

Talk-the-Talk: Using Internal Communication to Build Trust with Employees

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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). Business ethics scholar Archie Carroll argues that ethical organizations take care of their employees, working to build trust with them through positive communication efforts, as well as demonstrating respect for employees and acting with integrity in all employee relations. He claims that if management does not demonstrate honesty, transparency, genuine caring, supportiveness and a willingness to listen, employees will end up with less trust in management.

This study examines the impact of organizational communication and relationship management on employee trust and commitment. Cheney (1999), in his study of the Mondragon Cooperatives, found that employees are now demanding consideration as an internal market. The use of internal organizational communication, also referred to as inward marketing by advertising professor Robert Lauterborn (2005), leads employees to be better customer ambassadors (Lowenstein, 2006). Employees have important knowledge and skills about both their jobs and the organization, providing employees the opportunity to be organizational advocates to the customer, who in turn can enhance the firm’s reputation (Gronstedt, 2000).

Literature Review

Relationship management is the coordination, management, and relationship building between an organization and its publics with a variety of publics, including investors, community activists, suppliers, and even employees. Gronstedt (2000) points out that the roles of each of these publics is overlapping, for instance, both employees and investors are becoming activists, which makes it more important for organizations to better manage communications between and across these different publics. Theoretically, relationship management is the practice of building relationships with an organization’s publics (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998) by attempting “to restore and maintain a sense of community” (Kruckeberg, 2000, p. 145). Relationship has been defined by Thomlinson (2000) as “as set of expectations two parties have for each other’s behavior based on their interaction patterns” (p. 178). Increasingly, a focus of this relationship is how the parties communicate with each other to build the relationship (Toth, 2000), although the mechanics of how this communication takes place and what outcomes it produces have not been widely studied.

To date, employees have been understudied by relationship management scholars. This may reflect managers’ lack of concern in their own employees. As Cheney (1999) points 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). Organizational communication with employees is potentially insufficient because the emphasis by organizations is toward external publics about products and services through marketing communications such

as advertising or public relations. Cheney points out that there is an opportunity to meld the internal and external communications of the organization, instead of keeping them distinct. Kennan and Hazleton (2000) are among the first to define internal public relations as an important step in recognizing employees as a distinct public worthy of individualized attention.¹

As a result of such a narrow focus on marketing communications, employee communication can suffer, and with it, employee trust and commitment. Cheney (1999) suggested that values in the workplace can be evaluated by the role communication plays. Broom, Casey and Ritchey (2000) agree that communication is a critical aspect of how organization-public relationships are evaluated. Gavin and Mayer (2005) found that internal communication affects the trust between employees and managers. Chia (2005) affirmed that “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 can be conveyed through effective communication (Mishra & Mishra, 1994) via openness and concern. Additionally, Mishra (1996) found that “the extent to which the trusted person engages in undistorted communication then reinforces the trust (in terms of openness) placed in him or her” (p. 276).

Organization communication scholars have shown that the adequacy of information provided by the organization has also contributes to an employees’ job satisfaction (Rosenfeld, Richman & May, 2004). Communication practices within an organization are expected to 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.

One key dimension of communication that is expected to influence trust and related outcomes is its “richness” (Daft, Lengel, & Trevino, 1987). Information that is richer (face-to-face communication) is considered more personalized and reduces uncertainty because it contains higher quality information (Daft, Lengel, & Trevino, 1987). The richness of the media used to communicate with employees has been found to contribute towards increased satisfaction and loyalty in an employee-organization context (Daft, Lengel, and Trevino, 1987; Vickery, Droge, Stank, Goldsby, and Markland, 2004).

Kelleher (2001) found that public relations practitioners relied on written communication while public relations managers relied more on face-to-face communication. Cheney (1999) also observed that face-to-face communication is considered more reliable than written communication in a business context because it provides more information to the other party. It is important to understand if these differences in communication richness do matter in terms of reliability and trustworthiness among employees.

In the public relations literature, trust is considered a critical aspect of the organization-public relationship (Botan & Taylor, 2004). In an earlier study, Bruning and Ledingham (2000) found that trust had a significant impact on customer satisfaction. In addition, Wilson (1994) found that both employee and public perceptions of commitment, trust and mutual respect are important for understanding organization-public relationships. All of these findings focus on the relationship aspect of publics and the positive impact on customer satisfaction and firm reputation yet fail to consider the impact of communication on that relationship or on the relationship with other stakeholders. Paine (2003) specified that organizations should make sure

¹ Researchers William Kennan and Vincent Hazleton give Public Relations Scholar Carl Botan credit for prompting them to label the term “internal public relations” (per email correspondence with Dr. Hazleton).

to ask several questions prior to measuring trust in organizations, 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).

When an employee develops a relationship with external stakeholders, s/he can become an “ambassador” of that firm. Therefore, relationships exist not only between an organization and its publics, but relationships between an organization’s different publics are also important. In addition, employees can take on multiple roles, including that of investor and activist, as well as employee (Dougall, 2005; Gronstedt, 2000). If employees are considered an important public, they can be an important source of relationships with other publics, such as customers.

Research Question

Based on an overview of the previous literature, the following research question is proposed: How do organizations communicate with employees to create trusting relationships with employees?

In order to answer this question, interviews were conducted with both front-line employees and executives responsible for internal communication at their firms.

Employee Interview Method

Employee Interviews

The employee interviews were conducted in-person, recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to better understand how employees think about communication within their company. In addition, the employee interviews provided a platform to create the executive questions. The employee 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 that are found nearby a key term or that may connect to a key term. Finally, the analysis examined patterns of association or linkages to identify which clusters are most interesting or of greatest importance. To visualize the clusters, a mindmap (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004) of the analysis was developed.

All four interviewees were young women, under the age of 30. Alex, Deserai, Jessica, and Sharon had all worked in more than one location for a retail operation, yet at the time of the interviews, were all working at the same store. Last names are not given to preserve their confidentiality. Three are Caucasian and one is Black. Alex was from Lebanon and so she brought an international outlook to her job. In addition, she was a shift supervisor, which meant that she had some supervisory responsibilities while also having duties similar to her employees. All four had worked for this retail operation for less than five years, but had worked at multiple stores within this same chain, providing them with a variety of viewpoints. In this type of retail firm, employees work closely together, often as a team, to complete a customer transaction.

Using cluster analysis, several themes emerged analyzing the text of each employee interview: talking with their manager, open-minded managers, getting feedback, the people, and their impact on the customer. Clusters of words that described both shared and individual world views surrounded those themes. Overall, employees focused on the interpersonal aspect of their relationships to explain how communication works in their firm. The themes that emerged, however, are in their own words.

Results

Talking with their manager

All four employees mentioned the importance of being able to “talk” with their manager. They felt that this openness allowed them to not only become better employees, but enabled them to enjoy their job more. Jessica mentioned that people often ask her what it is like working for an impersonal Fortune 500 company. She noted that she still feels the benefit of working for a smaller organization. Specifically, it provides an opportunity for her to interact with her manager during her shifts.

A lot of people say if you’re working for a really big company you’re just a number and people aren’t thinking of what you want and they aren’t listening. But I haven’t found that at all. Because each store – you’re never going to work with more than about 15 to 20 people I guess. Like at this store I think we only have like 12 people working. You’re going to know everyone and if you have something to talk about with your manager you’re most likely going to work a shift with them and you can just discuss it with them right away and every manager I’ve had has been helpful.

When asked about the ways they communicate at work, the four employees at this retail firm all said that face-to-face communication was the way they enjoyed talking to their manager and to each other. Jessica described her communication with her manager as face-to-face, rather than by another communication means, such as email. “It’s always face to face. If they had a problem with what an employee is doing they’d definitely – like when you’re here they’d ask you to come in a little bit early.”

All four employees explained that the managers that they had worked for had sought them out and asked questions about how they felt their work was going. Deserei said that she appreciated this proactive approach by her manager.

This store is so small – no emails. Which is really cool because I like – the thing about (my company) too is it’s very easy – most of the managers are very approachable. They actually encourage that. Like they have a day where they set up all admin stuff and they actually encourage – they have one on one’s with partners. Not necessarily a shift but maybe a [colleague] and you can sit down and they’ll ask how you’re doing, what’s going on. That’s cool. Recently Alex (her shift supervisor) and I had a one-on-one. She was like “What’s going on? How do you feel?” Then she was helping me with my PDP- kind of a thing – an outline they set up things to work towards to be an assistant. She was like “oh let’s work on that. What do you feel you need to be doing?”

As a shift supervisor, Alex has some supervisory duties in addition to doing the same job duties as her employees. She communicates with her employees mostly face-to-face through on-the-job training. She trains them and then watches them while they work to provide feedback on what works or what does not work. She finds that the other employees provide feedback to each other, too, so that they can all work together as a team more effectively. She said that this is because each person’s work affects the other’s work. Although the other three employees had positive things to say about their relationships with their managers, Sharon was the one employee who described how miscommunication had affected her company experience.

The same problems occur here as well like sometimes there's miscommunication and sometimes I think we all feel as though our opinions and our personal interests, requests aren't really appreciated and sometimes you feel your work is not appreciated. But it goes both ways as well. I'm sure managers need some encouragement once in a while.

Overall, employees said they appreciate the opportunity to talk face-to-face with their manager. These employees articulated, however, that the degree of openness in that face-to-face discussion depended on the willingness of their manager to engage with them.

Open-minded Managers

They all agreed that it was obvious which managers were truly "open" to a give-and-take discussion and which managers were not able to handle openness as well. Deserei described the managers she has worked for as open-minded and willing to listen.

Whenever I have an issue, I just go to talk to them and the door is always open. I never feel like there's a time when I can't. And that's with every manager that I've worked with – they're always open-minded. That's one thing I would say that (my company) looks for. It's just odd that every manager – not odd but it's nice that every manager that I've worked for I'm able to – they're so open-minded and willing to listen so I guess that would be one of the things that they look for in talking. A lot of the questions they ask are situational questions as far as manager – when you move up as manager so I guess they see how you react. You respond to different situations. So I guess that's how they evaluate who they move up and who they don't. I guess that would be one of them is to be open minded because a lot of the managers are pretty open minded and pretty approachable.

As a result of the communication in a store, employees said that they can figure out quickly which managers they could trust based on how open they are in their communication, which they feel makes them more committed to those managers. As a shift supervisor, Alex described her rise through the managerial ranks and her training, which included a class in performance communication. She described her communication style as open and honest.

All four employees said that they were able to quickly discern which managers were open-minded about communicating with employees. The third theme that emerged from the analysis is the participants' beliefs in the value of asking for and receiving feedback from their managers.

Getting feedback

These four employees felt that any type communication from their manager was more effective if it included regular feedback. Both Jessica and Sharon indicated that they appreciated getting feedback from their bosses about how they were doing. Sharon also noted that some managers are better than others in listening and providing feedback. "So I think depending on what you say to the manager, management is receptive and is not receptive." Alex expressed gratitude to her district manager for teaching her how to give feedback in a constructive way to her employees.

Deserai, an employee who was scheduled by her manager to be promoted to the next level of supervision, believes that positive feedback is necessary to let employees know that they are important to the company, regardless of how long they have been with the company. She thinks that employees recognized, however, that communication suffered when the store was either too busy or understaffed. Deserai worried that “management has gotten away from giving encouragement and recognition for those old [colleagues] as well as new,” because the managers were being held accountable for so many things in the store that they became distracted from providing that necessary feedback.

A lot of the old [colleagues] feel as though they might not get the positive feedback because the focus is on the new partners right now so we’ve got a lot of older [colleagues] that do an awesome job every day but because they do it every day it’s kind of expected that - “We know you do a good job – you’re fine.” But you know sometimes they need that encouragement – not so much feedback but they need that encouragement.

Overall, the employees all said that they appreciated the opportunity to get feedback from their manager on their job performance. They believe that this feedback suffers, however, when a store is under stress, such as turnover. The next theme mentioned in the employee interviews is about what they agree they enjoy most about their job: the people.

The people

Jessica, one of the youngest employees noted that, “my favorite part of working here is the people-- the [colleagues]. I really like how I can talk to everyone and we’re all doing the same job.” Sharon agreed,

I guess the people I work with. You get to know a lot of different people in different areas. We have new people – there’s a guy that’s 47 years old and he’s a really interesting guy. He’s had a lot of really cool experiences. At my old store, there was a man who had a daughter my age and we were really good friends. He’s a great guy – he was so fun.

They also feel that smooth communication between the employees served to enhance their own experience as well as their customers’ experience. Deserai noted, “The way we interact with each other, the vibe is different when you have those [colleagues] that are happy when they come to work and they love what they’re doing.” Jessica also noted how she enjoyed both the co-workers and customers and how it brought her out of her shell. “Oh yes, I love the customers, I love my coworkers, it’s just how it’s made me be more out-going--like I was a lot more shy when I first started working here at the job.”

Overall, the employees agreed that the favorite part of their job is the people they interact with—both their co-workers and their customers, and they believe that good communication is important for a positive work environment. The final theme the employees described was the way their actions affect their customers.

Customer impact

These employees believe their own communication style or ability would influence their relationships with their customers. Deserai also described a connection between how she worked with her co-workers and how it affected their customers.

We all come from different places and we all share different experiences with each other. So I think people see that and that they think it is an easy job. It looks like so much fun so it must be easy. They seem to be laughing and joking but they don't realize we still have to be making things, cleaning up, we have to be getting things prepared for the next person that comes in. ... but we still work and we're back there working our butts off just to give you 100% every time you come in. Like just to make sure the store looks good when you come in, just to make sure we have things out there when you come in.

Sharon noted how the positive relationships with co-workers and customers made her job meaningful.

That's the best part, the different people and how great they are. You'd never know it. I mean like sure you know they're nice people – people that help you when you're getting your coffee but when you work with them every day and see them and develop relationships, they're the best part.

They said they understood that their work behavior directly influenced how customers perceived them and their company. As a result, they felt they were aware that they were highly visible in what they said and did. Jessica described her feelings this way,

That's the best part whether it's interacting with my coworkers or interacting with the customers. That's definitely the best thing. Even if I'm in a bad mood one day – just talking to people and forcing myself puts me in a good mood because I have to. I'm not allowed to be rude to the customers even if I'm not having a good day. It forces me even in my day-to-day life with other activities to just remember that, “would I treat a customer that way?” No.

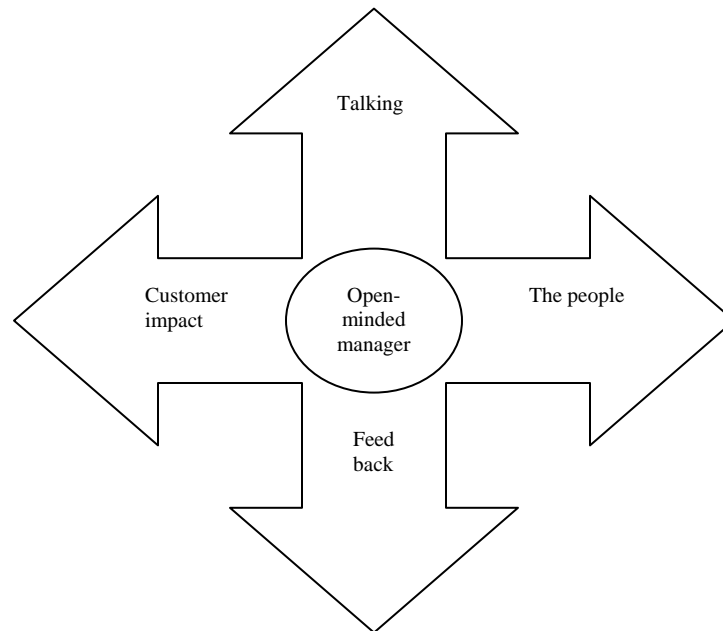
Overall, the employees believed that their actions on their jobs affected their customers. They also believed that those interactions with customers should be positive.

Employee Interview Summary

Overall, five themes emerged from the cluster analysis 1) talking with managers, 2) open-minded managers, 3) getting feedback, 4) the people, and 5) customer impact. First, these four employees described their ideal communication as face-to-face with their manager. One method for visualizing the relationships between the clusters in a qualitative analysis is to put them in a figure. Figure A is a mindmap (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004) showing how the clusters from the employee interviews fit together. It is clear that these employees feel that the crux of the experience lies with how open-minded they find their managers to be. Hence, “open-minded managers” is placed at the center of the diagram. They believe that this openness then affects the employee and customer environments. First, it affects how well managers are able to communicate with employees, as well as promote a sense of camaraderie among them. In

addition, this open communication fosters an atmosphere of constructive feedback in which employees want to improve how well they do their jobs, but also to provide an enjoyable environment for the customer. The arrows pointing outward indicate that those actions move out from the manager to the employees and the customers. On the vertical plane, those communications affect the relationship between a manager and the employee, yet on the horizontal axis, those communications affect the relationships with both co-workers and customers.

Figure A. Mindmap of employee's perceptions of how communication affects personal relationships



Executive Interview Method

The executive interviews were scheduled after the employee interviews were completed. It became clear during the employee interviews and analysis what was important to employees, and the intent of the executive interviews was to ascertain whether or not there was a link between employee needs and company efforts. The employee questions centered on what made them happy in their job, but the executive questions centered on the employee responses of the importance of communication with their manager. The six executives interviewed for this study came from many different industries and were recruited using a snowball approach. Not all executives were able to meet in person, and some preferred phone interviews or the opportunity to answer the interview questions by email. For those answering by email, follow-up or clarifying questions were sent to flesh out their responses and the text of the email messages were used for analysis. Those interviews that were done either in-person or on the phone were recorded, transcribed and later analyzed using cluster analysis (Foss, 2004), as described earlier.

All executives were responsible for employee communications as a significant aspect of their job responsibilities. These executives are:

1. Mary Beth, Vice President of Corporate Communications for a financial services firm

2. Keith, Vice President of Corporate Communications for an energy company
3. Karen, Director of Internal Communications for a software firm
4. Sharon, Manager of Employee Communications for a utility firm
5. Katherine, Corporate Secretary with a medium-sized construction materials firm
6. Gwen, District Manager with an international retail firm

Five of the executives are women and one of the executives is a man. Four of the executives have specific responsibility for corporate or employee communications and two of the executives have other roles which led them to affect communications in their firms.

The themes that emerged from the cluster analysis of the executive interviews were employee engagement, managing reputation, dialogue with key audiences, separate from marketing, owning all channels of communication, and face-to-face communication. Each theme is presented in the sections that follow.

Executive Interview Results

Employee Engagement

When each executive was asked how they defined their job or what their primary role was, three of them, Mary Beth, Keith, and Sharon, all mentioned that they believe “employee engagement” is one of their top priorities. They explained that employee engagement was a fairly new way for their firms to envision their communications role, and they said this perspective was being communicated down to them from their CEOs. All participants believe that employees must feel they are contributing to the company’s goals to be “engaged.” Engagement can be a process of ensuring employees understand the company mission and “how they fit into it,” according to Keith. 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, the energy executive mentioned that when he came into his job one year ago, he reorganized the entire corporate communications department and toyed with the idea of making his title “director of employee engagement.”

The bigger, sort of the higher-level picture of the employee communications role is to increase the engagement of employees into what the company’s 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 because 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.

Despite these advantages, some participants also see that employee engagement presents them with challenges. Keith believes that this goal of employee engagement is such an important part of his job and what his department does and yet he said he is having a difficult time finding other qualified people to fill new positions for his department. He believes this

challenge is due to the job's new focus on employee relations and away from media relations that has traditionally existed at large companies.

Media is sexy and visible, but employee relations has impact. There's 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 from employee meetings, web casts, you know working with senior managers on presentations - they're giving road show presentations to employees. Creating feedback mechanisms for employees and again constantly evaluating our tools to see how we can communicate to employees. Put in context the things that the company's doing.

Employee engagement was mentioned by all executives as an important goal of their internal communication efforts. The second theme from the executive interviews is their goal of managing their firm's reputation.

Managing Reputation

The second priority many of the executives expressed was a focus on protecting and managing the reputation of their company. Mary Beth said, "I feel like corporate communications is helping a 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.

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 about it. No matter what statement we make, it's really about your behavior and we would always want our statements to be honest and accurate so it starts with your behavior and the decisions you made to determine what we can then say about them.

In contrast, Gwen, the district retail manager, bases her reputation measure on how well a store is doing financially as well as 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 the same selves at work as they are with friends or colleagues. "It's not authentic if it's not the voice you use all the time." She believes that this authenticity is cultivated by the "respect and dignity" in the way they communicate with each other. She feels like 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 their firm's reputation. The third theme identified in the analysis of the executive interviews is their goal of promoting dialogue with their key audiences.

Dialogue with Key Audiences

Along with managing reputations and promoting employee engagement, these executives believed that it was their role to promote dialogue with their key audiences or stakeholders. For example, Sharon, the utility firm employee communications manager, 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.” Yet, the participants generally relayed how dialogue with key audiences had an impact on employee relations. Sharon described the importance of internal relations as well and indicated that employee communication was critical to rebuilding trust in her firm after a recent merger.

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 pretty happy to work for this company. The company pays well, particularly as 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, the Director of Internal Communications for a software firm, also described the goal of her department as “letting them (employees) know the company.” She wants her efforts to help employees become more knowledgeable about the company and their place in it.

These executives identified one of their roles as opening a dialogue with their key audiences, including employees and external stakeholders. The fourth theme that emerged from the executive interviews is their belief that their job is distinct from yet coordinated with the goals and objectives of the marketing department.

Separate from Marketing

In asking each executive to describe their job and role in the organization, they were quick to explain that their department was *not* marketing, yet coordinated their messages *with* marketing, serving in what Mary Beth called “a strategic role.” The executives from the financial services, energy, utility, and software firms all worked in corporate or internal communications departments. They saw the world of employee communication from the lens of its role in corporate communication, along with media relations, public relations, customer relations, and creative which they said includes both advertising and new media. In all of these firms, the marketing function was distinct and separate from their focus of employee communication in their firms.

For instance, Mary Beth identified corporate communications as “managing relationships with all the stakeholders,” and added that her department works with marketing to make sure that the information going to external publics is consistent with the firm’s internal messages.

We would have a strategic consulting role when it came to how we communicate with customers. You know, if there were some sort of customer issue and we were going to provide talking points to our frontline about how to respond to it, oftentimes corporate communications may write that or even if marketing writes it, we would want to see it and have input into what we were going to say. So I think it’s really about managing your relationship with all the stakeholders. So there may be certain specific groups within your organization - you have specific responsibility for one stakeholder or the other – I think corporate communications is supposed to help manage and maintain the relationship across all of those.

Sharon mentioned that despite having a separate department responsible for external communication with customers, she feels that her firm does a good job of making sure both sets of messages are coordinated. “We do a pretty good job coordinating our messages so that there is no real difference in the essence of what we say to the media or to employees.”

In summary, only one executive had both corporate communications and marketing responsibilities. The other executives had responsibilities that they described as both distinct from yet coordinating with marketing and they believed that this separation was a good thing. The next theme underscores the executive’s belief that they had all channels of communication at their disposal to share their messages with their stakeholders.

Owning all channels of communication

The executives said they are responsible for all channels of communication with employees. Keith, the energy executive, described his firm’s approach.

For employee communications, we own all the channels to communicate to the employees. 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 and 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 was working to figure out which communication vehicles to use when and for what occasions. Mary Beth, the financial services executive, finds that her internal “clients” whom she counsels on internal communication prefer to communicate with their direct reports by issuing memos either in writing or by email. She believes, however, that there are occasions that call for a more intimate approach, such as face-to-face communication and tries to help her clients decide which approach is appropriate for which occasion.

Keith believes that rather than guessing how employees want to receive communication, he should ask them how they want to receive information on important issues. In his experience, employees want to receive any information about their company benefits in writing, so that they can take them home, read them over and digest them.

Well, you know, 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, HR information and 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 email or electronic newsletters.

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

We've seen in our research a strong and growing preference for electronic communication (for us that means the daily email and the intranet). However, that 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 wide range of communication vehicles to choose from when communicating with employees, but they also believe that it is best to ask employees which way they want to receive specific types of information. The next theme is the executives' belief that despite this breadth of communication vehicles to choose from, 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 these executives, they all believe in the benefit of maintaining face-to-face communication. Karen, the Director of Internal Communications, for a software firm said, "There is nothing better than face-to-face communication." Mary Beth, the financial services executive, discovered that when her firm conducted its own in-house employee communication study, "face-to-face communication with my boss" was the most satisfactory way employees in her firm said they wanted to get information.

I think we would 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 your manager. And then I would say beyond that would be in a meeting -- a face-to-face meeting with your manager and there are 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, the district retail manager, believes that face-to-face communication is critical for store-level employees and their bosses. "Our whole goal is respect and dignity in how we communicate and it translates to the partners as well as to the customers."

In summarizing the executive responses about face-to-face communication, data show that this type of communication serves a dual purpose. First, it keeps employees informed, and second, it keeps them secure about their place in the company.

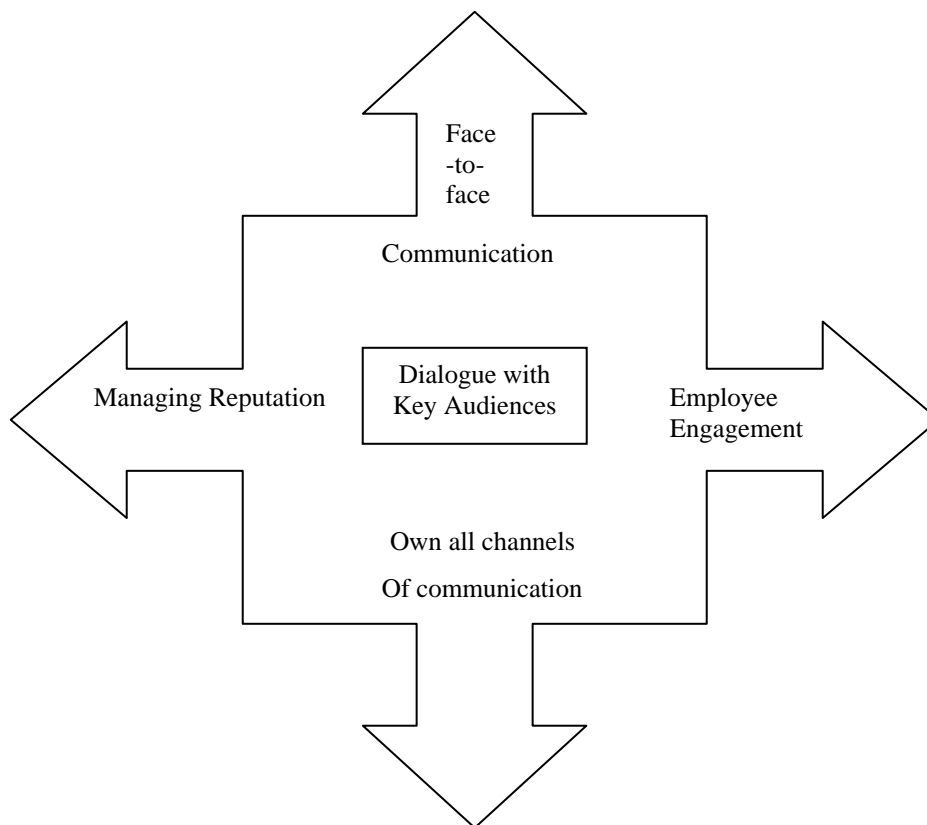
Executive Interview Summary

Executive interviews revealed their primary goals of promoting dialogue with all of their key audiences, managing the reputation of their company's brand and image, along with promoting employee engagement. The executives identified a full-range of communication vehicles they could use to implement these goals with employees, yet believed that face-to-face communication between an employee and his or her manager was preferred and most effective for reducing turnover and promoting a sense of community among employees. Finally, they saw

their work as overlapping, yet distinct from the marketing departments, which they saw as more tactical than strategic.

Figure B is a mindmap of the cluster analysis of the executive interviews, created from the interviews and relating them back to the relationship management literature. Executives frequently mentioned that the focal point of their activities is engaging in or promoting dialogue among key audiences, which is placed at the center of the diagram. The purpose of their dialogue includes both managing the reputation of the firm and employee engagement, which is reflected in the horizontal arrows of the diagram. In addition, the mindmap illustrates that these communication executives have a range of communication vehicles to choose from when communicating with employees, but that they believe face-to-face communication occupies a distinct and important place in talking with employees, which is reflected in the diagram's vertical arrows. The executive interviews corresponded more closely with the relationship management and public relations literatures, including aspects of building relationships. The mindmaps, however, utilize the words of the executives to describe those relationship management practices.

Figure B. Mindmap of executive perceptions of their role in promoting open communication



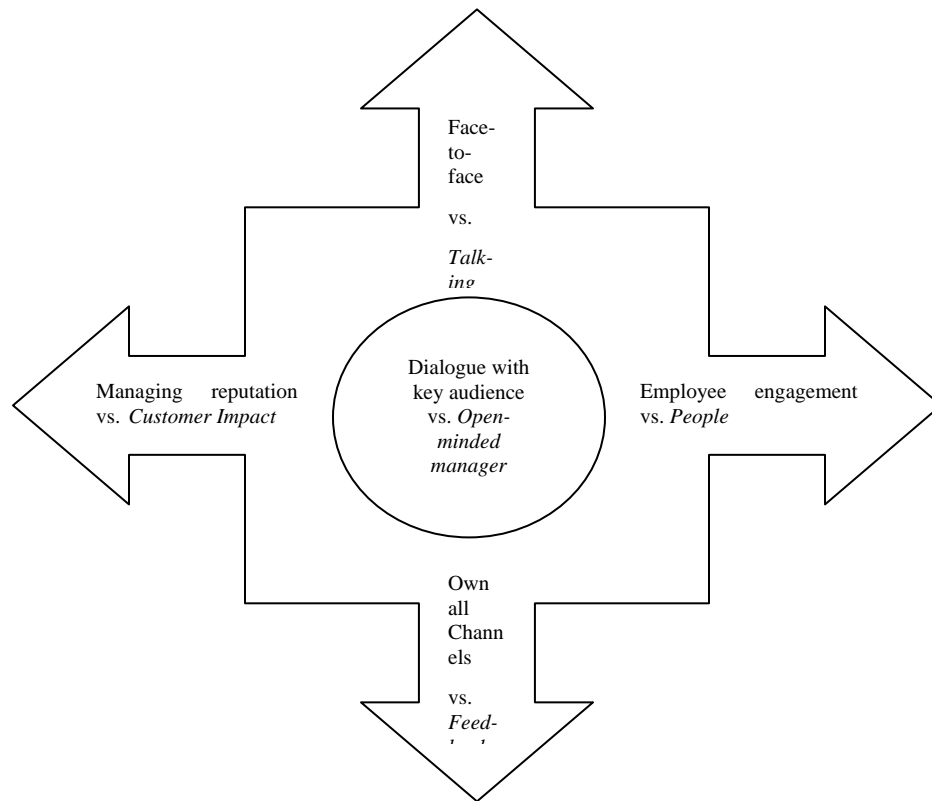
Discussion

Although new digital forms of communication are emerging, such as email, intranets, and podcasts, executives believe face-to-face communication helps their firms build trusting relationships within their companies. Employees believe face-to-face communication is the best way to learn from their manager and build a relationship with that person. Executives describe internal communication as a way to build better relationships with employees, so that they feel more engaged in the mission of the organization, will want to remain with the organization, and will share that enthusiasm with their customers.

The mindmaps were created using terms from each set of interviewees, but it seemed clear that the employee clusters focused on communication as part of the process of building interpersonal relationships, whereas the executive interviews focused less on interpersonal relationships and more on how to instill a sense of employee engagement to meet the goals of the organization or to enhance the firm's reputation. In order to analyze the similarities and differences across employee and executive interviews, a collective mindmap (Figure C, Northcutt & McCoy, 2004) was developed. In the middle of their thinking, executives see their job as opening dialogue with key audiences, including employees, but employees believe that this type of dialogue doesn't occur unless they happen to work for a manager who is very open-minded. This open-mindedness affects both the formality of communication managers have with employees as well as whether or not they offer the opportunity for employees to get and give feedback. Executives agree that face-to-face communication is important, but employees think of it as an opportunity to talk with their manager. There is the potential for consensus here, if managers understand that employees don't want formal, stuffy communication with their boss, but are seeking informal opportunities to talk with their boss. In addition, although executives see their ability to communicate widely through a variety of channels, employees crave informal opportunities to get and give feedback with their boss. Both talking and listening are informal methods of communication employed by these study participants.

Finally, executives see the goals of better communication to be employee engagement and managing their firm's reputation. Employees agree, but see communication more from their own perspective of enjoying the people they work with and positively affecting the customers they serve. Again, employees view these twin goals of internal and external engagement in a way that is much more informal than executives, yet are more focused on the bottom line. Employees want to affect customer relationships in a positive way and see how their own work habits and communication styles can actually improve customer relationships. Executives seem to intuitively know what their end goal of employee engagement entails, but don't verbalize it as well as the employees do.

Figure C. Collective mindmap of employee (*italic*) and executive perspectives



Employees think face-to-face communication is the most critical aspect of relating to their manager or company and the executives would agree, but the latter mentioned that they still have to coach their internal clients on how to do a better job relating to employees. These executives have found that their clients would rather send out a memo than walk over and talk to an employee. Executives also see many communication vehicles available to them to send messages to employees, and don't always see that face-to-face is fastest or easiest. The differing pattern of perspectives between employees and executives may reflect the latter's fragmented attention or compartmentalization with multiple employees to manage.

Executives even had specific names or jargon for this process: corporate communication, employee communication, or internal communication. They find it distinct from both marketing and public relations. For these executives, corporate communication or internal communication best describes the work they do to communicate with employee constituents. The implication is that communication is different than marketing or public relations to these executives.

Employees did not use specific names or jargon for this process. They refer to this type of communication as "talking." They recognize that having the ability and comfort level to talk to their boss each day is what makes them feel secure and happy in their jobs. They are very astute in understanding which managers are receptive to this type of open communication and which managers shy away from it.

As a result, employees and executives have different conceptions in how and why they communicate and there is room for miscommunication to occur. Managers might feel that they must present information to employees (as mandated by their supervisors or by the internal communications department), yet employees seek opportunities for informal and open dialogue with their managers. This alone could contribute to an employee's sense that his or her manager

is not open to dialogue because they are always in a presenting mode of communication. This also leaves a void between employees who seek intimate communication and communication executives who plan it—what person or role is there to advocate on behalf of what employees want?

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study was limited by interviewing only four employees and six executives, all from a variety of firms. Future research should consider studying employees and executives from one firm in order to determine if one firm's employee engagement activities are building trust and creating an open atmosphere for employees and their managers to talk.

Referring back to the collective mindmap (Figure C), these results diverge where each party defines the importance of face-to-face communication. Executives see this type of communication as one method among many for promoting dialogue with their key audiences, but employees see this as integral for interpreting whether or not they have an open-minded manager who they are able to talk to. The executive interview responses concurred with the importance that employees place on face-to-face communication, yet disclosed that their managers are not always equipped to deal face-to-face with their direct reports. Future research should ask managers about their level of expertise in face-to-face communication, including their ability to listen and deliver constructive feedback. In addition, future research could examine a firm's efforts to build trust before and after that organization works with managers to improve these skills.

Grunig (1983) suggests that publics can perceive a difference between symbolic and behavioral communication and one-way communication is inherently symbolic in that it says something, but does not have to 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. That discrepancy could also explain a disconnect between what employees and executives agree is important. If the executives are only planning communication and not implementing it, they do not actually know how effective it was. Future research should examine the effectiveness of including either employees or their front-line managers in the planning of these communication efforts.

Another purpose of this study was to determine which communication method(s) were most effective for building trust between the company and its employees. The findings support what public relations scholars Grunig, Grunig, and Ehling (1992) suggested--that trust was an attribute of relationships with publics to be measured and cultivated. Grunig and Huang (2000) found that successful relationships between an organization and its publics emerged from mutual trust, and Bruning and Ledingham (2000) called for more research into a complete definition of trust.

Employee engagement is not a term used in the relationship management literature (Bruning & Ledingham, 2000; Toth, 2000). It emerged from the interviews with executives, however, as a critical component of their job responsibilities. The executives in this study described their responsibilities as building 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 customers. Three of the firms had departments, in fact, specifically designed to manage relationships with employees. Referring back to the collective mindmap (Figure C), executives focus on engagement as a goal of their

communication efforts, while employees focus on relationships with people as an outcome of the communication efforts of the company. Future research should focus specifically on employee engagement as a role of the internal communications executive and how those efforts build trust between the employee and the organization. In addition, future research should examine the role that this trust has on relationships with other stakeholders, including customers.

Efforts to build trust with employees through internal communication can provide benefits for both employees and the firm, as employees feel more engaged, and more empowered to build relationships with customers on the firm's behalf.

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