



FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING EMPLOYEE ADVOCACY THROUGH LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNICATION

Shaochen Dong¹ and Romlah Ramli²

¹School of Multimedia, Technology and Communication, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia.

Email: dongshaochen01@gmail.com

²School of Multimedia, Technology and Communication, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia.

Email: romlah@uum.edu.my

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ABSTRACT: *Employee advocacy (EA) has emerged as a vital area of study within public relations, yet research on its antecedents remains limited. This conceptual paper aims to explore the foundational elements driving EA in the context of China's television broadcasting stations (CTBS). Utilising transformational leadership (TL) theory, the paper examines the relationships between TL and key internal communication dimensions (ICD), specifically transparent communication (TC) and symmetrical communication (SC), and their impact on fostering EA. The study posits that transformational leadership inspires employees to advocate for their organisation while effective internal communication enhances trust and engagement. Transparent communication fosters a sense of value among employees, whereas symmetrical communication encourages meaningful dialogue and feedback. By developing a conceptual framework, this paper seeks to clarify how TL and ICD interact to shape employee advocacy. Ultimately, the findings highlight the importance of integrating transformational leadership and effective communication strategies to enhance EA.*

KEYWORDS: Employee Advocacy, Transformational leadership, Transparent Communication, Symmetrical Communication.



BACKGROUND OF STUDY

There is a significant and concerning trend emerging globally in organisations and corporations a decrease in employee advocacy (EA) (Tao et al., 2023). Employees have become adversaries and not engaged when tasked with actively giving positive information about their organisations, such as refraining from endorsing organisational achievements, failing to engage with stakeholders, or abstaining from initiatives spotlighting and sharing positive information (Thelen, 2020). Which ultimately led to impacting its reputation internally and externally (Nazari et al., 2022). In addition, it extended beyond organisational boundaries. It created a distrust gap between the employee and the clientele and its stakeholders (Thelen & Men, 2023), decreased productivity, increased criticism, and a higher likelihood of job turnover (Alsharairi et al., 2023). Therefore, the issue of EA is becoming increasingly common in major organisations and has emerged as an unresolved issue, that needs further investigation it has been labelled as a priority by 45 % of public relationship scholars to increase and pay more attention to (Alyaqoub et al., 2019).

Due to this prevailing issue, academics have investigated the measures that represent the significance in the internal communication field, examining it from both internal and external perspectives (Alyaqoub & Alsharairi, 2020). The three measures that have been widely recognised as significant antecedents of employee advocacy include, the employee organisation relationship (Men et al., 2020), organisational reputation (Alsharairi & Jamal, 2021), and employee engagement (Meng & Berger, 2019). Despite the increasing significance of employee advocacy, there is a lack of scholarly research on this subject within the field of public relations (Hassan et al., 2021).

As a result, there are prominent factors that scholars in the organisational communication and public relations field have called to pay more attention to further investigation toward the antecedents of EA, such as examining the effectiveness of internal public relations and its effect on EA as an outcome of internal communications activities (Ghorbanzadeh et al., 2023), leadership style (Li et al., 2023), and engagement (Afram et al., 2022). As such, academics claim that the enhancement of EA may be achieved via the improvement of the quality of the adoption of good leadership styles like transformational leadership (TL) and internal communication dimensions (ICD), including symmetrical communication (SC) and transparent communication (TC) (Chen et al., 2020) and employee engagement (Aggarwal et al., 2022).

The identified dearth of research focusing on the direct associations between these variables within the unique organisational landscape of China's sectors highlights the urgency and significance of this study. Thus, this study will endeavour to fill critical gaps within the existing body of literature by undertaking a comprehensive examination of the intricate relationships between these factors and their effect on employee advocacy. By empirically exploring and validating these relationships, this research aspires to contribute not only to academic discourse but also to offer practical implications for organisational leaders, recommending strategies to optimise leadership and communication practices tailored to the specific needs of China's organisations.



LITERATURE REVIEW

Employee advocacy

Employee Advocacy (EA), defined as the promotion of an organisation by its employees, represents a burgeoning area of interest in both public relationship and communication studies. It is important to note that some scholars assert that employee advocacy is not merely positive word-of-mouth; true advocates can defend their management when the organisation is under attack. Walden and Kingsley Westerman (2018) propose that EA is one of the employee behaviours that constitute organising civic behaviour, which is often unrecognised by the organisation.

Moreover, advocates who speak positively about their management are often viewed as being on the “right side,” thereby enhancing the organisation’s public image. Employees who defend their organisation’s image and behaviour become trustworthy ambassadors, whose words are deemed credible (Lee & Kim, 2021).

Moreover, EA proves beneficial for organisations in retaining qualified employees. When employees believe they can advocate for their workplace, they are less inclined to leave, allowing the organisation to retain valuable personnel and avoid the costs associated with hiring new staff (Akgunduz & Sanli, 2017). Employee advocacy is essential for the organisation to fully leverage its information, participation, and resources (Latvala, 2017). Additionally, the relationship between organisational and employee goals is crucial (Alsharairi, 2024). Employees are more likely to pursue the organisation’s mission and objectives when they believe in them. Consequently, the initial outcomes in achieving these goals will improve, resulting in increased productivity. Sharing goals encourages employees to stay focused and work collaboratively (Kuutsa, 2016).

EA is also vital for modern organisations due to its relevance to innovation and change initiatives. Employees who feel empowered to propose innovative solutions are more likely to engage in change processes. Organisations that rely on innovative human resources can outperform their competitors (Yeh, 2014). EA positively influences organisational resilience, as advocates are generally more receptive to new information, ideas, and dynamics within the organisation. Furthermore, these employees can have a positive impact on their peers and assist in the adaptation process. As a result, organisations with an advocacy community often feel less pressure during abrupt changes (Lu et al., 2023).

This relationship is driven by the combined effects of EA on organisational reputation, employee engagement, talent attraction, and customer satisfaction. In essence, EA serves as a strategic asset for organisational success (Thelen et al., 2022). A significant outcome related to EA is the enhancement of organisational identity (Park, 2023). When all employees consistently share positive information about the organisation, it strengthens its identity, benefiting both employees and customers (Abdullahi et al., 2022). A robust organisational identity helps differentiate the organisation in the market, attracting committed customers and investors (Lee et al., 2021).

Given the theoretical and practical significance of EA, current studies should focus on elucidating the antecedents and consequences of this concept. Additionally, research should examine the varying effects of advocacy behaviours on organisational success. By prioritising



EA, organisations can better harness the strengths of their workforce to achieve sustainable growth and a favourable public image. Overall, as organisations continue to recognise the critical role of employee advocacy, understanding its dynamics and implications will be essential for fostering a culture of engagement and commitment that benefits both employees and the organisation as a whole.

Transformational leadership theory

Transformational Leadership Theory (TLT) is increasingly recognised as a crucial determinant of organisational success. While it has been extensively studied in management, business, and marketing, research in the public relations context is still evolving (Saputra, 2021). Samimi et al. (2022) define leadership as a process that outlines tasks and strategies, influences performance, maintains group cohesion, and enhances organisational culture. Additionally, Amussah (2020) characterises leadership as the ability to motivate, influence, and enable contributions to organisational performance.

The term 'transformational leadership' was first introduced by Downton (1973) and gained prominence through Burns (2012), who described it as a process where leaders and followers elevate each other's morality and motivation. Transformational leaders utilize their vision and personality to inspire followers to change their expectations and motivations in pursuit of common goals.

Burns originally introduced TLT, which was later expanded by Bass in 1985, highlighting the importance of leaders in inspiring followers based on personality (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Leadership style positively influences follower qualities and commitment, motivating them to exceed expectations. Bass (1995) further delineated TLT into four components: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration.

Transformational leadership appeals to scholars primarily due to its relational focus. Research indicates it positively impacts employee attitudes and behaviours, such as job satisfaction (Ridwan et al., 2022). Transformational leaders are trusted figures who share decision-making power and empower their followers (EkiZler & Bolelli, 2020). This relevance across various contexts—construction, empowerment, and organisational relationships—helps maintain TL's popularity.

Importantly, transformational leadership is instrumental in promoting employee advocacy (EA) (Hong & Ji, 2022; Nurina, 2018). TLT serves as a powerful framework in organisational management and leadership theories (Peng et al., 2021; Siangchokyoo et al., 2020), motivating followers to enact collective change for better outcomes (Siangchokyoo et al., 2020; Yin et al., 2020). It emphasizes inspiration and challenges in organisational settings (Kwan, 2020). Currently, CTBS often rely on transactional and autocratic leadership styles, which can perpetuate the status quo and limit employee participation (Lau et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2018). Given the rapid economic and social transformation in China, adopting TL is critical for navigating these changes (Zhou et al., 2021). Despite its significance, TL remains underutilized in some organisations.

However, cultivating transformational leadership within CTBS is essential for building high-performing organisations and positively influencing employee behaviour. By fostering an environment of trust, innovation, and ethical behaviour, TL can drive meaningful changes



within organisations and among employees. With China's current socio-economic challenges requiring careful navigation, implementing a TL approach is vital for achieving success in this complex environment.

Moreover, to establish trust and credibility within organisations, effective communication practices are essential. Men (2014) emphasizes that strategic communication (SC) is a prerequisite for trust and credibility. Transformational leaders who foster open communication contribute to building trust among followers (Alyaqoub et al., 2024). Such communication enhances employee engagement and advocacy. Grunig et al. (2002) characterise SC as open, reciprocal, and two-way, facilitating the exchange of opinions and concerns (Hay, 2006). Effective communication is crucial for cultivating trust and credibility. According to social exchange theory, leaders who communicate transparently create an environment where employees feel empowered to voice their perspectives on organisational matters. In return, employees contribute their skills, effort, and time to advance the organisation's development (Rafferty & Griffin, 2004).

Internal Communication Dimension

Transparent Communication

Organisational transparency became one of the top items on the research agenda in the field of communication and public relations (Thelen & Formanchuk, 2022). The three major, widely accepted, elements that form sub-constructs of the transparent communication concept are informational substantiality, participation, and accountability (Alyaqoub et al., 2023a). As Thelen and Formanchuk (2022) argue transparency as a process means not only the provision of information but the active participation in obtaining, sharing, and creating knowledge.

However, in an internal communication context, the transparent communication of the organisations includes the offering of substantial and accountable information to the employees and inviting the employees to the decision-making process by determining their wants and demands. These three elements emphasize that an organisation's communication efforts, listening and telling, have an active nature to increase mutual understanding. Several scholars have posited the virtues of TC such as increasing employee trust (Podsakoff et al., 1990), engagement (Arif et al., 2023), organisational reputation (Gross et al., 2021), and employee organisation relationships (Wamprechtsamer, 2023). Notably, transparent internal communication has been conceptualized and operationalized as employees' perceptions and/or evaluations of their organisations' communication practices, in general, in much extant literature (Jiang & Shen, 2023).

Similarly, other scholars provided a more holistic definition, arguing that TC is the strategic management of interactions and relationships between stakeholders at all levels within organisations, including internal line manager communication, team peer communication, and organisational communication (Lee & Kim, 2021). This suggests that to better understand organisations' internal communication practices, complex and dynamic interactions and relationships at all levels should be considered comprehensively.

Attributed to the aforementioned purpose, the current study attempts to differentiate three types of TC in CTBS. Although many studies have shown that internal transparency is instrumental in driving EA, few cases have confirmed how each level's communication leads to symmetrical



or asymmetrical advocacy. To address the mechanism through which employee support could be altered by each unit's transparent communication that of the CEO, supervisors, and peers the current study suggests the second driver, which is SC.

Symmetrical Communication

Researchers posited that organisations should apply the same strategic focus to managing employee relations as to the organisation's other stakeholders. Organisations are encouraged to create comprehensive employee communication programs, based on four key principles of strategic management, integrated communication functions, the manager's effectiveness in dialogue, and the two-way symmetrical model of public relations (Alyaoub et al., 2023b).

Previous studies argued that high-quality relationships between organisations and employees are encouraged by SC, which he defined as a pattern of communication manifesting dual interest, an interest that meets the interests of all actors. Such communication generates trust, credibility, openness, reciprocation, network symmetry, and horizontal communication, all of which affect employee attitude. Empirical data supports the assumption that communication about performance, for example, is conducive to higher employee commitment and trust (Lee et al., 2022).

SC is officially defined as two-way communication that aims to benefit all parties, achieved through openness, feedback capacity, and participation facilities in decision-making. It is one of the most common paradigms in organisational communication, widely recognised for its important role in organisational public relations and epitomized in interactions between organisations and their employees to create mutual understanding and participative decision-making (Andreu Perez et al., 2022). Research indicates that organisations with symmetrical communication patterns show higher levels of employee advocacy, related communication behaviour, job satisfaction, and identification (Lee, 2022). Conversely, asymmetrical communication characteristics are unidirectional, aimed at influencing or controlling employees' communicative behaviour. As such, asymmetrical communication represents a regulatory relationship between authoritarian culture organisations and their employees. In general, symmetrical communication is a critical aspect of internal communication programmes that are aimed at creating desirable employee attitudes and behaviours (Oedekoven, 2021). This study focuses on examining transparent and symmetrical communication as a part of internal public relations.

Hypothesis Development

The Relationship of Transformational Leadership and Employee Advocacy

Empirical research indicates that there is a strong impact of transformational leadership at a variety of organisational levels on employee advocacy. Jia et al. (2021) also demonstrated that transformational leaders were able to inspire their followers to promote the organisation's goals.

Likewise, in the context of a Chinese organisation, Zhu et al. (2022) found that TL was effective in promoting employee commitment and advocacy, as commitment and advocacy were nurtured in a culture where leaders inspire others with their ideas. These issues were studied in the context of employees working in Korean private organisations by Park et al.



(2021). They studied the relationship between TL and employee commitment, one of whose expressions is advocacy. They found that TL, specifically charismatic behaviour, and intellectual stimulation, fostered employee commitment, including advocacy, through creating a climate of trust and empowerment.

This study also highlights the possibility of considering the role of leadership in changing organisational outcomes through employees as advocates. In this way, this research correlates well with the synthesized study provided by Khoso et al. (2021) synthesized knowledge that TL results in high levels of employee commitment and loyalty to a leader.

Furthermore, the theory states that it is possible to provide a firm theoretical ground for the statement that TL will result in EA in various organisational contexts Siangchokyo et al. (2020). This fact can be proved by the outcomes of numerous studies on how TL may influence employees' trust and commitment and motivate them to advocate, among other organisations, the organisations they work in. The evidence obtained, when synthesized, argues to be strong enough to ensure the reliability of the statement regarding TL as influencing advocacy in organisational settings (Lee & Kim, 2021). It may be concluded that, based on the above studies and the manner of their synthesis, Therefore, this hypothesis is posited.

Hypothesis 1: Transformational leadership is positively associated with employee advocacy in China's television broadcasting stations.

Internal Communication Dimension and Employee Advocacy

Transparent Communication and Employee Advocacy

TC is a type of organisational communication associated with openness and honesty regarding information. Research on the relationship between TC and EA demonstrates a consistent positive relationship. Lee and Dong (2023) conducted a study in Chinese organisations and discovered that a higher extent of employee-appreciated transparency concerning organisational goals and organisational behaviour tends to have a positive direct relationship with EA. In another study, Wang et al. (2020) investigated the topic on a multinational level in organisation subsidiaries and concluded that there is a positive connection between the two types of business practices. In cross-industry research over Western and Chinese samples, Zhang et al. (2019) have stated that the latter showed a mixed result because the performance appraisal-centered communication opened other avenues of employees' direct motivation. Hong & Ji (2022) discovered that TC is a great tool to increase EE and is directly linked to increased advocacy behaviours. As Huang et al. (2021) point out, the acquisition of open communication is positively connected to an increase in organisational trust. At the same time, trust works as a direct mediator in the relationship between TC and EA.

Moreover, Jiang and Shen (2023) found that TC positively affected EA since employees who feel well-informed and engaged in information-sharing processes are more likely to advocate for the organisation's interests and values. Liu et al. (2021) studied the impact of TC on EE and EA in service-oriented industries and found that organisations that communicate openly and transparently with employees have a higher level of EA in turn leads to customer satisfaction and performance of the organisation. These studies significantly impacted my understanding of different aspects of TC and their impact on EA. Overall, the findings of the studies provide theoretical and empirical support to the hypothesis that TC has a positive



impact on EA across different cultural and national settings. The use of TC ensures that the organisational EA for the organisational goals, values, and interests increases. Therefore, this hypothesis is posited.

Hypothesis 2: Transparent communication is positively associated with employee advocacy in China's television broadcasting stations.

Symmetrical Communication and Employee Advocacy

SC is a form of mutual, two-way exchange between employees and their organisational leaders, which generates open, trustworthy, and mutually respectful relations (Men & Stacks, 2014). previous research served to accentuate the positive effects of SC, on various employee outcomes such as job satisfaction (Men & Sung, 2022), organisational identification (Yue et al., 2021), loyalty (Sinitsyna et al., 2024), employee-organisation relationships, and communication behaviour (Wang, 2021).

Relying on previous research, efforts to maintain SC and build positive relationships with employees yielded positive outcomes in terms of employees' engaging in positive megaphoning and scouting behaviours (Alsharairi et al., 2022). Specifically, there is a wealth of empirical evidence supporting the positive effects of SC on EA. Ji et al. (2022) discovered in EA that symmetrical organisations have a higher level of employees' trust and commitment, which makes them promote their organisations more. Lee and Kim (2021) have found that employees who feel they are being heard and valued are more likely to promote their organisation in the outside world. Moreover, findings by Thelen and Men (2023) further proved that the openness and honesty of the organisation had a significant effect on the levels of EE, which led to higher EA. SC is most consistent with the principles of this leadership style, combining to enhance EA. For example, the introduction of a vision/reward standard or the use of SC to discuss the way information on the achievement of final scores is handled might be a powerful mechanism for the promotion of EA. In the article by Ji et al. (2022), the regular practice of inspirational motivation and open dialogue and, therefore, SC has been discussed as a factor that enhances EA.

In general, the addition of transformational perspectives to the long-term effects of this type of communication has a significant effect on increasing EA. Thus, it can be concluded that SC has a positive effect on EA, while TL plays a crucial moderating role in affecting this relationship, with all the components contributing to a positive synergy. Therefore, this hypothesis is posited.

Hypothesis 3: Symmetrical communication is positively associated with employee advocacy in China's television broadcasting stations.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the pivotal role of Transformational Leadership Theory (TLT) in enhancing organisational effectiveness and employee engagement, particularly within China's television broadcasting stations (CTBS). Leadership is a fundamental determinant of success, and transformational leadership offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how leaders can motivate and inspire their followers. By focusing on the dimensions of idealized



influence, inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation, TLT provides leaders with the tools necessary to foster a positive organisational culture.

Effective communication is integral to transformational leadership, as it builds trust and credibility within organisations. Open, transparent communication practices facilitate employee engagement and advocacy, allowing employees to feel valued and empowered. As noted by Men (2014), strategic communication (SC) is essential for establishing trust-based communication (TC). Leaders who prioritize open dialogue create environments where employees can share their perspectives, enhancing their commitment to organisational goals.

Transformational leaders are crucial in promoting employee advocacy, which significantly impacts organisational reputation and resilience. By inspiring their followers to become ambassadors for the organisation, these leaders not only enhance the public image but also counterbalance negative perceptions during crises. This advocacy fosters a sense of belonging and commitment among employees, leading to higher retention rates and improved overall performance.

Furthermore, in a rapidly changing socio-economic landscape, particularly in China, the need for transformational leadership is more pressing than ever. Traditional leadership styles, often characterised by transactional and autocratic approaches, may not be sufficient to navigate the complexities of contemporary challenges. Instead, adopting transformational leadership practices can drive innovation, ethical behaviour, and a shared vision, ultimately leading to a competitive advantage.

Future research should delve deeper into the intersection of transformational leadership and internal communication dimensions, exploring how effective communication strategies can amplify the positive effects of transformational leadership on employee advocacy and organisational outcomes. By understanding these dynamics, organisations can cultivate a culture that not only adapts to change but also thrives in it. In summary, the integration of transformational leadership with strong internal communication practices is essential for achieving sustained organisational success in today's complex environment.

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