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Internal communication and prosocial service behaviors of front-line employees: Investigating mediating mechanisms

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ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to the prosocial service behavior (PSB) literature by developing and testing a conceptual framework to investigate the mediating mechanisms underlying the relationships between internal communication and PSBs. Data collected from front-line employees (FLEs) in a UK based service organization was used to test our conceptual framework. Our findings demonstrate that FLE perceptions of internal communication practices influence their role stress and organizational commitment, which, in turn, influence their PSBs. The results highlight the significance of studying role stress and organizational commitment as mediators in the relationship between internal communication and PSBs. The limitations of the study are then sketched, and suggestions for future research are also provided.

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1. Introduction

It is well established within the services marketing and management literature that front-line employee (FLE) prosocial service behaviors (PSBs) strongly influence customers perceptions of service quality and satisfaction (e.g. Bettencourt & Brown, 1997; Bettencourt, Brown, & MacKenzie, 2005), which, in turn, affect organizational effectiveness and performance (Podsakoff, Whiting, Podsakoff, & Blume, 2009). PSBs are defined as “helpful behaviors of employees directed towards the organization or other individuals” (Bettencourt & Brown, 1997, p. 41). As PSBs are discretionary behaviors that go beyond formal role requirements, and are found to be positively associated with both organizational and customer relationship performance (Bettencourt & Brown, 1997), these are highly valued by service firms. Given the significance of PSBs, (Podsakoff et al., 2009), more research is called for to understand what motivates these, and how management can help to promote PSBs among FLEs (Bettencourt & Brown, 2003; Podsakoff et al., 2009; Wintericht, Aquino, Mittal, & Swartz, 2013). Considering that different types of FLE behaviors have been shown to have different antecedents (MacKenzie, Podsakoff, & Ahearne, 1998; Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1997), more research into different dimensions of PSBs is also warranted (Bettencourt & Brown, 2003; Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1997). However, relatively few studies have addressed this gap in literature (excluding for instance Ackfeldt & Wong, 2006; Bettencourt et al., 2005; Bettencourt & Brown, 1997, 2003; Lages, 2012).

In view of the above, literature suggests that research investigating antecedents of prosocial behaviors mainly falls into two broad categories: one that is focused on studying individual-difference variables (such as dispositions or job attitudes), and the other that studies contextual variables (Wintericht et al., 2013). However, research in both these categories has been ‘almost entirely’ focused on motivational variables (Dudley & Cortina, 2008), neglecting other important variables like knowledge and communication. This is because motivation has been regarded as the “overriding proximal predictor of citizenship performance” in literature (Dudley & Cortina, 2008, p.1249). Thus, more research investigating predictors, especially situational predictors (Rank, Carsten, Unger, & Spector, 2007), that could facilitate the effective performance of such behaviors has been repeatedly called for (Dudley & Cortina, 2008; Lee, Nam, Park, & Lee, 2006; Rank et al., 2007). In this context, although a few studies have looked at the impact of management interventions like empowerment (Ackfeldt & Wong, 2006), training, rewards (Lee et al., 2006), fairness perceptions (Bettencourt & Brown, 1997), task variables (Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006) and leadership (De Cremer, Mayer, van Dijke, Schouten, & Bards, 2009; Rank et al., 2007), research investigating the influence of internal communication on FLE PSBs remains extremely limited (Ackfeldt & Wong, 2006).

Literature suggests four levels of internal communication: internal line management communication, internal team peer communication, internal project peer communication and internal corporate communication (see Welch & Jackson, 2007). While most empirical work in services literature has focused mainly on internal line management communication in the form of either supervisor communication practices or feedback (Johlke & Duhan, 2000, 2001; Johlke, Duhan, Howell, & Wilkes, 2000; Yoo, Flaherty, & Frankwick, 2014), it is important to

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study internal organizational communication (also known as internal corporate communication (Welch & Jackson, 2007) or management communication (Ng, Butts, Vandenberg, DeJoy, & Wilson, 2006)), as literature highlights “the need for organizations to recognize employees as a distinct public worthy of individualized attention” (Mishra et al., 2014, p.185). Because internal communication between the organization and its employees helps to engage employees’ “intellectual and creative assets to produce value” (Quirke, 2008, p. 15), instills a sense of ownership in employees (Soupatha, 2005), enhances employees’ psychological attachment towards the organization and encourages them to contribute to organizational goals (Rousseau, 1998), it is being increasingly recognized as “a vital issue requiring further research” (Hargie & Tourish, 2009, p. 419). Although internal marketing literature conceptually talks about the benefits of internal organizational communication for FLE performance (George, 1990; Rafiq & Ahmed, 2000), empirical research verifying and testing its significance remains negligible (Ng et al., 2006; Tkalac Verčič, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2012), especially for frontline PSBs as “extant services research focuses far more on managing customer relationships than on the dynamics of effectively supporting and developing the service personnel who interact with customers” (Ellinger et al., 2013, p.1124). As such, empirical research examining the significance and role of internal communication is warranted to help organizations understand how internal communication could foster an effective internal service climate that encourages and supports prosocial behaviors among FLEs, which are crucial for any service organization’s success. Addressing such gaps in literature, we focus on organization’s internal communication (hereinafter referred to as ‘internal communication’) in this study, which is defined as “the extent to which organizations provide organization-related information to their employees, such as information about changes in organizational policies and procedures, financial results, employee and group successes, and customer feedback” (Ng et al., 2006, pp. 476–77).

As empirical findings establishing the significance of internal communication for FLE performance are not only limited but also mixed (see Ackfeldt & Wong, 2006; Carrière & Bourque, 2009; Ng et al., 2006), research is required to gain a deeper understanding of the mechanisms by which internal communication may influence employee PSBs. Since PSBs are not so simple that anyone can do them effectively (Dudley & Cortina, 2008), it would be useful to identify those variables and/or mechanisms that facilitate these behaviors in organizational settings (Podsakoff et al., 2009). In this context, relatively little empirical research has centered attention on understanding other alternative mechanisms besides employee attitudes (e.g. Ackfeldt & Wong, 2006; Lages, 2012; Lee et al., 2006). For instance, because role stress is inevitable in boundary-spanning roles (Singh, 2000), and can directly influence FLE behaviors and their attitudes (Bettencourt & Brown, 2003), Bettencourt et al. (2005) suggest that future PSB research frameworks might benefit by incorporating FLE role stress to better understand the mechanisms by which PSBs could be developed. In particular, previous studies overlook PSB antecedents (such as internal communication and role stress), and the interrelationships among these key variables in a comprehensive framework to understand how internal communication could facilitate the development of PSBs among FLEs.

Drawing on attitude (Bagozzi, 1992) and role (Solomon, Suprenant, Czepiel, & Gutman, 1985; Walker, Churchill, & Ford, 1975) theories, we address the above notable gaps and multiple calls in the service management literature by developing and testing a research framework to understand how internal communication may influence PSBs. Particularly, we investigate the nature of relationships among internal communication, role stress and organizational commitment on two types of PSBs: extra-role customer service and cooperative behaviors. In this study, we specifically focus on these two types of PSBs, because both extra-role customer service behaviors and cooperation are discretionary behaviors with a strong flavor of service orientation that involve helping others with work-related problems, which are especially critical for the

success of service organizations (Bettencourt & Brown, 1997; Mackenzie et al., 1998). Our main argument is that internal communication plays a crucial role in positively influencing FLEs organizational commitment whilst simultaneously diminishing the negative effects of role stress, thereby enhancing FLE extra-role customer service and cooperative behaviors.

The remainder of our paper is organized as follows. We present the conceptual framework and develop the hypotheses in the next section. The methodology is then explained, followed by the findings of our study. Finally, the research findings are discussed along with the implications of the findings for theory and practice, the major limitations of the study, and recommendation for future research.

2. Conceptual framework and research hypotheses

PSBs may be directed at either customers or co-workers (Bettencourt & Brown, 1997). *Extra-role customer service behaviors* refer to discretionary behaviors of FLEs in serving customers that extend beyond their formal role requirements (Bettencourt & Brown, 1997). *Cooperation* refers to helpful behaviors of FLEs that are internally directed towards the organization, and towards other members of their immediate workgroup (Bettencourt & Brown, 1997). Previous literature suggests that employee behaviors could be explained using both attitude and role theories. We develop our conceptual framework by integrating both these theories, which we describe below.

2.1. Attitude theory

Bagozzi (1992) argues that self-regulatory processes guide behavior. Specifically, individuals assess situational conditions, which lead to emotions, and subsequently induce coping responses (behavior); thus, the sequence of appraisal processes or cognitive evaluations of events, emotional responses and behavior. For example, when one experiences a pleasant event, one feels a sense of satisfaction and joy, which leads one to attain the outcome (Bagozzi, 1992). In contrast, when one experiences an unpleasant event, situation or outcomes, it leads to negative reactions such as dissatisfaction or distress, which in turn results in behaviors that are guided to reduce or eliminate the outcome. Based on attitude theory, our conceptual framework assumes that perceptions of internal communication (appraisal), leads to organizational commitment (emotional response), which then leads to employees engaging in PSBs directed towards colleagues (cooperation) and customers (extra-role service behavior).

2.2. Role theory

Role theory has been utilized to explain attitudes and behaviors by marketing researchers (Coeleho, Augost, & Lages, 2011). According to this theory, individual’s perceptions of their role are determined by their perceived influences from role senders (such as supervisors and customers), and their own perceptions of how their role should be performed (Walker et al., 1975). Based on role theory, role ambiguity and role conflict have been identified as two key aspects of role stress. Role stress mainly results due to need for flexibility during interactions with customers and others in the role set (Singh, 1993), and may also be influenced by managerial actions, including “the extent to which managers clearly define priorities for employees, communicate activities to be performed, and articulate evaluation mechanisms” (Coelho et al., 2011, p. 33).

Following role theory, effective internal communication between management and employees should reduce the role stress that employees perceive in their boundary-spanning positions, which also should enhance their organizational commitment and PSBs. However, attitude theory suggests that employee appraisals of the contextual factors (i.e. perceptions of internal communication practices) should influence their PSBs through the mediating mechanism of organizational

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