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# The internal communication role of the chief executive officer: Communication channels, style, and effectiveness



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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the internal communication role of chief executive officers (CEOs) by examining their communication channels, style, and quality, as well as their influence on employee–organization relational outcomes. Results showed that CEOs most frequently use email and face-to-face channels to communicate with employees. The social media presence of CEOs positively and strongly correlates with their communication responsiveness and quality, as well as employee–organization relational outcomes. The responsive communication style of CEOs positively influences the quality of CEO communication, which subsequently affects employee relational outcomes. The assertive communication style of CEOs demonstrates a small significant positive effect on the quality of employee–organization relationships but nonsignificant effect on the quality of CEO communication. The significant theoretical and practical implications of the findings are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Public relations and management communication scholars and practitioners have increasingly recognized the critical role of leadership in influencing the effectiveness of internal communication. On the one hand, leadership communication is a major component of the internal communication system of an organization (Men, 2014a,b; Whitworth, 2011), which influences employee attitudes and behaviors (Berger, 2008; Holladay & Coombs, 1993; Kim & Rhee, 2011; Men and Stacks, 2013, 2014). On the other hand, leadership provides an important context and sets the tone for internal communication practice. This growing concern has sparked considerable research that examines the impact of supervisor leadership on building employee–organization relationships in the past decade. However, one facet of leadership communication that has been largely overlooked is that of top-level management, more specifically, the chief executive officer (CEO).

The innate linkage between CEOs and the organization has been widely acknowledged. CEOs personify the organization to internal and external stakeholders and act as the highest level corporate spokesperson (Park & Berger, 2004). The image and leadership charisma of the CEO as portrayed in the media could influence corporate reputation (Cravens, Oliver, & Ramamoorti, 2003). From an internal perspective, the support and participation of CEOs in communication programs affect the organizational standing and effectiveness of public relations functions (Grunig, 1993; Pincus, Rayfield, & Cozzens, 1991). Similarly, the symbolic leadership, power, and communication demonstrated by CEOs may influence employee attitudes, trust in leadership, and performance (Men, 2011; Park & Berger, 2004). The influential role of CEOs as “chief engagement officer” within the organization has drawn the increasing attention of communication professionals. The 2014 Edelman Trust

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Barometer initially used the term “chief engagement officer” to highlight the pressing need for CEOs to come out of their offices, communicate with and engage their internal and external communities, and build personal relationships. Such rising concern with the communication function of CEOs appears in parallel with the development of social media, particularly with the penetration of digital platforms in the internal communication programs of organizations. The interactive, personal, empowering, and relational features of social media tools have blurred communication hierarchies within organizations (Men, 2014b). Thus, the power distance has been reduced, bringing CEOs into life and allowing them to communicate with their employees in a friendly, authentic, and informal manner. Moreover, the democratic spirit of social media with user-generated content encourages employees to articulate their opinions and concerns and voice alternative views, which can be heard by CEOs (Huang, Baptista, & Galliers, 2013; Men, 2014a). Therefore, emerging digital media fuels equal dialogues and builds the relationship between CEOs and employees.

Despite the growing professional interest and literature on the topic, few scholarly attempts have examined the channels, styles, or influence of the internal communication of CEOs on employee outcomes. Thus, this study aims to fill the research gap by investigating the CEO role in organizational internal communication in the social media era. In particular, the study examines the channels that are currently being used by CEOs to communicate with employees, social media use and presence of CEOs, different CEO communication styles, and more importantly, the effects of CEO communication styles on the relationship between employees and the organization.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Roles of the CEO

Mintzberg (1973) identified 10 primary roles in which the CEO represents the company in interactions with various constituencies, namely, figurehead, leader, liaison, monitor, disseminator, spokesperson, entrepreneur, disturbance handler, resource allocator, and negotiator. The importance of CEOs in public relations and image building has long been recognized by academics and practitioners (Park & Berger, 2004). Grunig (1993) contended that CEOs as top leaders of the organization help define and embody the organizational image and personify the organization to internal and external stakeholders. A number of researchers have examined the role of CEOs as corporate spokespersons or public representatives (e.g., Graham, 1997; Hutton, Goodman, Alexander, & Genest, 2001; Park & Berger, 2004; Reidenbach & Pitts, 1986). For instance, Garbett (1988) noted that the CEO personality shapes the character and culture of the entire organization (Garbett, 1988; Hutton et al., 2001). Gaines-Ross (2000) stated that a favorable CEO image urges investors to purchase company stock, recommend the company as a reputable alliance partner, and maintain faith in the company during setbacks. However, compared to the immense interest in the role of CEOs in external relations, their contribution to internal communications has not gained considerable scholarly attention.

#### 2.1.1. CEOs and internal communication

Executive leaders, particularly CEOs, play a unique organizational role. As the top leader of the organization, the CEO influences organizational direction, relations with key stakeholders, corporate reputation, and organizational effectiveness by establishing a collective purpose, communicating a vision, and managing the culture (Fanelli & Misangyi, 2006; Men, 2011; Resick, Whitman, Weingarden, & Hiller, 2009; Waldmann, Ramirez, House, & Puranam, 2001). CEOs likewise directly influence employee perceptions, attitudes, and performance through leadership and power (Park & Berger, 2004).

With regard to the public relations function, on the one hand, CEOs play the key “enabling” role; that is, they create an appropriate organizational context, thus allowing the public relations department to effectively manage the communication system (Grunig, 1993; Pincus et al., 1991). In other words, if the CEO doubts the value of public relations, the function will receive little support from top management and will be likely ineffective. On the other hand, CEOs can play the role of chief engagement officer internally and be directly involved with the communication efforts. For instance, CEOs often serve as the catalyst in forming the communication philosophy and style of the organization, establish management credibility to employees, engage in two-way communication, and use their personal influence and connections to foster trust (Men, 2011; Pincus et al., 1991). In fact, CEO communication is an indispensable part of organizational leadership communication. According to Pincus et al. (1991), employees desire a more open and closer relationship with top managers, particularly the CEO. The perceptions of employees toward top management are “closely linked to their overall perceptions of the organization as a place to work and the general state of the morale” (Pincus et al., 1991, p. 9).

However, the thrust of most scholarly works on leadership communication has been on immediate supervisor–subordinate communication and its effects on employee attitudinal and behavioral outcomes (Men, 2014a,b; Pincus et al., 1991). Efforts that examine the role of the upper levels of management, particularly CEOs, in the organizational communication process, have been scant. Thus, the current study serves as one of the earliest empirical attempts to examine the internal communication role of CEOs. More specifically, this study aims to investigate the communication channels employed by CEOs in internal communication and their social media presence, as well as the impact of CEO communication style on perceived CEO communication quality and employee relational outcomes.

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