

** Correlation is significant at $p < .01$ (2-tailed), * Correlation is significant at $p < .05$ (2-tailed)

Hypotheses Testing

The influences of ethical leadership on symmetrical internal communication (H1), leader credibility (H2), and employee engagement (H3) were analyzed using simple regression. All three hypotheses were supported by the data. Specifically, the linear combination of ethical leader behaviors of fair treatment, role clarification, power sharing, people orientation, integrity, ethical guidance, and concern for sustainability jointly explained 65% of the variance in symmetrical communication, $R^2 = .65$, $F(7, 537) = 143.64$, $p < .001$. All these ethical behaviors of leaders were found to be significant positive predictors of the organization's symmetrical communication system, with *people orientation* demonstrating the strongest influence ($t = 6.30$, $p < .001$, $\beta = .27$, see Table 2). The linear combination of ethical leader behaviors jointly explained 74% of the variance in leader credibility, $R^2 = .74$, $F(7, 537) = 219.05$, $p < .001$. Fair treatment ($t = 7.17$, $p < .001$, $\beta = .18$), role clarification ($t = 2.95$, $p < .01$, $\beta = .11$), power sharing ($t = 3.74$, $p < .001$, $\beta = .10$), people orientation ($t = 2.73$, $p < .01$, $\beta = .10$), *integrity* ($t = 11.97$, $p < .001$, $\beta = .47$), and concern for sustainability ($t = 2.87$, $p < .01$, $\beta = .09$) all showed significant positive influences on leader credibility. Ethical guidance, however, showed insignificant influence on leader credibility.

To test the influences of ethical leadership and symmetrical communication on employee engagement, a hierarchical multiple regression was conducted by entering ethical leader behavior variables (i.e., fair treatment, role clarification, power sharing, people orientation, integrity, ethical guidance, and concern for sustainability) in Model 1 and symmetrical internal communication in Model 2. Preliminary analysis indicated low multi-collinearity for all sets of independent variables in the regression models (the

tolerance ranged from .30 to .79).³ The hierarchical regression analysis revealed that the linear combination of ethical leader behaviors jointly explained 42% of the variance in the level of employee engagement, $R^2 = .42$, $F(7, 537) = 54.81$, $p < .001$. Power sharing ($t = 3.33$, $p < .001$, $\beta = .14$), people orientation ($t = 3.65$, $p < .001$, $\beta = .21$), ethical guidance ($t = 3.61$, $p < .001$, $\beta = .21$), and concern for sustainability ($t = 3.40$, $p < .001$, $\beta = .15$) were all found to be significant positive predictors of employee engagement.

Ethical leader behaviors of fair treatment, role clarification, and integrity, however, showed insignificant influences on employee engagement. Furthermore, after controlling the influence of ethical leader behaviors, results suggested that the organization's symmetrical internal communication explained an additional 21% of the variance in employee engagement [F change (1, 536) = 303.15, $p < .001$, $\Delta R^2 = .21$]. Symmetrical internal communication demonstrated a large positive influence on employees' level of engagement in the organization in Model 2, $t = 17.41$, $p < .001$, $\beta = .78$, thus supporting H 4. Regarding mediation effects, the significant influences of ethical leader behaviors on power sharing, people orientation, and concern for sustainability on employee engagement, as observed in Model 1, became insignificant when symmetrical communication was added to the equation. Therefore, the influence of ethical leadership on employee engagement was partially mediated by symmetrical internal communication, which supports H5.

³ Tolerance is a measurement of the degree of independence that each variable (IV) has from the other IVs. Its value ranges from 1 (complete independence) to 0 (complete dependence). A high value indicates low multicollinearity. The common rule of thumb for large tolerances is .10 (Cohen et al., 2003).

Table 2

Results of simple regression analyses of ethical leadership on symmetrical communication and leader credibility, and results of hierarchical regression analysis of ethical leadership and symmetrical communication on employee engagement

| Independent Variables (IVs) | DV: Symmetrical Communication | | | DV: Leader Credibility | | | DV: Employee Engagement | | |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------|---------|------------------------|---------|----------|-------------------------|---------|-------------|
| | R2 | β | t | R2 | β | t | ΔR^2 | β | t |
| Model 1: | .65*** | | | .74*** | | | .42*** | | |
| Fairness | | .06 | 2.26* | | .18 | 7.17*** | | | n.s. |
| Role clarification | | .14 | 3.31*** | | .11 | 2.95** | | | n.s. |
| Power sharing | | .12 | 3.58*** | | .10 | 3.74*** | | .14 | 3.33*** |
| People orientation | | .27 | 6.30*** | | .10 | 2.73** | | .21 | 3.65*** |
| Integrity | | .16 | 3.40*** | | .47 | 11.97*** | | . | n.s. |
| Ethical guidance | | .12 | 2.75** | | . | n.s. | | .21 | 3.61*** |
| Concern for sustainability | | .15 | 4.33*** | | .09 | 2.87** | | .15 | 3.40*** |
| Model 2: | | | | | | | ΔR^2 | | |
| Fairness | | . | | | | | .21*** | | n.s. |
| Role clarification | | | | | | | | | n.s. |
| Power sharing | | | | | | | | | n.s. |
| People orientation | | | | | | | | | n.s. |
| Integrity | | . | . | | . | | | | n.s. |
| Ethical guidance | | | | | | | | .11 | 2.42* |
| Concern for sustainability | | | | | | | | | n.s. |
| Symmetrical communication | | | | | | | | .78 | 17.41*** |

Notes. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, one-tailed test; $n = 545$; DV: dependent variable

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Although much has been said about the importance of management and leadership behavior in setting the tone for organizational internal communication, the topic has received little systematic scholarly attention. The current study is among the earliest empirical work to address the issue by examining the influence of ethical leadership on the development of symmetrical communication and employee outcomes in the organization. Results provided significant implications for public relations scholars and professionals.

Ethical Leadership and Symmetrical Internal Communication

As predicted, ethical leadership demonstrated strong positive influences on the organization's symmetrical internal communication. Ethical leaders are fair and genuinely concerned with the needs and interests of their followers and others. They are willing to share power with employees, are open to different perspectives and

opinions, and allow others to participate in the decision-making process. Such employee-centered, caring, and empowering behavior reflects the notion of symmetrical communication, which emphasizes the balance of power and interests (L. Grunig, et al., 2002), collaboration, relationships, and non-manipulation. In addition, ethical leaders fulfill their promises, take responsibilities, and behave altruistically. They act as moral role models and promote an ethical and positive work environment in the organization by rewarding ethical conduct and setting ethical guidelines. This leadership provides a benign context in which the inherently ethical symmetrical communication system (Huang, 2004) can be nurtured. Moreover, ethical leaders use open and transparent communication to clarify their role/goal expectations, listen to employees' concerns and opinions, and foster mutual understanding. They value organizational relationships with the environment and society at large and consider the maintenance of such relationships in the long term. The strategic foresight concurs with the win-win and relational emphasis of symmetrical communication. Therefore, the finding in this study revealed the contribution of ethical leadership to the development of the symmetrical internal communication system in the organization. Recent literature (e.g., Men & Stacks, 2013) suggests that organizational, transformational, and authentic leadership build symmetrical communication. Ethical leadership is consequently added to the list.

Ethical Leadership and Leader Credibility

Previous research has also suggested positive relationships between ethical leadership and employee outcomes such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, perceived leader effectiveness, and organizational citizenship behavior (e.g., Brown, et al., 2005; De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008; Kalshoven, 2011). In connection with these relationships, the current research demonstrated the positive influence of ethical leadership on leader credibility.

Specifically, ethical leader behaviors of fair treatment, role clarification, power sharing, people orientation, integrity, and concern for sustainability each uniquely contribute to leader credibility. Indeed, leaders who show integrity and fair treatment of employees are perceived to be more trustworthy. Den Hartog and De Hoogh (2008) also found that fair treatment and power sharing were related to trust in management. The concept of leaders sharing power with employees is a sign of trust that employees may reciprocate and increase their perception of the credibility of their leaders. In addition, credibility can be built on open, clear, and transparent communication (O'Keefe, 2002). Thus, the caring, consistent, and open communication behaviors of ethical leaders can heighten leader trustworthiness and credibility (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). Moreover, leaders who clarify roles, expectations, responsibilities, and goals reflect their knowledge and expertise, which also contributes to increased leader credibility. Finally, ethical leaders who are aware of their environment and display social conscience show their interests in issues beyond themselves, which could inspire trustworthiness. Interestingly, among all the leader-leadership elements, leader integrity demonstrated the largest influence on leader credibility. Therefore, the moral values of leaders play a more prominent role than strategies and tactics with regard to management credibility.

Ethical Leadership and Employee Engagement

Regarding the association between ethical leadership and employee engagement, this study showed that power sharing, people orientation, ethical guidance, and concern for sustainability have significant positive influences on employee engagement. Employees managed by leaders who exhibit power sharing and promote employee involvement in decision making are likely to experience more control (Zellars, Tepper, & Duffy, 2002) and exert more influence at work. Also, as suggested by the social exchange perspective, when employees are trusted, cared for, and provided with genuine concern by their managers, they tend to reciprocate by showing a high level of engagement, focus on their work, pride and optimism about the organization, and the willingness to perform beyond their duties (Saks, 2006). Moreover, employees managed by leaders who reward ethical conduct, clarify integrity and ethical guidelines, and show concern for sustainability issues will show positive affectivity toward the organization as a result of the halo effect, thus they become more engaged. Interestingly, ethical leadership dimensions of fair treatment, integrity, and role clarification, which were found essential for building leader credibility and enhancing employee trust (c.f., Kalshoven, et al., 2011) showed positive but insignificant influence on employee engagement. This finding suggests that different ethical behaviors demonstrated by leaders may generate varied employee and organizational outcomes. Organizational leaders and communication managers must understand the complicated relationships among these constructs to obtain the desired results.

Finally, the study findings showed that symmetrical internal communication fully mediates the influences of leader behaviors of power sharing and people orientation on employee engagement. This mediation is expected because ethical leadership as an organizational context shapes the symmetrical internal communication system that is employee-centered, empowering, and collaborative. This finding also concurs with the notion presented by Kalshoven et al. (2011) that the communication climate and context where the leader operates are more important than the leader behavior. Moreover, the study revealed that the two-way, open, responsive, and balanced nature of symmetrical communication uniquely and significantly influenced employee engagement. When employees are fully informed and listened and responded to, they feel highly involved and engaged.

The study findings provided important guidelines and implications for public relations scholars and professionals. Theoretically, by demonstrating the positive influences of ethical leadership on symmetrical communication and employee outcomes, new empirical evidence is presented for the notion that leadership is a critical contextual factor that influences best practices in internal communication (Men & Stacks, 2013). The results of the present study also adds to the growing body of literature on ethical leadership and communication and sheds light on how symmetrical communication can be developed by the conduct of ethical management behaviors. Furthermore, this study addressed the under-researched issue of leader credibility, which is closely related to trusting management–employee relationships and verified the theoretical connection between ethical leadership behavior and management credibility. Lastly, the study

enriched the theoretical understanding of an emerging construct, that is, employee engagement, and confirmed the critical roles of leadership and communication in driving employee engagement in the organization.

Implications for Practitioners

In terms of strategic implications, the study findings underscore the importance of developing ethical leadership inside the organization. Not only do ethical leader behaviors nurture positive employee attitudes, such as organizational satisfaction and commitment (e.g., Brown, et al., 2005; Kalshoven, 2011), and build leader credibility, but also shape an effective symmetrical internal communication system, which largely affects employee engagement. Thus, leaders at different levels in the organization should be trained to advocate fair, empowering, role clarified, word-deed aligned, people-oriented, and environment-friendly ethical management behaviors.

Specifically, leaders should treat employees fairly, do not practice favoritism, and empower employees by give them opportunities to participate in organizational decision-making. Managers are expected to provide clear instructions on what they expect from employees, including employees' performance levels and responsibilities. Further, leaders should show respect, support, care, understanding, and compassion, and make employees feel included and appreciated. Employees should also be encouraged to freely express their opinions, concerns, and feelings. Additionally, leaders should deliver on what they promise, be consistent in what they say and do, and be accountable for their words and actions. Furthermore, leaders should lead by example, explain ethical standards, and promote ethical conduct among employees. Finally, management in the organization should pay attention to sustainability issues, consider the effect of their actions beyond the interests of the organization, and care for the welfare of the society.

Ethical leaders not only promote ethical conduct and moral values in the organization, but they also act as role models to employees and motivate them to similarly engage in ethical behavior. In sum, communication professionals should work with organizational leaders to build an ethical communication climate and leadership context to achieve communication effectiveness. More importantly, two-way, open, responsive, employee-centered, and collaborative symmetrical communication programs should be in place because of its more important and direct role in driving employee engagement.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite the significant contributions of this study, several limitations were encountered and should be addressed in future research. The survey sample included only employees from large and medium-sized companies in the United States. Organizations outside the scope of this research or from other cultural settings should be careful in making inferences from the findings. Future research can cross-validate the relationships tested in this study in different organizational (e.g., non-profit, government) and cultural settings. Also, the data in this study were gathered by an international

survey firm through its patented random online sampling procedure. Thus, the response rate of the survey was unknown. Moreover, this study may be subject to common source measurement error because data were gathered from the employees' perspective. Future studies can incorporate the insights of organizations or managers and qualitative methodological approaches (e.g., document analysis, qualitative interviewing, participant observation) to obtain triangulated and objective (instead of perceptive) data. Finally, future endeavors should empirically examine other potential outcomes of ethical leadership and drivers of employee engagement at the individual, group, and organizational levels.

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APPENDIX: KEY MEASUREMENT ITEMS**Ethical Leadership**

My direct manager...

People orientation

- Is interested in how I feel and how I am doing.
- Takes time for personal contact.
- Pays attention to my personal needs.
- Takes time to talk about work-related emotions.
- Is genuinely concerned about my personal development.

Fair treatment

- Holds me accountable for problems over which I have no control.
- Holds me responsible for work that I gave no control over.
- Holds me responsible for things that are not my fault.
- Pursues his/her own success at the expense of others.

Power sharing

- Allows subordinates to influence critical decisions.
- Does NOT allow others to participate in decision-making.
- Seeks advice from subordinates concerning organizational strategies.
- Will reconsider decisions on the basis of recommendations by those who report to him/her.

Concern for sustainability

- Would like to work in an environmentally friendly manner.
- Shows concern for sustainability issues.
- Promotes recycling of items and materials in our department.

Ethical guidance

- Clearly explains integrity-related codes of conduct.
- Explains what is expected from employees in terms of behaving with integrity.
- Clarifies integrity guidelines.
- Ensures that employees follow codes of integrity.
- Clarifies the likely consequences of possible unethical behavior by me and my colleagues.

Role clarification

- Indicates what the performance expectations of each group member are.
- Explains what is expected of each group member.
- Explains what is expected of me and my colleagues.

Integrity

- Keeps his/her promises.
- Can be trusted to do the things he/she says.
- Can be relied on to honor his/her commitments.

- Always keeps his/her words.

Symmetrical Communication

- I am comfortable talking to my manager about my performance.
- Most communication between management and other employees in this organization can be regarded as two-way communication.
- This company encourages differences of opinions.
- The purpose of communication in this organization is to help management to be responsive to problems of other employees.
- I am usually informed about major changes in policy that affect my job before they take place.
- I am comfortable talking to my manager when things go wrong.
- My supervisor encourages differences of opinion.

Leader Credibility

Trustworthiness

- Dependable–Undependable
- Honest–Dishonest
- Reliable–Unreliable
- Sincere–Insincere
- Trustworthy–Untrustworthy

Expertise

- Expert–Not an expert
- Experienced–Inexperienced
- Knowledgeable–Unknowledgeable
- Qualified–Unqualified
- Skilled–Unskilled

Employee Engagement

- One of the most exciting things for me is getting involved with things happening in this company.
- I am really **NOT** into the “going-ons” in this company.
- I am enthusiastic about this company.
- I am proud of this company.
- I am attentive to the activities of this company.
- I am actively involved with this company.
- I believe I can make a difference in what happens in this company.
- I believe I have a great deal of control over the decision-making process of this company.
- I am confident about my abilities to improve the company.
- I believe I can collaborate with this company as a valuable partner.

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