
Building leader-employee dialogue and relationships through internal public relations, leadership style, and workplace spirituality

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Abstract

Despite an abundance of research examining external organisation-public relationships—OPRs—(Bruning & Ledingham, 1999; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998), scholarship remains relatively undeveloped regarding dialogue and relationship-building between internal (employee) publics and their top organisational leader. In addition, little research has studied the leader-employee dialogue and relationships within the context of specific workplace cultures, particularly those with a spiritual basis. Building on previous research (McCown, 2010), this organisational case study examines the intersections and overlaps of OPR as realised through internal public relations practices and leader-employee relationship-building. In particular, how does the combination of specific leadership style enactment and spiritually-based workplace culture (Wagner-Marsh & Conley, 1999) influence the excellence of internal public relations practices? And, what outcomes result from leader-employee dialogue and relationship-building borne out of the confluence of specific leadership style enactment, workplace spirituality, and excellent internal public relations practices?

Organisation contextualisation

Before examining existing public relations and relationship-building literature relevant to the current study, it is important to establish organisational context. This study researched a banking corporation (CommunityBankCorp) with more than 100 employees at eight branches. Located in the Eastern United States, the bank launched just three years ago, yet established itself as the region's fastest-growing community bank during its existence. In addition to a fairly developed internal public relations (employee communication)

programme, several keys made the organisation well-suited for this study, including the founder's exhibited leadership styles and religiosity as well as an organisational culture known for its spiritual foundations. Previous research findings will provide appropriate background and context for framing the current study.

Leader style and religiosity

Leadership style can set the tone—positively or negatively—for both external and internal public relations practice and relationship-building. Research has already shown that authoritarian leadership is not conducive to excellent public relations (J. E. Grunig, 1992), but only a few studies (i.e., Aldoori & Toth, 2004; McCown, 2005a, 2006) have begun to explore types of leadership styles that positively relate to excellence in public relations. Regarding CommunityBankCorp, McCown (2010) found that the organisation's top leader demonstrated a variety of traits and behaviours characteristic of several specific leadership styles—including transformational, authentic, principle-centred, and servant—the combination of which promoted internal public relations excellence. First, the leader enacted a transformational leadership style (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978; Yukl, 2002), recognising follower needs beyond transactional exchanges and empowering followers to reach their highest potential through sensitivity to their needs. Often exhibited through friendly, close behaviour and treatment of followers as equals, the company leader ultimately confirmed McCown's (2005a, 2006) findings that transformational leadership using individualised consideration strategies (Musser & Orke, 1992; Musser, 1997) enhanced internal public relations excellence, relationship-building, and leader-employee trust. Second, the leader employed principle-centred leadership, which highlights ethics, character,

and personal principles to create a workplace where empowerment and trust enabled employees to meet expectations “without being reminded” because the leader “built an emotional bank account with them” (Covey, 1992, p. 155). Third, as found by McCown (2010), the leader exercised servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977, 1978, 1998) actions such as participative management (DePree, 1989), listening and empathy (Spears, 1998), and vision supported by hope/faith and undergirded with workplace spirituality (Fry, 2003) to foster high levels of organisational commitment and productivity. Finally, the leader embodied authentic leadership (Luthans & Avolio, 2003) characteristics such as coherence in connecting one consistent action to another and convergence of mutual understanding (Terry, 1993); confidence, optimism, resilience, and high moral character (Avolio, Luthans, & Walumbwa, 2004); and actions based on values and convictions (Shamir & Elam, 2005). This embodiment led to increased leader-follower intimacy and trust, increased follower (employee) engagement, and greater workplace performance (McCown, 2010).

According to CommunityBankCorp’s leader, this combination of leadership styles grew out of his upbringing in extreme poverty in a third-world country, his deep religious faith (“spirit-filled Christianity”), and the educational opportunities afforded to him in the United States. After experiencing a pivotal “vision”, he felt “led” to leave a leadership role in a large banking conglomerate to found a new community-based bank built on “fundamental biblical principles [of] integrity, honesty, passion, caring for people” (McCown, 2010, p. 11). The organisation’s employees highlighted these leadership characteristics as integral to CommunityBankCorp’s vision and cultural values as well as to the leader’s interaction and communication style (McCown, 2010).

Organisational culture

CommunityBankCorp’s workplace culture fits Wagner-Marsh and Conley’s (1999) definition of a spiritually-based firm. In particular, McCown (2010) found that the organisation’s culture embodied the following characteristics

deemed critical for achieving a spiritually-based workplace:

...honesty with self [in the organisational leader], articulation of the corporation’s spiritually based philosophy, mutual trust and honesty with others, commitment to quality and service, commitment to employees, and selection of personnel to match the corporation’s spiritually-based philosophy. (Wagner-Marsh & Conley, 1999, p. 292)

The company culture also embodied spiritual values that allowed employees to experience connectedness and wholeness in their work (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003). In addition, McCown (2010) noted that the organisation’s written mission statement, which includes spiritual language and specific “biblical principles” (the leader’s term), assisted potential employees in determining a personal spirituality fit with the workplace culture; it also helped avoid employee confusion and frustration (Konz & Ryan, 1999). Finally, CommunityBankCorp’s strong corporate culture contributed to profitability and employee job performance, brought about largely through the top leader’s focus on individuals and establishment of “a higher sense of business purpose”, also foundational to spiritually-based firms (Garcia-Zamor, 2003, p. 361).

These spiritually-based cultural characteristics, according to CommunityBankCorp employees, produced a workplace atmosphere described as respectful, friendly, family-like, team-oriented, supportive, enjoyable, accommodating to personal life, philanthropic, open, empowering, and participatory (McCown, 2010). The organisation also engaged in intentional cultural maintenance through a variety of mechanisms: a specific leadership position (the chief relationship officer), regular cultural training, consistent vision and values reinforcement, written foundational documents, mandatory ‘storytelling’, appropriate hiring and firing, building relationships inside and outside of work, and special committee activities designed to promote employee-leader dialogue

and connection (McCown, 2010). In particular, employees recognised the leader's faith foundation as key to informing the company's business philosophies; employees were expected to (and wanted to) adhere to those philosophies, although they clearly did not feel 'required' to share the leader's exact same religious beliefs (McCown, 2010).

Building on background regarding the organisation's leadership style and workplace culture, several theoretical streams lend insight to the current study. A literature review of internal publics and employee communications, relationship management, and public relations power will assist in framing the study.

Literature review

Internal publics and employee communication

J. E. Grunig's (1997) situational theory of publics suggests that publics act based on three independent variables—problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement—that influence a public's information seeking/processing communicative behaviours affecting an organisation. This theory mandates that public relations practitioners measure, identify, and segment publics to better understand their nature and appropriately plan organisational communication with both internal and external publics (J. E. Grunig, 1997; J. E. Grunig & Hunt, 1984; J. E. Grunig & Repper, 1992). In addition, several scholars (i.e., Friedman & Miles, 2002, 2004; J. E. Grunig & Repper, 1992; J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, 2000; L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002; Hallahan, 2001) offered theoretical public relations programmes for effectively managing publics through varying behavioural levels, shifting organisational communication processes from long-term relationship-building communication to greater public involvement in organisational decision-making processes and greater use of mass media/interpersonal communication.

Within the context of OPR (Bruning & Ledingham, 1999; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998), public relations practitioners and scholars have expressed desire for increased focus on an organisation's internal public—its

employees (Toth, 2006). According to the excellence theory (Dozier, L. A. Grunig, & J. E. Grunig, 1995; J. E. Grunig, 1992; L. A. Grunig et al., 2002), organisations that value communication excellence exhibit several principles guiding communication management between organisational decision-makers and employees. These principles include decentralised, less formal, and complex communication processes as well as two-way symmetrical internal public relations that foster a participative, organic organisational culture affording employees significant decision-making input. Also, public relations practitioners with power in or direct access to the dominant coalition are best able to influence the organisation's public relations worldview, help set goals, and identify or manage relationship-building communication with strategic (including internal) publics. In addition, public relations practitioners span boundaries between organisational leadership and internal publics, relaying messages and helping give voice to all parties. These characteristics lead to employee job satisfaction and increased productivity.

Relatedly, Jo and Shim (2005) found that the managerial practice of using positive dialogue with employees fostered trust between employees and leaders (Jo & Shim, 2005). In addition, employees perceiving communication gaps, particularly in turbulent situations, may develop a lack of trust and enact 'activist' strategies to force organisational leadership into more symmetrical dialogue (McCown, 2005b, 2007).

Relationship management

Many scholars have examined various facets of public relations' shift toward a relationship-building focus (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997, 2000; Bruning & Ledingham, 2000; Heath, 2001; Ledingham, 2003; Ledingham & Bruning, 2000a, 2000b; Ledingham, Bruning, & Wilson, 1999). Further studies identified 'good' OPR dimensions such as trust, openness, involvement, commitment, and investment (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998), and advocated measuring these in both internal and external publics (J. E. Grunig & Huang, 2000). Flynn's (2006) multi-dimensional public

relations perspective promoted balancing dialogue, collaboration, and organisation-publics negotiation through relationship building.

Scholars have tested and applied OPR management theories in a variety of relational settings, including government-citizen (Ledingham, 2001), university-student (Bruning, 2002), utility company-customer (Bruning, Castle, & Schrepfer, 2004), and city-resident (Bruning, Langenhop, & Green, 2004), often using Hon and J. E. Grunig's (1999) guidelines for relationship measurement to test for control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, commitment, and exchange vs. communal relationships. Scott (2007) noted several outcomes of relational strength, including: 1) improved access to and positive attention gained from organisations' dominant coalitions, 2) increased focus on practitioners' crucial role in effective company management, 3) increased transparency of the connections between building effective public relationships with achieving organisational goals (particularly the bottom line), and 4) trust in the organisation-publics relationship all achieved through 'real client' relationship instruments. Finally, leader-employee communication to enhance participative decision-making produced employee job satisfaction increases (Kim, 2002) and improved perceptions of employee trust in leadership's decision making and organisational loyalty (Sobo & Sadler, 2002). (For a synopsis of OPR research published between 1985 and 2004, see Ki & Shin, 2006.)

Public relations power

Understanding power in public relations is crucial to this study. Berger and Reber (2006) defined power and influence as "the ability to get things done by affecting the perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, opinions, decisions, statements, and behaviors of others" (p. 5). Moreover, the power-control perspective (Berger, 2005, 2007; L. A. Grunig, 1992; Plowman, 1998) suggested that leaders will set up organisational structures that merely "satisfice, that are 'good enough' to meet the organisation's minimum needs" (Dozier & L. A. Grunig, 1992, p. 407), and beyond that make decisions based on their own interests in power

and control. Although public relations practitioners with power in the dominant coalition can best influence the organisation's worldview of public relations (L. A. Grunig et al., 2002), they sometimes risk co-opting their professional voice and values (Berger, 2007; Holtzhausen, 2000, 2007; Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002). Practitioners also may need to resist usual power structures (Berger & Reber, 2006; Holtzhausen, 2007; Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002) to gain additional power and influence to accomplish organisational goals (Hay & Hartel, 2000) and give voice to less powerful publics (Karlberg, 1996).

Research questions

Based on the combination of CommunityBankCorp's top leader's known styles (transformational, principle-centred, servant, and authentic) and spiritually-based workplace culture (McCown, 2010), this study explores two specific research questions:

RQ1: How do the organisation's top leader's style and resulting workplace culture influence internal OPR (employee communication) practices?

RQ2: How does the confluence of this particular leadership style, the organisation's internal public relations, and workplace culture facilitate leader-employee relationship building? What are the resulting outcomes of leader-employee relationship building?

Method

Blurred lines between context and phenomenon support a qualitative case study (Yin, 2003) for exploring this study's research questions. Data collection occurred through a three-pronged, iterative process. First, using purposive sampling, in-depth interviews (H. J. Rubin & I. S. Rubin, 1995; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) were conducted with 21 employees across various levels of the organisation, years of employment, and genders. Interviews, which ranged from 50-90 minutes, followed a pretested, semi-structured, 21-question protocol. Second, 10 hours of participant observation yielding extensive field notes revealed the setting's social and cultural meanings and context clues (Wolcott, 1994).

This “witnessing evidence” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 135, 139) occurred through observations in one-on-one, small group, and large group interactions. Finally, document analysis of key internal materials (a corporate foundations booklet, vision/values statement, web site, and employee newsletters) provided “confirmatory evidence and strengthen[ed] the credibility of the results of interviews and observations” (Potter, 1996, p. 96). Data analysis using constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) produced a coding scheme to categorise recurring themes.

In addition to data collection triangulation (Kvale, 1995), the study employed lengthy fieldwork duration (four months) to increase validity, resulting in ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) and saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Frequent reflexive memo writing prior to and during the data collection analysis helped “bracket” potential researcher bias (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 80) while still allowing the data to “speak” and categories to emerge (Wolcott, 1994, p. 10). Appropriate Institutional Review Board approvals as well as ethical participant treatment (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; H. J. Rubin & I. S. Rubin, 1995) respected and empowered participants in the research process. Finally, member checks, through mailed research summaries and findings presentations, solicited participant feedback to confirm the account’s accuracy (Ellis, 1995).

Results

Based on data analysis, this study revealed numerous interrelated themes. As gathered from previous research (McCown, 2010), the organisation’s founder and top leader based his leadership style on his understanding of and desire to live out his own religious faith; this faith foundation permeated the entire organisation: the top leader’s style influence on the way employees were led and managed, the underlying cultural values (both expected and ‘lived’), and internal OPR practices. Evidence through the current study, internal OPR practices ‘lived out’ the cultural values effectively through emphasising face-to-face

communication whenever possible, whether through formal communication channels such as regular meetings, or informally through interpersonal conversations. Specific outcomes of the confluence of three elements—combined leadership style (authentic, transformational, principle-centred, and servant), spiritually-based workplace culture, and excellent internal public relations—included strong relationships among company members as well as organisational unity and a commitment to employee leadership development. Specific study findings, identified as emerging themes, are organised around the study’s two research questions. Participants have been assigned pseudonyms to preserve confidentiality, although general position levels are included to increase contextual understanding.

RQ1: How do the organisation’s top leader’s style and resulting workplace culture influence internal OPR (employee communication) practices?

CommunityBankCorp’s leadership model clearly influenced the organisation’s internal OPR practices. Top leader David—and the rest of the senior leader team—exhibited authentic, participatory, and open communication consistent with the organisation’s prevalent leadership style. As senior leader team member Brandon noted, “If you have leaders doing the right things, you’ll always have open communication because you won’t have fear in the workplace. People will feel their opinions matter and they’ll feel valued.” Formal internal communication processes fell under the chief relationship officer’s purview, flowing through a variety of channels. In both formal and informal processes, timely, open, two-way, and supportive transactions characterised CommunityBankCorp’s internal communication.

Participants said leaders communicated ‘well’ and frequently, set clear expectations, practiced good listening skills, and acted beneficently in confronting issues or rejecting ideas, a practice which began at the top. Mid-level officer Rebekah noted, “David makes it clear where we’re going and what’s expected, and then he walks the walk rather than just

being a figurehead that shouts out commands and then does his own thing”.

Senior team leader member Robert found David’s listening abilities surprising compared with other leaders he has known, saying, “I didn’t expect David to be as good of a listener as he is, especially with the success and community reputation that he has”. In fact, participants stated that ‘listening well’—and empowering employees by doing so—was actually a part of CommunityBankCorp’s monthly leadership training.

David also modelled communicating value for others by preserving employee dignity in all situations. Branch employee Michael shared, “Even if David’s upset about something, he always has a kind and positive way of explaining what was wrong. And if you tell him something and he totally disagrees with it, he tells it back to you why he doesn’t agree with you in a positive way that you feel he actually listened to you.”

All CommunityBankCorp formal internal communication processes were created and implemented by employees reporting to the chief relationship officer, including postings on the company intranet, email notices and blasts, a quarterly newsletter, company-wide voicemail messages, and face-to-face meetings at all levels. The corporation’s ‘foundations booklet’ outlined ‘rules of engagement’ to guide communication: 1) be loyal to the absent, 2) give people the benefit of the doubt, 3) don’t make assumptions; 4) respond to the person, not the position, and 5) approach every situation in a positive, helpful way. In addition, guidelines for email usage, an emphasis on face-to-face communication wherever possible, and required communication from team leaders to subordinates within 24 hours of weekly management meetings further promoted open, timely communication.

Although participants expressed overwhelmingly that they felt informed, a few negative examples emerged where they felt ‘out of the loop’ or confused because leaders shared information still under discussion, which later changed. Also, CommunityBankCorp culture included frequent mandatory meetings, causing some employee frustration. However, one

participant said during ‘crunch’ times, supervisors were willing to excuse employees so they could meet tight deadlines. And David lauded ‘face time’ as critical to excellent internal OPR and leader-employee communication, noting, “People will look at it and say, ‘That’s a lot of time,’ and I say, ‘No, it’s not the time, it’s the process of having a weekly meeting where you’re looking at people...face-to-face, watching their tone and their facial expressions. That builds accountability.”

RQ2: How does the confluence of this particular leadership style, the organisation’s internal public relations, and workplace culture facilitate leader-employee relationship building? What are the resulting outcomes of leader-employee relationship building?

As shown in RQ1, the organisation’s promoted leadership style and spiritually-based cultural values clearly influenced internal OPR practices. The confluence of leadership style, culture, and excellent internal public relations led to strong, positive relationships at all organisational levels. Key findings indicated dialogue and relationship strength as well as organisational unity, as evidenced by trust, organisational commitment and loyalty, motivation and productivity, job satisfaction and enjoyment, and control mutuality (empowerment).

Trust. Although data amply supported all indicators noted, several bear specific mention. First, mid-level officer Rebekah stated, “Trust is something that’s built by follow through. Here we see come to fruition what [the leaders] have promised and having them back you up or support you when you make a decision.” Participants also noted that leaders earned trust through keeping their word. Mid-level officer Audrey suggested, “I would say I trust the members of management. When someone tells you something, they’re genuine, they mean it.”

Loyalty/productivity. Beyond CommunityBankCorp’s status as the #1 Best Place to Work in its state (McCown, 2010), achieved through a third-party survey of employees, company loyalty ran strong in this organisation. “There’s a high loyalty”, mid-level employee Lindsay stated. “Almost anyone

will stay past normal hours to get things done. You don't have to, but you want to stay and help. You could say this is an 8-5 job and I'm out of here, but I've never seen anybody do that." Mid-level employee James noted, "If you treat employees right, they'll give it right back in return with their work". And branch leader Jared added, "...in any other bank you look at...the turnover rate is astronomical. Entire branches are turning over like three-four times a year sometimes. But here you don't see that."

Satisfaction. Participants also derived great satisfaction from working for CommunityBankCorp. Mid-level employee Lindsay enthused, "I really love working here. I love our leaders and my co-workers. I enjoy coming to work and I'm not planning to leave." Job satisfaction and enjoyment also spread from participants to community members though informal, often serendipitous organisational promotion. Branch leader Jared described his response to friends and acquaintances who ask him about his job: "It's an exciting thing. I tell them about it and get them pumped up. I think it's fun here, and I really enjoy it!"

Unity. A powerful sense of unity pervaded the organisation, as evidenced by senior leader team member Maria's comments: "We all kind of believe in the same values, so that really helps to know that we have the same beliefs, the same ideas, the same expectations. That kind of grounds people." For top leader David, unity meant synchronising all aspects of the organisation to achieve an integrated whole. "At the end of the day, it's all in alignment," he stated, "which is what most companies are missing".

Empowerment. Finally, employees felt empowered to grow as leaders within the organisation. As previously noted, leadership training and coaching sessions under the chief relationship officer and leadership style modelling that spread across the entire senior leader team encouraged employee growth and development as leaders themselves. Participants also noted that collaborative decision-making and problem-solving helped employees hone their leadership skills through less formal means.

Top leader David noted his own vision and purpose for employee leadership development:

When you look at the average age of the current leadership team, it's 43. So that's a young team. But 20 years from now...if we've developed the next generation of leadership, I would like nothing more than to walk away and say, 'Now you guys take over with the same vision'.

Discussion and conclusions

This study discovered that a combination of specific leadership style enactment and spiritually-based workplace culture produced excellent internal OPR practices. In particular, open, two-way symmetrical communication (i.e., L. A. Grunig et al., 2002) fostered intentional, positive, people-driven cultural maintenance, interpersonal communication, and employee empowerment and growth strategies. In turn, this hybrid environment encouraged strong relationship building (i.e., Heath, 2001; Ledingham, 2003) between employees and organisational leaders as well as between employees across the company. The confluence of leader style, workplace spirituality, and excellent internal public relations also promoted organisational unity as well as intentional leadership development among employees. These outcomes—strengthened leader-employee relationships, cultural unity, and employee empowerment through leadership development—fed back into the leadership, culture, and communication processes to perpetuate a cycle of organisational success.

This study's findings led to development of Figure 1, an internal relationship-building model which suggests relationship (but not causality) between the various constructs. Several propositions explain the model:

1. An organisational leader's faith and vision can provide the foundation for and drive leadership style, organisational culture, and excellent internal OPR processes.

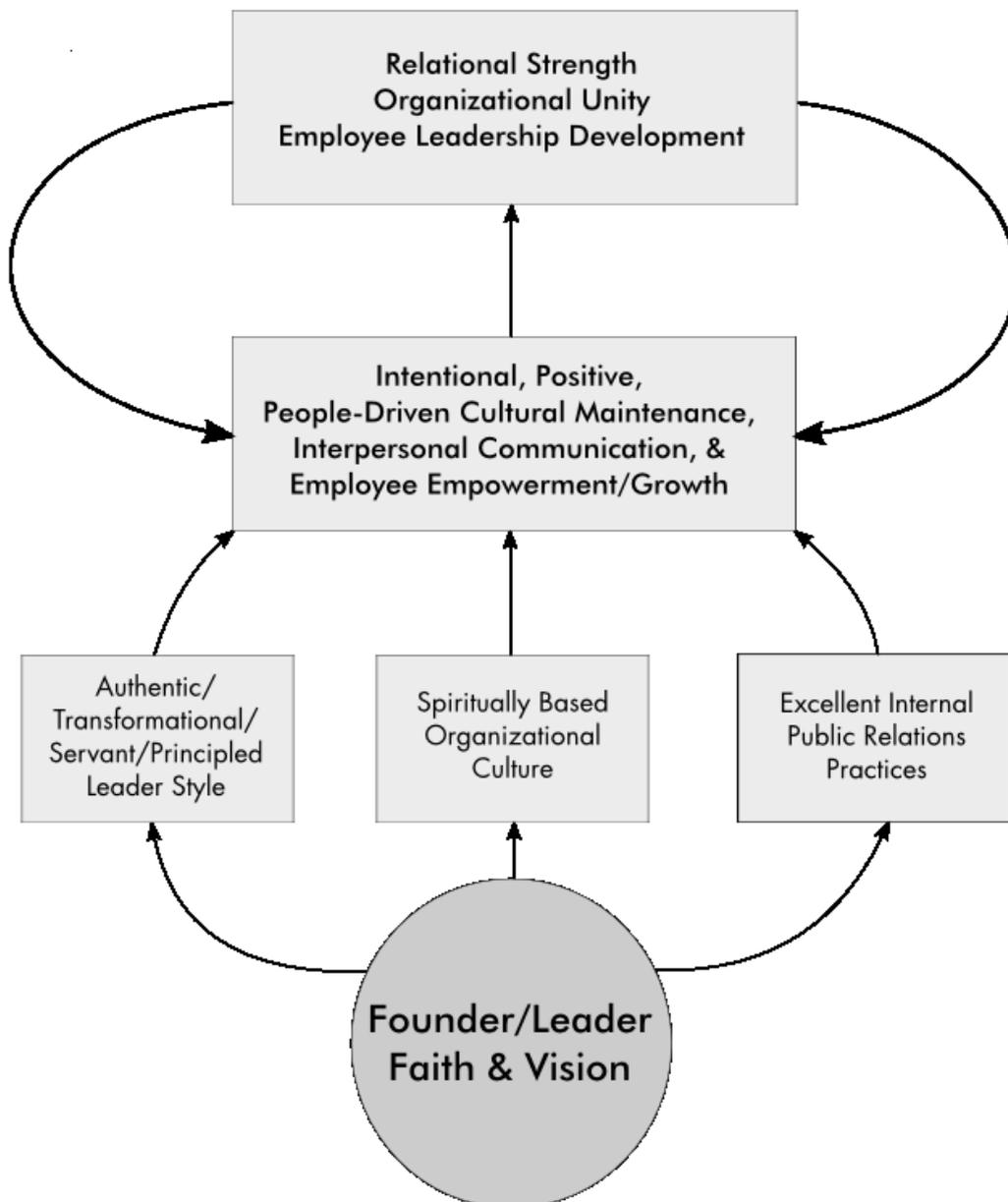
2. Leadership style, organisational culture, and internal OPR processes influence each other to create specific cultural values, leader-

employee interaction characteristics, and communication values.

3. The confluence of leadership style, workplace culture, and internal public relations processes generates relationship-building, organisational unity, and employee empowerment (through leadership development) outcomes.

4. Relationship strength, organisational unity, and intentional employee leadership development perpetuate the organisation's espoused leadership style/model, spiritual cultural values, and internal public relations excellence, thus serving as the keys to organisational success.

Figure 1. Model of internal relationship building.



Applying propositions 1–4, the model shows the faith and vision of the organisation’s top leader (the large circle at the bottom) as driving the entire organisation, providing a strong foundation from which to establish a combination of leadership styles: authentic, transformational, principle-centred, and servant. That same vision, promoted through the leadership style combination, also establishes a spiritually-based organisational culture as well as internal public relations processes and practices toward excellence, namely two-way symmetrical communication that values employee and leader voices alike. These three elements are represented by the three small rectangles in the model’s lower half.

As study participants noted, changing any one of these elements (i.e., enacting a different leadership style or constraining open, two-way internal communication) would greatly affect the other components’ ability to exist in their current state. Moreover, these three elements work consistently and cooperatively to foster intentional, positive, and people-driven cultural maintenance, interpersonal communication, and employee empowerment and growth (depicted in the model’s upper half by the lower large rectangle). Specifically, ‘cultural maintenance’ elements encompass practices of hiring and firing according to cultural fit, cultural storytelling, and intentional cultural training. ‘Interpersonal communication’ is characterised by frequent, open, timely, and two-way interactions between leaders and employees—evidence of internal public relations excellence. ‘Employee empowerment/growth’ stems from intentional leadership training, participatory idea generation and decision-making, and control mutuality.

The model’s upper-most rectangle contains organisational realities which are nurtured through the confluence of leadership style, organisational culture, and internal public relations practices. These realities include relational strength, organisational unity, and employee leadership development and growth. As the findings revealed, relational strength stems from trust, organisational commitment, and loyalty, motivation/ productivity, job

satisfaction/enjoyment, and control mutuality. In addition, organisational unity is demonstrated through participants’ high dedication to teamwork and commitment to ‘living out’ the organisation’s mission, vision, and values. Finally, employee leadership development clearly occurs through specific leadership training/coaching sessions and intentional leader modelling. In turn, as indicated by the returning arrows, these three outcomes feed back into the environment to perpetuate the organisation’s defining characteristics, ultimately leading to organisational unity and success.

Theoretical implications

Although studies have examined dyadic relationships of leadership style influence on public relations and on organisational culture (i.e., J. E. Grunig, 1992; L. A. Grunig et al., 2002; McCown 2005a, 2006, 2010), or organisational culture influence on public relations (Dozier et al, 1995; McCown 2010), no research has previously explored the confluence of all three and their resulting effect on a spiritually-based organisation’s ability to achieve strong internal relationships. The current study’s findings enhance understanding of how these phenomena come together to produce internal relationship building as the key to organisational success.

This study builds on previous research indicating that a specific combination of leadership styles as enacted through authentic, transformational, principle-centred, and servant leadership strategies positively influenced internal OPR practices, leading to enhanced dialogue and strong relationship-building at all organisational levels. Moreover, leadership’s value for employees as people, along with a desire to serve them, empower them to do their jobs, and help them reach their potential was key to organisational success (McCown, 2010). In addition, although organic, open, participatory cultures are most conducive to excellent internal public relations (Dozier et al., 1995; J. E. Grunig, 1992; L. A. Grunig et al., 2002), no prior research examined a spiritually-based organisational culture’s influence on employee communication. This study indicated that commitment to specific spiritual principles

that elevate valuing people through respectful, open communication can have a profound influence on the organisation's ability to foster symmetrical dialogue and practice excellent internal public relations. Thus, the resulting model for internal public relationship-building further offers scholars propositions regarding how an organisational leader's faith and vision can drive enactment of particular leadership styles, spiritually-based organisational culture, and internal OPR practices. The confluence of these elements can result in intentional, positive, people-driven cultural maintenance; strong interpersonal communication, and employee empowerment/growth. Ultimately, they can help companies build strong relationships, promote organisational unity, and develop employees as leaders to create a self-perpetuating cycle of increased organisational success.

Practical implications

Building on previous research (McCown, 2010), this study also poses several implications for applied practice of internal public relations. First, organisational leaders can, and perhaps should, allow their faith and vision to contribute meaningfully to the types of leadership style, organisational culture, and internal OPR practices promoted within an organisation. As CommunityBankCorp has demonstrated, spirituality can provide a strong foundation for shared organisational values and behavioural expectations and principles. However, leaders must be careful to maintain respect for employees from other faith or no faith traditions to foster buy-in to those values, expectations, and principles. Second, enactment of authentic, transformational, principle-centred, and servant leadership styles coupled with open, two-way symmetrical internal communication within a spiritually-based organisational culture may produce positive, people-driven cultural values, interpersonal communication, and employee empowerment and growth. In praxis, leaders and public relations professionals must be consistent, intentional, and unified in maintaining certain leadership styles, cultural values, and excellent dialogue and relationship-building processes. Commitment to constant training and

reinforcement will be required across all organisational levels. In addition, leaders must employ careful hiring and firing practices based on foundational cultural values, behavioural expectations, and principles. In short, for the model to work, the organisation must 'practice what it preaches'.

Finally, the resulting outcomes of relational strength, organisational unity, and employee leadership development may well feed back into maintaining organisational success over time. Special attention must be paid to encouraging these outcomes from the top leadership trickling out through mid-level leaders to employees at all levels. Again, intentional, consistent organisation-wide training, modelling, and mentoring will help ensure a perpetuating cycle of success. As leaders model positive, respectful relationship-building and enact appropriate hiring/firing practices (with careful attention to cultural fit), employees at all levels may begin to emulate this behaviour. Public relations professionals, through facilitating face-to-face dialogue as well as through cultural maintenance strategies such as consistent vision and values communication, storytelling, and relationship-building informally and through planned activities, should help to facilitate this perpetuating cycle as well.

Future research

Directions for future research include further model testing and development, specifically its staying power within the original organisation. In addition, testing the importance of OPR's influence on cultural maintenance assessment within the original organisation would prove crucial to determining the model's sustainability. Links between leadership style, internal public relations, and organisational culture could be re-tested within the original organisation by conducting interviews using the original protocol questions, by conducting content analysis of current internal public relations communication tools, and by engaging in participant observation of company meetings, and then comparing new outcomes with the current study's findings. Additional research using the same methods in both similar and dissimilar organisations could test

the model's potential universality. Further, specifically exploring the role of leadership listening in achieving internal OPR excellence will enhance understanding of the confluences depicted here. Again, this could include in-depth interviews and participant observation as research methods.

Due to its unique context and combination of research streams as well as the resulting model, this study is rich in description and potential theoretical propositions, adding to the understanding of internal relationship management found in mainstream public relations research. For too long, employees have been passed over as a critically valued public and a crucial research topic. Yet without them—and more importantly, without greater understanding of how to best build relationships between them and organisational leaders—businesses would experience constraint in their ability to practice both internal and external public relations with excellence. This could lead to adverse effects on employee satisfaction, productivity, and the organisational bottom line. Moreover, understanding the role of spirituality as it weaves throughout leadership style and workplace culture to influence internal OPR practices may provide insight into OPR, relationship-building, and employee empowerment in a wider range of organisations. Ultimately, this study's most important scholarly contribution may be that it has focused attention on an organisation's exemplary combination of leadership styles, spiritual workplace culture, and internal public relations practices that give voice to its employees, clearly identifying internal organisational dialogue and relationship-building as critical for effective future public relations practice.

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