

**Examining the Effects of Symmetrical Internal Communication and Employee  
Engagement on Organizational Change Outcomes**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines how the organization's symmetrical internal communication during organizational change and employee organizational engagement influence employee reaction to change (i.e., affective commitment to change and behavioral support for change). Through an online survey of 1,034 employees whose companies are currently undergoing or have gone through a company-wide change within the past two years, results showed that symmetrical internal communication during organizational change positively influences employee affective commitment to change and behavior support for change. Symmetrical change communication also contributes to employee engagement, which again, serves as a predictor for employee positive reaction to change. Significant theoretical and practical implications of the findings are discussed.

*Keywords:* internal communication, change communication, symmetrical communication, employee engagement, commitment to change, behavior support

Scholars have reported that the majority of organizational change programs fail, and the cause of that failure is often attributed to poor internal communication (Daly, Teague & Kitchen, 2003; Kitchen & Daly, 2002). In contrast, effective internal communication during change can reduce uncertainty, overcome employee resistance to change by building shared understanding, encourage employee participation, and eventually facilitate change implementation (Elving, 2005; Men & Bowen, 2017).

Internal communication refers to “strategic management of interactions and relationships between stakeholders at all levels within organizations” (Welch & Jackson, 2007, p. 183). The challenge for organizations is defining what exactly effective internal communication includes, particularly in the context of organizational change. Much of the advice in best-selling books on change management can be characterized as “directive (e.g., communicate often) without providing much guidance on channels, frequency, mix of types, or specific message strategies” (Lewis, Schmisser, Stephens & Weir, 2006, p. 123). Recently, through a qualitative study of internal communicators, Neill (2018) identified key messages to communicate to employees during times of change such as reinforcing the organization’s core values, explaining what the changes mean, and communicating the benefits of the change, end goals, as well as alternatives and resources for employees. Kraft, Sparr and Peus (2018) described leaders’ ideal communication roles at different phases of the change process. They stressed that during the beginning phase, executives should attempt to address rumors and demonstrate availability (Kraft et al., 2018). Then during later stages, executives need to offer opportunities for symmetrical communication, create an atmosphere of trust, and allow time for employee emotional responses (Kraft et al., 2018). Likewise, Men and Bowen (2017) argued that upward communication and listening with genuine care, sensitivity, understanding and compassion (cf. symmetrical communication) during change is crucial for effective change management as it “conveys the message that ‘your anxieties are legitimate’” (p.168). However, despite these speculations, there has been a lack of empirical evidence showing whether and how symmetrical internal communication during change affects organizational change outcomes.

In previous public relations literature, the role of symmetrical internal communication in generating positive employee outcomes (e.g., employee-organization relationships, employee positive messaging, employee advocacy) has been widely recognized (Jo & Shim, 2005; Kang & Sung, 2017; Kim & Rhee, 2011; Men, 2014; Saks, 2006; Verčič, & Vokić, 2017). Recently, scholars (e.g., Kang & Sung, 2017; Men, 2015) found that symmetrical internal communication generally contributes toward a higher level of *employee engagement*. Engagement has been described as the “discretionary effort exhibited by employees,” (Saks, 2006, p. 601) or their willingness to go beyond the minimal efforts required to keep a job. The impact of employee engagement on employee attitudes (e.g., commitment, job satisfaction), behaviors (e.g., employee advocacy), and other organizational performance indicators have been extensively studied (e.g., Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011; Dalal, Baysinger, Brummel, & Lebreton, 2012; Saks, 2006). Yet, whether and how employee engagement in the organization may exert influence on change management remains unknown.

To fill the above-stated research gaps, this study proposes a normative model that links symmetrical internal communication during change and employee organizational engagement to change-related outcomes, specifically, employee reaction to change that represented by employee commitment to change and behavioral support for change. The study’s findings provide significant implications for public relations scholars and professionals. Theoretically, the

study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on strategic internal communication and change management communication. Practically, this study provides specific recommendations for public relations professionals and organizational leaders overseeing change management communication initiatives.

### **Literature Review**

Strategic organizational change is “a planned adaptive process allowing organizational systems and participants to adjust and behave differently to accommodate new contingencies, technologies, values, processes and personnel” (Seeger, Ulmer Novak, & Sellnow 2005, p. 80). Organizational change can encompass a range of activities including rebranding efforts (Finney & Scherrebeck-Hansen, 2010), a change in senior leadership (Byrne & LeMay, 2006), mergers and acquisitions (Daly et al., 2003), and downsizing (Luo & Jiang, 2014). The continual change within organizations has become the new norm as organizations are facing increasingly keen competition from the external environment (Johansson & Heide, 2008). However, many change initiatives still fail for various reasons, among which lack of effective internal communication, organizational identification, change leadership, and employee support have been constantly considered as contributing factors (Barrett, 2002; Elving, 2005; Fugate, Prussia, & Kinicki, 2012; Hill, Seo, Kang, & Taylor, 2012; Johansson & Heide, 2008; Knippenberg, Martin, & Tyler, 2006).

From the communication perspective, it is worth noting that change management is impossible without effective employee communication (Barret, 2002; Seeger et al., 2005). Change introduces a high level of uncertainty, anxiety, and stress among employees, and communication is a way of reducing employee resistance, uncertainty, and encouraging their change participation and readiness for change (Elving, 2005; Kitchen & Daly, 2002). Integrating strategic employee communication into organizations’ change strategy helps managers inform and educate employees of the change as well as motivate employees to support the new organizational direction. Without effective communication, the cycle time required for employees to learn of, understand, believe in, and enact the change can be prolonged, which can raise the costs of change and affect productivity (Berger & Reber, 2006). Barrett (2002) identified five goals for effective employee communication during change include ensuring consistent and clear change messages, gaining employees’ support, encouraging employee discretionary effort, reducing misunderstandings, and aligning employees behind the company’s goals. Similarly, Bull and Brown (2012) state that effective communication should be initiated on varying message channels and should paint “the full picture of why the change is occurring and what impact it will have for each individual” (p. 148).

Meanwhile, the important role of internal communication during change has been empirically demonstrated (Elving, 2002). For example, a longitudinal study reveals that top management communication in a federal government agency predicts employee commitment to the change (Hill et al., 2012). Another study shows that perceived quality change communication enhances employee openness toward the change (Allen, Jimmieson, Bordia, & Irmer, 2007). In contrast, lack of listening and a viable feedback mechanism led to employee criticism on change (Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2011). Despite the vast literature from organizational and management scholars, communication and public relations scholars are largely absent in the change management arena, and a public relations approach to organizational change remains

underexplored (Johansson & Heide, 2008). The purpose of this study is to examine how organizations' strategic internal communication systems, specifically, symmetrical internal communication can influence employee responses to organizational change. Specifically, we focus on examining employee commitment to change and behavioral support for change.

### **Commitment to Change**

Organizational commitment has been conceptualized as “a psychological state, or mind-set, that increases the likelihood that an employee will maintain membership in an organization” (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002, p. 475; Meyer & Allen, 1991). Verčič, and Vokić (2017) characterized commitment as a long-term perspective and employee engagement as a temporary attitude. Such commitment is tested during times of organizational change, due to the uncertainty present in the workplace as well as the full range of emotions experienced by employees including anger, resentment, and frustration (Luo & Jiang, 2014).

Organizational commitment has been further delineated into concepts such as “*affective commitment* (desire to remain), *continuance commitment* (perceived cost of leaving), and *normative commitment* (perceived obligation to remain)” (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002, p. 475; Meyer & Allen, 1991). Meyer and Allen (1991) suggested that employees who desire to remain (affective commitment) are likely to attend work regularly, perform assigned tasks to the best of their abilities, and do extra tasks to help out, but those who remain out of a sense of obligation (normative commitment) are motivated by duty. Likewise, commitment to change has been defined to incorporate these dimensions.

*Commitment to change* refers to “a force (mind-set) that binds an individual to a course of action deemed necessary for the successful implementation of a change initiative” (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002, p. 475). Commitment to change has been described as “the glue that provides the vital bond between people and change goals” (Conner, 1992, p. 147), and similarly, a lack of commitment has been suggested as among the most prevalent factors contributing to failed change projects (Conner & Patterson, 1982). In their study, Herscovitch and Meyer (2002) found that commitment to change is a better predictor of behavioral support for a change than organizational commitment, and affective and normative commitment to change are associated with stronger levels of support than continuance commitment. This study will focus on affective commitment to change because as compared to normative and continuance commitment, it reflects employees' voluntary and proactive desire to support the change. Simply put, employees who show affective commitment to change truly believe in the value and benefits of the change and do not act out of obligation or fear of costs for not supporting the change.

### **Behavioral Support for Change**

Herscovitch and Meyer (2002) conceptualized behavioral support for change as encompassing both cooperation and championing. They defined *cooperation* “as demonstrating support for a change by exerting effort when it comes to the change, going along with the spirit of the change, and being prepared to make modest sacrifices;” and *championing* “as demonstrating extreme enthusiasm for a change by going above and beyond what is formally required to ensure the success of the change and promoting the change to others” (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002, p. 478). Both cooperation and championing are discretionary behavior that requires extra efforts from employees compared to pure compliance with change demands. This study centers on cooperation and championing as higher levels of behavioral support for the change. In support of the role of strategic internal communication during times of change, scholars have

suggested that leaders need to assume the role of sense-makers by communicating to employees what the change means in order to gain their support for organizational change (Berger & Meng, 2014; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Further, beyond providing sufficient information during change, organizations should listen to employees and engage them in a continuous dialogue (Men & Bowen, 2017), which reflects the notion of symmetrical communication.

### **Symmetrical Communication**

Grunig (1992) recommended that organizations approach employee relations in a manner similar to relationships with other stakeholders and described excellent programs as characterized by “an integrated communication function, and the managerial role, and the two-way symmetrical model of public relations” (p. 536). He added that symmetrical communication requires “trust, credibility, openness, relationships, reciprocity, network symmetry, horizontal communication, feedback, adequacy of information, employee-centered style, tolerance for disagreement, and negotiation” (Grunig, 1992, p. 558). Men (2014) described symmetrical communication systems as those where managers and their employees engage in dialogue and listen to each other to reach mutual understanding and build relationships. Examples of channels used in times of change management to foster symmetrical communication and dialogue include committee meetings, town halls, skip-level meetings, and informal channels such as breakfasts, coffees and lunch meetings that connect supervisors with employees (Neill, 2018).

Grunig (2001) believed excellent internal communications could eventually result in quality employee relationships and supportive behaviors toward the organization. Public relations scholars have confirmed such a connection. Kang and Sung (2017) found a positive link between symmetrical internal communication, employee engagement, and supportive behavior and commitment. Similarly, Men and Stacks (2014) found a positive association between symmetrical and transparent communication with favorable relationship outcomes such as employee trust, satisfaction, commitment, and control mutuality.

It is widely supported that communication is an important antecedent of organizational commitment (Elving, 2005); employees who engage in reciprocal dialogue with organizations would demonstrate a sense of belonging to and appreciation of organizations due to the community spirit symmetrical communication creates. Lewis (2000) listed the keys to achieving commitment to organizational change initiatives as creating and communicating the vision, providing opportunities for employee feedback, and communicating when goals are achieved. Findings from empirical studies in change management reveal that quality communication reduces employee uncertainty and increases positive employee behavior (Lind & van den Bos, 2002). Furthermore, soliciting change-related inputs from employees indicates employee empowerment, therefore leading to a heightened perception of justice during the change process (DiFonzo & Bordia, 1998). Despite the scant literature in relation to the influence of symmetrical internal communication on employee change-related responses, along the line of previous research, we argue that the practice of symmetrical internal communication featured by mutual understanding, collaboration, responsiveness, reciprocity, balanced power and interest during change can induce affective commitment to change and behavioral support for change.

H1: Symmetrical internal communication during organizational change positively influences employee affective commitment to change.

H2: Symmetrical internal communication during organizational change positively influences employee behavioral support for change.

As previously mentioned, affective commitment to change reflects employees' "desire to provide support for the change based on a belief in its inherent benefits" (Meyer et al., 2007, p. 186). Herscovitch and Meyer (2002) found that affective commitment was positively associated with employee discretionary support (cooperation and championing) for the change. Similar findings show that employees with a strong affective commitment would make personal sacrifices to support the change such as engaging in organizational citizenship behavior (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002). In line with these studies, we believe that committed employees are more likely to go above and beyond the call of duty to advocate the change and make extra efforts to fulfill the change requirement. The following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Employee affective commitment to change positively influences their behavioral support for change.

### **Employee Engagement**

Engagement has been defined "as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption" (Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma & Bakker, 2002, p. 74). Schaufeli et al. (2002) further described vigor as being "characterized by high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in one's work, and persistence even in the face of difficulties;" dedication refers to a sense of "significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge;" and *absorption* describes an employee who is "fully concentrated and deeply engrossed in one's work" (p. 74-75).

Other scholars have conceptualized engagement as three separate factors: *trait engagement*, referring to employees' positive view on life and work; *psychological state engagement*, which is related to job satisfaction, commitment and involvement; and *behavioral engagement*, which includes the willingness to assume additional responsibilities and personal initiative (Macey & Schneider, 2008).

The reciprocal relationship between employee engagement and organizational commitment has been discussed in a multitude of literature. Many scholars have argued that employee engagement is a broader concept than job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and job involvement (Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011; Dalal, Baysinger, Brummel, & Lebreton, 2012). Employee engagement is an antecedent to organizational commitment because once employees are engaged in their work, a sense of commitment to their job and their organizations will follow. Relatedly, Saks (2006) found that both job and organization engagement predicted job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

Engaged employees are attentive to and absorbed in their work environment. In the context of a change initiative, they will devote tremendous energy in performing the change-related tasks. As previously discussed, affective commitment develops when employees "believe in the change and want to contribute to its success" (Meyer, Srinivas, Lal, & Topolnytsky, 2007, p. 187). Only when employees are cognitively, emotionally, and physically engaged in their roles and missions, and therefore feeling a deep involvement with and dedication to the change, could they be psychologically attached and committed to the change. Therefore, despite the lack of literature linking employee organizational engagement with employee commitment in the context of change, the assumption can be made that the more employees are engaged, the more they will be committed to the change.

H4: Employee organizational engagement positively influences employee affective commitment to change.

Furthermore, empirical evidence has revealed that employee engagement elicits supportive employee behaviors, such as positive megaphoning and scouting (Kang & Sung, 2017; Kim & Rhee, 2011), organizational citizenship behavior (Saks, 2006), and job performance (Dalal et al., 2012; Rich, LePine, & Crawford, 2010). In line with this rationale, we believe that in face of organizational change, employees with strong organizational engagement will demonstrate discretionary support to advance the successful implementation of the change. Therefore, we propose:

H5: Employee organizational engagement positively influences employee behavioral support for change.

Saks (2006) argued that a theoretical foundation for employee engagement can be social exchange theory (SET), which is based on a “state of reciprocal interdependence” (p. 603). Some of the basic assumptions of the theory are mutual dependence, meaning the various parties in the relationship have some justification to engage in exchanges to obtain resources they value; a desire to increase gain and avoid loss; and continuance of the relationship over time rather than a one-time encounter (Cook, Cheshire, & Gerbasi, 2006).

Karanges et al. (2015) described employee engagement as a form of reciprocation when employees are satisfied with the quality and quantity of internal communication. Scholars have long recognized that effective internal communication can foster engagement but poor communication can result in disengagement (Welch, 2011). In fact, it is said that in driving employee engagement, internal communication “plays a central role if not the most important one” (Men & Bowen, 2017, p. 121). Though limited, empirical studies have consistently shown that effective internal communication, such as transparent communication, symmetrical communication, and supervisory communication, is positively related to employee engagement (e.g., Kang & Sung, 2017; Karanges et al., 2015; Jiang & Men, 2017; Verčič, & Vokić, 2017).

Similarly, when organizations demonstrate two-way communication during change, employees experience trust, reciprocity, and a genuine and sincere concern from their organizations in communicating the content, the process, and the impact of the change, and in return, they tend to pay back the organization by demonstrating high engagement. In other words, in occasions where employees’ informational needs are satisfied, and feedbacks are valued due to symmetrical internal communication, their work engagement will likely be strengthened. Based on this rationale, we tested the following hypothesis in the current study:

H6: Symmetrical internal communication during organizational change positively influences employee organizational engagement.

Based upon the hypotheses proposed, the conceptual model of the study can be presented (see Figure 1). Specifically, symmetrical internal communication during organizational change and the resultant employee engagement can both contribute to employee affective commitment to change, which in turn, leads to employee behavioral support toward change.

## **Method**

To test the hypothesized model (Figure 1), we conducted an online survey with a random sample of employees who worked across varying industry sectors in the United States with the assistance of a global provider of survey services, Survey Sampling International (SSI) (<http://www.surveysampling.com/>) in June 2018. To obtain a representative sample with comparable genders, age groups, and corporation sizes across various income and education

levels, we used stratified and quota random sampling strategies. The final sample of 1034 employees included 52.4% males and 46.7% females who identified that their company is currently undergoing a company-wide change or has gone through a company-wide change in the past two years and the respondents experienced the change. Regarding their level of position, 38.1% of participants were non-management, followed by 31.1% in middle-level management, 20.9% in lower level management, and 9.9% in top management. The average age of the respondents was 41, and the average corporate tenure was between six to ten years. Approximately 49.8% of the respondents held at least a bachelor's degree.

### **Measures**

The study used a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) to measure the focal concepts (i.e., symmetrical internal communication, employee engagement, affective commitment to change, and behavioral support for change). All measurement items were adopted from the previous literature and then modified to fit the context of this study.

Symmetrical internal communication was assessed using six items developed by Dozier et al. (1995) (e.g., "Most communication during the change process between management and employees can be said to be two-way communication," "This company encourages difference of opinions during change"  $\alpha = .88$ ). Affective commitment to change was measured with six items adapted from Herscovitch and Meyer (2002) (e.g., "I believe in the value of this change," "This change is a good strategy for this organization",  $\alpha = .83$ ). Ten items adapted from Saks (2006) and Men and Bowen (2017) were used to measure employee organizational engagement (e.g., "Being a member of this company is exhilarating for me",  $\alpha = .91$ ). To examine behavioral support for change, 14 items adapted from Herscovitch and Meyer (2002) were used consisting of two subscales: Cooperation and championing. Specifically, cooperation was measured with eight items (e.g., "I work toward the change consistently," "I remain optimistic about the change, even in the face of adversity,"  $\alpha = .86$ ). Championing was measured with six items (e.g., "I encourage the participation of others in the change," "I speak positively about the change to co-workers,"  $\alpha = .87$ ).

## **Results**

The conceptual model proposed was tested utilizing structural equation modeling analysis with AMOS 24.0 software. In the structural model, the unidimensional variables of symmetrical internal communication, employee engagement and commitment to change were specified as observed variables while employee behavioral support for change was treated as a latent variable that entails sub-dimensions of cooperation and championship.

The test of the SEM model revealed excellent fit to the data:  $\chi^2(2) = .021$ ,  $p = .989$ ,  $\chi^2/df = .011$ , RMSEA = .00, SRMR = .00, TLI = .1.00, and CFI = 1.00. Thus, the hypothesized model was retained as the final model (see Figure 2). All the six structural paths demonstrated significant results at the  $p < .001$  level.

### **Hypotheses Testing**

Symmetrical internal communication during organizational change demonstrated significant positive effects on employees' affective commitment to change ( $\beta = .16$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and behavior support for change ( $\beta = .20$ ,  $p < .001$ ), supporting hypotheses 1 and 2. Thus, if the organization's change communication was two-way, open, valued employee's voice, feedback,

and participation, and cared about employees' concerns and welfare related to the change, employees were more likely to commit to change and support the change in action. Hypothesis 3 was also supported that employee affective commitment to change was positively associated with behavior support for change ( $\beta = .17, p < .001$ ). In other words, the more employees believe in the value and necessity of the organization change, the more likely they will cooperate and advocate for the change.

Hypotheses 4 and 5 predicted the positive effects of employee engagement on change-related employee outcomes. Results showed that, as hypothesized, employee organizational engagement strongly and positively influenced employee affective commitment to change ( $\beta = .44, p < .001$ ) and behavioral support for change ( $\beta = .53, p < .001$ ). Therefore, when employees feel absorbed, dedicated, and involved in the organization, and feel psychologically attached to the company, they are more likely to commit to organizational change and support the change through cooperation and championship when change occurs. Additionally, the association between symmetrical internal communication during organizational change and employee engagement ( $\beta = .62, p < .001$ ) was demonstrated in the study, supporting hypothesis 6. Employee-centered communication that is characterized by listening, reciprocity, trust, appreciation of employee feedback, and care of employee concerns during times of organizational change can help boost employee engagement.

In addition to the hypotheses testing, we conducted a formal test of indirect effects using a bootstrap procedure ( $N = 2,000$  samples). Results showed significant indirect effects in paths from symmetrical communication during organizational change to employee commitment to change through employee engagement ( $\beta = .27, p = .007$  [95% CI: .23 to .31]) and to employee behavioral support for change through employee engagement and commitment to change ( $\beta = .40, p = .005$  [95% CI: .37 to .45]). Therefore, employee engagement mediated the effects of symmetrical communication during change on employee commitment to change; employee engagement and commitment to change mediated the effects of symmetrical communication during change on employee behavioral support for change. In addition, indirect effect in paths from employee engagement to employee behavioral support for change through employee commitment to change was significant,  $\beta = .08, p = .006$  [95% CI: .06 to .11], suggesting that employee commitment to change was a mediator in the relationship between employee engagement and behavioral support for change.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

Successful change implementation cannot be separated from effective communication and employee support (Men & Bowen, 2017). While much has been examined on the causes, consequences, and strategies of change management communication from the organization's perspective, there is a dearth of empirical research on employee reaction to change and change communication (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002). Further, from an internal public relations' perspective, symmetrical communication initially theorized by Grunig and colleagues (J. Grunig, 1992, L. Grunig, et al. 2002) has been extensively studied and argued as an effective communication mindset or philosophy that yields a variety of positive employee outcomes, including employee-organization relationships (Rhee & Kim 2011), employee engagement (e.g., Kang & Sung, 2017), and advocacy (Men & Stacks, 2014). However, it remains unknown how symmetrical communication works in the change management context, when the organization's

normal reproduction of the organizational structures, routines, and rules is interrupted. To fill this gap, this study constitutes one of the first attempts to examine how organizational strategic internal communication characterized by a symmetrical system along with the resultant employee engagement influence employee reactions to change, specifically, commitment to change and behavioral support for change.

### **Symmetrical Communication and Employee Reaction to Change**

According to Herscovitch and Meyer (2002), employee commitment is among the most important factors that determine employee support for change initiatives. Likewise, Conner and Patterson (1982) argued that “the most prevalent factor contributing to failed change projects is a lack of commitment by the people” (p. 18). Indeed, employees who are committed to change recognize and believe in the value of change, which is prerequisite for them to comply with the change and conduct discretionary behaviors to support the change.

The roles of effective communication in influencing employees’ attitudes toward change and change outcomes have been extensively discussed in the literature. For instance, Difonzo and Bordia (1998) suggested that added information communicated during change will reduce peoples’ perception of uncertainty and proactively establish and maintain trust. Bordia et al. (2004) argued that systematic communication could increase employees’ sense of control and job satisfaction during changes. Kotter (1996) stated that open and transparent communication during change nurtures employee trust and positive attitudes toward change, which are vital for successful change implementation. More recently, upon a comprehensive review of recent change communication literature, Men and Bowen (2017) concluded the contributions communication makes in the strategic change process, including reducing uncertainty, overcoming employee resistance to change, facilitating employee participation, and building shared understanding and mutual interpretation.

The current study extended this line of research and provided additional support for the strategic importance of effective communication for successful change management. Specifically, the results showed the significant effects of symmetrical internal communication on employee reaction to change at both the attitudinal and behavioral levels. When the organization’s change communication is two-way, open, responsive, emphasizes listening, employee feedback and inputs, and cares about employee interests and concerns, employees tend to commit to change by recognizing and appreciating its value, and support change through cooperative actions and championship. Indeed, employee-centered symmetrical communication during change not only provides employees venues and opportunities to ask questions to reduce uncertainty, but also allows management to hear employees’ voice and concerns and address them in a timely manner to reach mutual understanding (Neill, 2018). Incorporating employees’ perspectives and input in change management decisions also gives employees a sense of empowerment and ownership (Men & Bowen, 2017). From a social exchange perspective (see social exchange theory [SET], Blau, 1964), management symmetrical communication during change acted as “socioemotional resources” for employees (Saks, 2006), which subsequently led to employees’ sense of obligation to repay the organization, including valuing and committing to the organizational change and supporting change in action. Overall, it appeared the effectiveness of symmetrical internal communication can be generalized to the specific change communication context, leading to positive employee outcomes that facilitate effective change implementation.

### **Employee Engagement and Employee Reaction to Change**

Employee engagement has attracted enormous scholarly attention across the business, management, and communication disciplines in the past decades. Numerous studies have documented the impact of employee engagement on organizational success (Saks & Gruman, 2014), including nurturing positive employee attitudes (e.g., job satisfaction, organizational commitment, Saks, 2006), boosting employee performance (Rich et al., 2010) and organizational citizenship behavior (Saks, 2006), as well as contributing to business-unit outcomes, such as employee retention, productivity, and profitability (Berger, 2011; Harter et al., 2002). However, limited research has explored whether and how employee engagement affects organizational change outcomes. As a psychologically motivated state characterized by vigor, absorption, dedication and positive affectivity (Schaufeli et al., 2002), will employee engagement facilitate change implementation? The current study provided empirical insights on the contribution of employee engagement during change. Specifically, the results showed that when employees are engaged within the organization physically, cognitively, and emotionally, they tend to commit to change and behaviorally support change when it occurs. In other words, engaged employees are more likely to be acceptive to change and appreciate the value of change than less engaged employees; they are also more cooperative during change through actively obtaining change-related information, seeking help related to change, and proactively engaging in change-related behaviors. Further, engaged employees are more willing to promote the value of change inside and outside of the organization as change champions. In short, employee engagement with the organization as a contextual antecedent factor can promote supportive change attitudes and behaviors among employees, thus facilitating change implementation.

The study also supported the linkage between symmetrical internal communication during change and employee engagement. Previous studies have consistently demonstrated the contribution of strategic internal communications on employee engagement (e.g., Karanges et al., 2015; Lemon & Palenchar, 2018; Men, 2015; Sievert & Scholz, 2017; Welch, 2011). The more specific roles of symmetrical internal communication in engaging employees also have been evidenced (e.g., Kang & Sung, 2017; Men, 2015). The current study thus extended this line of research by showing the positive contribution of symmetrical change communication in boosting employee engagement. In other words, regardless of during normal times or in the change process, symmetrical communication is a critical determining factor for employee organizational engagement. Thus, an employee-centered two-way symmetrical communication system during change not only contributes to positive employee reaction to change and change outcomes but also helps build an engaged workforce in the long run. Further, in a sense, employee engagement also mediates the impact of symmetrical change communication on employee reaction to change. Employee change attitudes (i.e., commitment to change) also mediates (partially) the impact of symmetrical communication and employee engagement on employee change-related behaviors (i.e., behavioral support through cooperation and championship for change).

### **Theoretical and Practical Implications**

As one of the earliest attempts to examine change communication from an internal public relations' perspective, the study provides important implications for internal communication and change management scholars and professionals. First, overall, the study adds to the growing body of knowledge on how strategic communication influences effective change management. Taking an employee-focused (as opposed to organization-focused) approach to studying change, the study demonstrated what kind of change communication strategies work from the internal publics' standpoint. Second, the study extended the generalizability of Grunig's symmetrical

communication model to the specific change communication context and demonstrated its effectiveness in generating positive employee attitude and behavior toward change and employee engagement. The findings showcase the value of a strategic public relations mindset and co-orientation model during organizational change. Third, the study contributes to the employee engagement literature by revealing its impact on organizational change outcomes. It showed how employee engagement as a contextual factor interplays with strategic change communication to affect employee change-related attitude and behavior.

Practically, the findings suggest that it is wise for the organizations to incorporate the public relations perspective in the change management process. Strategic communication matters for effective change implementation. Change managers and organizational leaders should be equipped with a two-way, employee-centered symmetrical communication mindset during change, not only feeding employees the information they need, but also listening with patience, sensitivity, care, and understanding. As Neill (2018) found in her study, organizations should create opportunities for routine employee feedback (e.g. skip level meetings, coffee/luncheons with supervisors) well in advance of a change initiative, so that those communication channels can be utilized during times of change. In addition, organizations should legitimize employee concerns, encourage their participation and involvement, and make employees feel they are empowered, included, and in control of the situation. Further, employee engagement should be boosted on a day-to-day basis, which can become a facilitator for change implementation. Organizations should pay attention to the disengaged group and beware of the potential challenges in generating positive reactions toward change from disengaged employees. Last but not least, to yield employee behavioral support for change, it is critical to cultivate employee commitment to change, making them understand the change, recognize the value and benefits of change, and what the change means for them, and for the organizations. To that end, open, added, and transparent communication should be in place.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Despite the significant theoretical and practical implications, the study has encountered several limitations that should be addressed in future. First, the study utilized a generalized approach and examined a variety of organization-wide changes employees had experienced in different organizations and industries. Although it increased the generalizability of the findings, it did not provide specific insights on any particular type of change, such as merger and acquisition or leadership change. Future research could adopt a commonly used case approach (e.g., identifying an organization that recently experienced change) to cross-validate the model proposed in the study. Second, the cross-sectional survey method is limited in establishing the true causality between the constructs. The application of SEM resolved the issue, but future research could utilize longitudinal designs or experimental method to provide deeper understanding of the causal effects between symmetrical communication, employee engagement, and change outcomes. Third, limited to single employees' perspective and survey method, the study did not provide in-depth understanding to questions of how and why; such as, why is symmetrical change communication effective and how exactly does employee engagement facilitate change implementation? Although a check of common method variance using Harman's single factor test did not imply a serious issue, other methodological approaches such as in-depth interviews and case studies incorporating alternative sources, e.g., the organizational leaders' and change/communication managers' perspectives could offer comprehensive insights in future.

Lastly, to extend the line of research on the roles of strategic internal communications in change management, future researchers could explore the application of other public relations strategies in the change management context such as transparent corporate communication and visionary leadership communication. Research is also in need to examine how effective change communication could potentially reduce the cycle time for change which then helps reduce cost of changes and preserve productivity (Berger & Reber, 2006). Lastly, with the evolvement of new technological tools like enterprise social media, how they could be utilized in change communication and their effectiveness warrant exploration.

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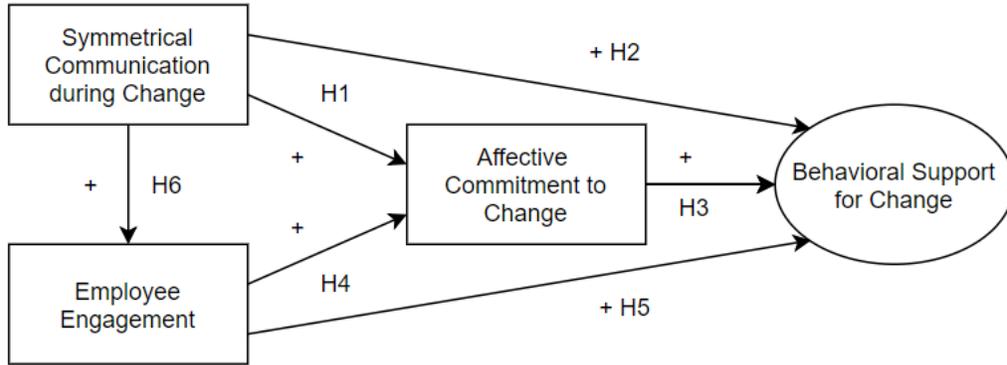
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Figures

**Figure 1**

*The conceptual model of symmetrical communication, employee engagement, and employee reaction to change.*



**Figure 2**

*The hypothesized structural model with standardized path coefficients.*

*Note. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .*

