Full Length Article

Cultivating employee creativity through strategic internal communication: The role of leadership, symmetry, and feedback seeking behaviors

Yeunjae Lee [a], Jarim Kim [b],*

[a] Department of Strategic Communication, School of Communication, University of Miami, 5100 Brunson Drive, Coral Gables, FL, 33156, United States
[b] Department of Communication, Yonsei University, 50 Yonsei-ro, Seodaemun-gu, Seoul, 03722, Republic of Korea

ABSTRACT

Using a survey of 405 full-time employees, this study examined how organizations' internal communication influenced by leadership communication at the supervisory- and senior-levels impacts employee creativity and how employees' feedback-seeking behaviors mediate these relationships. The results suggest that leadership communication at the supervisory and senior levels positively influence symmetrical internal communication system. The analysis also shows that symmetrical internal communication and leadership communication cause employees to seek more feedback from different interpersonal sources including supervisors, coworkers, and peers in other departments, which in turn enhances creativity. This paper concludes with a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of these findings for public relations and internal communication.

1. Introduction

Creativity plays a pivotal role in helping organizations survive and compete (Zhou & Shalley, 2003; Zhou, 1998). Defined as the production of novel and useful ideas or solutions (Amabile, 1988), creativity is an important organizational asset that has been found to affect the well-being of organizations and employees (Oldham & Cummings, 1996). For example, creative ideas in the workplace range from employees' simple suggestions related to their tasks (e.g., ways to save the department money or help develop a new filing system to increase efficiency) to innovative ideas for promoting the company's products and services that require substantive organizational change. Researchers across the disciplines have thus extensively examined the factors that foster workplace creativity, ranging from individual- to contextual- and organizational-level factors (see Zhou & Shalley, 2003, for a review). Although prior research (Zhou et al., 2008) has highlighted the importance of internal communication systems, few empirical studies have examined whether and how organizations' internal communication efforts can increase employee creativity.

Internal communication, as a core function of public relations, brings positive organizational outcomes such as employee engagement, commitment, and performance (Men & Bowen, 2017). Scholars have considered symmetrical communication, in particular, as a normative model for public relations and internal communication practices

(Grunig, 1992; Men & Bowen, 2017). Employees in symmetric atmospheres feel empowered and engaged and are encouraged to contribute decision-making (Grunig, 2006). Given that employees' creative ideas can be drawn from open, free, and active exchanges of ideas (Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, & Herron, 1996), symmetrical internal communication, as a critical organizational resource, has greater potential to foster employee creativity. Notably, scholars (Men & Bowen, 2017; Men, 2014) have suggested that employees' perceptions of symmetrical communication climates and systems are largely determined by diverse types of supervisory-level leadership behaviors (e.g., transformational, authentic leadership). While most extant management and organizational behavior studies have also identified leadership as a key element for enhancing employee creativity (e.g., Zhang & Bartol, 2010), the communicative component of leadership has remained underexplored. Furthermore, despite growing recognition of the critical communicative role of executive or top leadership (i.e., CEOs) as corporate representatives in communication research (Men, 2015; Park & Berger, 2004), the role of top leaders in affecting employee creativity has seldom been at the center of the discussion. This study thus intends to examine whether and how organizations' internal communication environments shaped by leadership communication and the interpersonal components of leadership behaviors (De Vries, Bakker-Pieper, & Oostenveld, 2010) both at the supervisory- and senior-level increase employee creativity.

Additionally, this study tested the role employees' feedback-seeking

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behaviors (FSB) plays as a link between symmetrical internal communication and creativity. Creativity theorists have emphasized that the information obtained from multiple sources through employees' FSB fosters employee creativity because responding to opposing views about their work engages employees in cognitive processes (De Stobbeleir, Ashford, & Buyens, 2011). The fact that two-way, open, and symmetrical communication environments encourage employees' active communication behaviors in the workplace (Kang & Sung, 2017; Kim & Rhee, 2011) indicates that they can also influence their FSB. Incorporating FSB as a mediator, this study attempted to develop an integrative model delineating how organizations' internal communication practices at different managerial levels, directly and indirectly, affect employee creativity.

By examining how leadership communication (i.e., supervisory communication and CEO communication) affects symmetrical internal communication systems, which in turn increase employee creativity through employee feedback-seeking behaviors, the findings of the current study will help build a theoretical link between leadership communication, public relations, and management studies. The findings should also provide practical insights that will help organizational managers and employee communication practitioners develop effective methods for fostering employee creativity through strategic internal communication.

2. Literature review

2.1. Symmetrical internal communication

The notion of symmetrical internal communication (Grunig, 1992) has received considerable scholarly attention in public relations literature (e.g., Kang & Sung, 2017; Kim & Rhee, 2011; Men, 2014). The concept of symmetry stems from the idea that individuals need to engage in communication processes to adjust their thoughts and behaviors through interactions with other people (Grunig, 2006). Characterized by attributes including "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), symmetrical internal communication emphasizes the importance of employee's empowerment and engagement in making organizational decisions (Grunig & Grunig, 2011). It is often contrasted with asymmetrical communication, which primarily focuses on the top-down management of employees via the dissemination of pre-determined organizational decisions and ensuring employee compliance (Hargie & Tourish, 2000), allowing for little employee autonomy (Sriramesh & White, 1992). Empirical research has shown that symmetrical internal communication contributes to the achievement of organizational goals by engaging employees at different levels and enhancing employee outcomes such as organizational identification (Smidts, Pruyn, & Van Riel, 2001), empowerment (Liden, Wayne, & Sparrowe, 2000), trust (Jo & Shim, 2005), and employee-organization relationships (Lee, 2018; Kim & Rhee, 2011).

2.2. Antecedents of symmetrical communication: leadership communication

Leadership behaviors, defined as a form of influence, and their impacts on organizational outcomes have been a primary focus of management, business, and organizational behavior research because they facilitate organizational efforts to achieve organizational goals at both the individual and group levels (Yukl, 2006). While leadership is comprised of both managerial attributes (e.g., planning, making decisions) and interpersonal attributes (e.g., communication practices between individuals) (Daft, 2003; McCartney & Campbell, 2006), many leadership scholars have identified communication as an essential component of leadership (Awamleh & Gardner, 1999; De Vries et al.,

2010; Den Hartog & Verburg, 1997; Frese, Beimel, & Schoenborn, 2003; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996; Riggio, Riggio, Salinas, & Cole, 2003; Shamir, Arthur, & House, 1994). For example, some types of leadership (e. g., relational leadership) rely heavily on the relational aspects of communication, such as interpersonal concerns or cares, meaning leadership can be essentially equated with communication (De Vries et al., 2010; Penley & Hawkins, 1985).

Similarly, communication scholars have highlighted the crucial role of communication as a core constitutive element of leadership (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014). This communication-centered view of leadership conceives of communication as the central, defining, and constitutive feature of leadership. In this sense, leadership communication is defined as the process through which organizational leaders connect with and influence stakeholders (Harrison & Mühlberg, 2014). The leadership communication styles leaders deploy to achieve organizational or individual objectives are geared toward optimizing hierarchical relationships within organizations (De Vries et al., 2010). This suggests that leadership communication plays a critical role in organizations' internal communication, which refers to management function in charge of communication (Verčič, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2012), by determining how internal and external stakeholders perceive organizations' images and reputations (Men & Bowen, 2017).Research regarding leadership communication has shed light on the public relations discipline, as numerous studies have examined diverse leadership styles at the supervisory-level (e.g., transformational, authentic, ethical leadership) as critical antecedents of internal communication systems and employee outcomes such as the quality of employee-organization relationships and supportive behaviors (e.g., Jiang & Men, 2017; Lee & Cheng, 2010; Men, 2014; Men & Stacks, 2014). Although several studies have explored the significant role of executive leaders' communication in fulfilling public relations function (Men, 2015; Park & Berger, 2004), little studies have examined the concurrent effects of leadership communication both at the supervisory- and CEO-levels. This study, therefore, attempts to investigate the interpersonal dimensions of leadership (i.e., leadership communication) at the manager (i.e., supervisory supportive communication) and senior management (i.e., relational communication of CEOs) levels, as potential antecedents of symmetrical internal communication.

2.2.1. Supervisory supportive communication

Researchers have highlighted the role of interaction supportiveness, which refers to employee perceptions of the ways individuals communicate with each other in organizational settings, particularly in relationships with their supervisors (Rhee & Moon, 2009; Smidts et al., 2001). As a component of employees' perceptions of communication climates within organizations, leaders' or supervisors' supportive communication through openness, displays of empathy, and other behaviors impact whether employees feel supported by their supervisors (Rhee & Moon, 2009). Drawing on previous studies, this study conceptualized *supervisory supportive communication* as the level of support that employees believe they receive from their supervisors in workplace relationships.

Prior research has implied that supportive communication on the part of leaders can generate positive employee outcomes. Walden, Jung, and Westerman (2017) found that employees' perceptions of interaction supportiveness from their supervisors increased both their commitment to organizations and their job engagement. In addition, Rhee and Moon (2009) found that more flexible and employee-oriented group cultures are associated with interaction supportiveness while hierarchical cultures that emphasize organizational stability are not. A meta-analysis (Judge & Piccolo, 2004) also showed a positive association between relationship-oriented leadership and employees' job satisfaction, motivation, perceived effectiveness of their leaders, and organizational performance. Employees perceive supportiveness through various communication practices including openness and empathy, active listening, and conflict management (Rhee & Moon, 2009). By making

employees feel valued and appreciated (Robertson, 2005), such supportive leadership communication practices may encourage employees to contribute to decision-making processes, listen to and implement other organizational members' ideas, comfortably voice and exchange opinions, treat other members respectfully and manage conflicts among themselves (Bass & Bass, 2008; Behrendt, Matz, & Göritz, 2017; Henkel, Marion, & Bourdeau, 2019; Yukl, 2006); such actions constitute key attributes of symmetrical internal communication. Thus, it is plausible that supportive communication at the supervisor level leads employees to perceive their organizations' internal communication practices as symmetrical. The following hypothesis was posited:

H1. *Supportive communication from supervisors is positively related to symmetrical internal communication.*

2.2.2. CEO relational communication

As recognition that communication between senior leadership and employees is as important as supervisory-level communication has grown, recent studies have started to identify effective CEO communication styles (e.g., Men, 2015). Given that employees often desire open and close relationships with top managers (Men & Bowen, 2017), the interpersonal roles played by CEOs can be a critical component in employee communication practices. The notion that CEOs should play interpersonal roles is not new. Half a century ago, Mintzberg (1973) identified interpersonal engagement as one of the key roles that CEOs play. Focused on maintaining employee networks and enhancing employee motivation (Hartnell, Kinicki, Lambert, Fugate, & Corner, 2016), the interpersonal roles CEOs play involve various dimensions of communication. The diverse relational communication behaviors CEOs employ when engaging with their subordinates include showing trust and confidence in employees, being friendly and considerate, and being supportive and helpful by trying to understand their problems (Yukl, 2006). In this vein, Wang, Tsui, and Xin (2011) showed that relationship-oriented CEOs operate as motivators by establishing interpersonal relationships with followers and showing benevolence and care to employees. By maintaining close contact with followers, CEOs bolster employees' levels of organizational commitment and help them identify themselves with company missions and values.

A number of prior studies have suggested that relationship-oriented leadership is positively associated with different employee outcomes such as trust, commitment, job satisfaction, and employee-organization relationship (Judge, Piccolo, & Ilies, 2004; Men & Stacks, 2014; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, & Fetter, 1990; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Bommer, 1996). Although CEOs may not interact as closely with employees as managers, researchers have argued that organizations reflect the characteristics of top managers (e.g., value, personality) because these characteristics affect their perceptions and interpretations of situations, decision making, and ultimate organizational outcomes (Carpenter, Geletkanycz, & Sanders, 2004). In line with this, research has also shown significant associations between relationship-focused CEO leadership behaviors and both employee commitment and perceived fairness and supportiveness (Wang et al., 2011). More importantly, senior corporate leaders often serve as catalysts for the formation of communication philosophies that convey vision and values within organizations (Men & Bowen, 2017). Thus, relational communication that emphasizes interpersonal connections, caring, and benevolence on the part of CEOs helps employees perceive overall organizational communication environments as open, participative, and mutually influenced. In this study, researchers, therefore, predicted that relational communication at senior levels would affect symmetrical internal communication environments, leading to the following hypothesis:

H2. *CEO relational communication is positively related to symmetrical internal communication.*

2.3. Symmetrical internal communication and employees' feedback-seeking behaviors

Feedback-seeking behavior (FSB) is defined as "a conscious devotion of effort toward determining the correctness and adequacy of behaviors for attaining valued end states" (Ashford, 1986, p. 466). Individual employees are intuitively and genuinely interested in knowing how they are doing and whether they are on the right track; as a result, they purposefully and proactively seek feedback to prepare for what they hear in their performance appraisals or to know how others view them (Ashford, Blatt, & VandeWalle, 2003). FSB has been identified as an effective self-regulation strategy because it improves individual employees' assessments of their capabilities (Williams & Johnson, 2000), performance (Hays & Williams, 2011; Renn & Fedor, 2001), job satisfaction (Judge, Thoresen, Bono, & Patton, 2001), and proactive behaviors (Grant & Ashford, 2008; Morrison & Weldon, 1990; Parker, Williams, & Turner, 2006).

In conceptualizing FSB, numerous earlier studies focused on employees' solicitation of feedback from their direct supervisors or leaders (Chen, Lam, & Zhong, 2007; Lam, Huang, & Snape, 2007). Acknowledging that two major sources—supervisors and coworkers—impact feedback environments, scholars have distinguished supervisor feedback inquiries from coworker feedback inquiries (Callister, Kramer, & Turban, 1999). De Stobbeleir et al. (2011) extended the range of sources that employees can utilize when seeking feedback to include organizational sources beyond supervisors and coworkers (e.g., peers in other departments). Following this approach, this study focused on feedback source variety, seeking to understand employees' FSB in relation to various sources of feedback including their supervisors, direct coworkers (e.g., peers in the same department), and peers in other departments.

Organizational settings make the entire self-regulation process (of which feedback-seeking is a part) more critical (Tsui & Ashford, 1994) and thus can encourage employees to seek feedback regarding their performance more often and broadly. Conservation of resources (COR) theory (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001; Hobfoll, 1989) states that organizational resources strongly motivate individuals' achievement of personal goals, increasing their learning, growth, and development. Examples of these resources include organizational environments such as the degree of participation in decision-making, and level of autonomy, and performance feedback (e. g., Lee & Ashforth, 1996). Employees who receive resources from their organizations can reinvest in the organizations to increase resource gains, generating a "gain spiral" (Hobfoll, 2001). From a communication perspective, communication climate, work culture, and supervisory support can be considered as important job resources (e.g., Jiang & Men, 2017). In line with this, this study argues that organizations' communicative environments—symmetrical communication in particular—can serve as resources in managing employee behaviors by creating contexts in which employees feel safe asking for feedback about their work. Studies have shown associations between symmetrical communication and employee levels of trust, satisfaction, commitment, and mutual influence with their companies (Grunig, 1992; Kang & Sung, 2017; Kim & Rhee, 2011). These relationship qualities or the trust established between organizations and their employees, in fact, increase employees' FSB (Huang, 2012; Qian, Ou, Huang, Xu, & Xia, 2016). Symmetrical communication can thus make employees believe that they receive their job resources from an organizationally supportive environment, enabling them to perceive feedback-seeking value in the state of resource surplus.

Employees seek feedback more actively and frequently when the perceived diagnostic value of feedback increases (Morrison & Cummings, 1992; Tuckey, Brewer, & Williamson, 2002). Based on the trust, identification, and commitment established through symmetrical communication environments, employees are more likely to believe that they will obtain quality information concerning how to improve their

performance. Using this information, employees can resolve any uncertainties in their work, develop competence, and identify appropriate ways to achieve goals (Park, Schmidt, Scheu, & DeShon, 2007), which makes employees feel comfortable seeking feedback in their workplaces and fosters frequent FSB. Indeed, communication scholars have demonstrated that symmetrical communication can enhance employees' active communication and information-sharing behaviors in the workplace (Kang & Sung, 2017; Kim & Rhee, 2011; Men, 2014). In relation to leadership communication as described above, it was predicted in this study that symmetrical internal communication influenced by leadership communication would increase employees' FSB. Therefore, the following hypothesis was posed:

H3. *Symmetrical internal communication mediates the relationships between employees' feedback-seeking behaviors and (a) supportive supervisory communication and (b) CEO relational communication.*

2.4. Employees' feedback-seeking behaviors and employee creativity

Employee creativity, which refers to the generation of novel and useful ideas by employees (Amabile, 1988; Zhou & Shalley, 2003), is critical not only for organizational survival and effectiveness but also for individual employees' job performance (Gong, Huang, & Farh, 2009). Although creative ideas can generate both slight and substantive changes in organizations' existing practices (Madjar, Greenberg, & Chen, 2011; Mumford & Gustafson, 1988; Sijbom, Janssen, & Van Yperen, 2015), creativity is, in fact, not necessarily relevant to particular occupations (e.g., engineers, R&D professionals). Instead, employees can exhibit it in almost all occupations at any level, since they tend to provide ideas for improving organizational practices or their tasks to some extent (Shalley, Gilson, & Blum, 2000). The theory of creativity identifies diverse individual- and organization-level factors that influence employee creativity, ranging from employees' personal traits and self-efficacy to organizational climate and leadership behaviors (e.g., Anseel, Beatty, Shen, Lievens, & Sackett, 2015; Tayfur, 2012).

Notably, research has emphasized the importance of feedback in the creative process (Zhou et al., 2008) because individuals' active efforts to seek feedback eventually contribute to their creative performance (De Stobbeleir et al., 2011). Specifically, scholars have suggested that direct feedback enables employees to clearly see how others view their work and ideas, allowing them to subsequently adjust and improve their ideas (De Stobbeleir et al., 2011).

As noted above, employees tend to seek feedback from different groups of individuals within organizations (e.g., supervisors, coworkers, and peers in other departments) (Madjar, 2005; Perry-Smith & Shalley, 2003). Sijbom, Anseel, Crommelinck, De Beuckelaer, and De Stobbeleir (2018) suggested that this feedback source variety, referring to the diversity of contacts that individuals proactively pursue, generates a sizeable amount of new and diverse information. This information enables employees to perceive new connections between different viewpoints, leading them to approach problems from different angles (Milliken, Bartel, & Kurtzberg, 2003). Moreover, the information acquired from various feedback referents forces employees to combine various viewpoints in unique ways or to reformulate existing knowledge and information, which may lead to new perspectives (Madjar, 2005). This cognitive process—so-called "conceptual combination and reorganization"—fuels the generation of creative ideas (e.g., Reiter-Palmon & Illies, 2004). De Stobbeleir et al. (2011) likewise noted that frequent performance-related FSB exposes employees to more diversified views that may clash with their own and enables them to decide how to respond to these clashes, which cognitively stimulates them to think outside of the box, consider alternatives, and generate more ideas that increase their creativity. According to Perry-Smith and Shalley's (2003) social perspective on creativity, differences in cognitive perspectives and approaches tend to be greater between different feedback sources than within the same feedback source. Thus, the variety of sources from

which employees seek feedback may be indicative of the breadth or quality of their networks (Sosa, 2011). Indeed, research has identified the recombination of diverse knowledge into creative ideas as one of the most important determinants of employees' creative work (Sijbom et al., 2018) because building on diverse perspectives spurs individuals' brainstorming techniques to generate streams of new ideas (Paulus, 2000).

Accordingly, creativity theorists have empirically shown that FSB with diverse sources in organizations can increase employee creativity. For example, several scholars have noted that supervisors' or leaders' feedback (e.g., Hon, Chan, & Lu, 2013; Talbot, Cooper, & Barrow, 1992) and feedback-seeking organizational climates (Li, Wang, & Huang, 2018) can foster employee creativity. In addition, research has shown that task-focused feedback (e.g., feedback from coworkers) leads to employee creativity (Mueller & Kamdar, 2011) by directing individuals' attention to the tasks at hand, fostering their interest in the tasks themselves as opposed to external constraints, and nurturing an orientation toward learning and development (e.g., Utman, 1997; Zhou, 1998). Therefore, feedback-seeking is one of a more general set of creativity-relevant skills and strategies that increase creative performance. In line with this argument, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H4. *Employees' feedback-seeking behaviors are positively related to employee creativity.*

2.5. The mediating role of employees' feedback-seeking behaviors

To understand whether and how symmetrical internal communication affects employee creativity, this study examined the mediating role of employees' FSB. As noted previously, symmetrical communication environments are expected to elicit employees' FSB on all-levels by fostering positive attitudes toward companies, including trust, commitment, and satisfaction, among employees (Kang & Sung, 2017; Kim & Rhee, 2011). Employees are thus likely to obtain organizational resources and perceive seeking feedback about their work as more valuable and less costly in open, employee-centered, horizontal communicative environments, leading them to actively engage in FSB not only with their direct supervisors but also with colleagues within and outside of their departments.

Such FSB by employees at all levels of organizations can, in turn, encourage them to become creative (De Stobbeleir et al., 2011). Actively seeking feedback from coworkers, peers in other departments, and supervisors enables employees to obtain a wide range of useful information that is relevant to their jobs (Sijbom et al., 2018) as well as differing perspectives on their performance (Madjar, 2005). Cognitively determining how to respond to these various views motivates employees to come up with new ideas and novel ways to improve their work performance. In other words, being exposed to diverse viewpoints regarding one's ideas and cognitively processing and integrating those viewpoints with one's own should enable one to identify what one should do and what is important, giving one a greater chance of coming up with creative responses to those opinions, which increases one's creative performance (Dokko, Kane, & Tortoriello, 2013; Madjar, 2005). Supporting this view, De Stobbeleir et al. (2011) showed that proactively seeking feedback from a variety of feedback sources enhances creative performance. Therefore, the FSB generated in symmetrical communication environments was expected to influence employee creativity, leading to the following hypothesis:

H5. *Employees' feedback-seeking behaviors in relation to their (a) supervisors/managers, (b) peers in the same departments, and (c) peers in other departments mediate the relationship between symmetrical internal communication and employee creativity.*

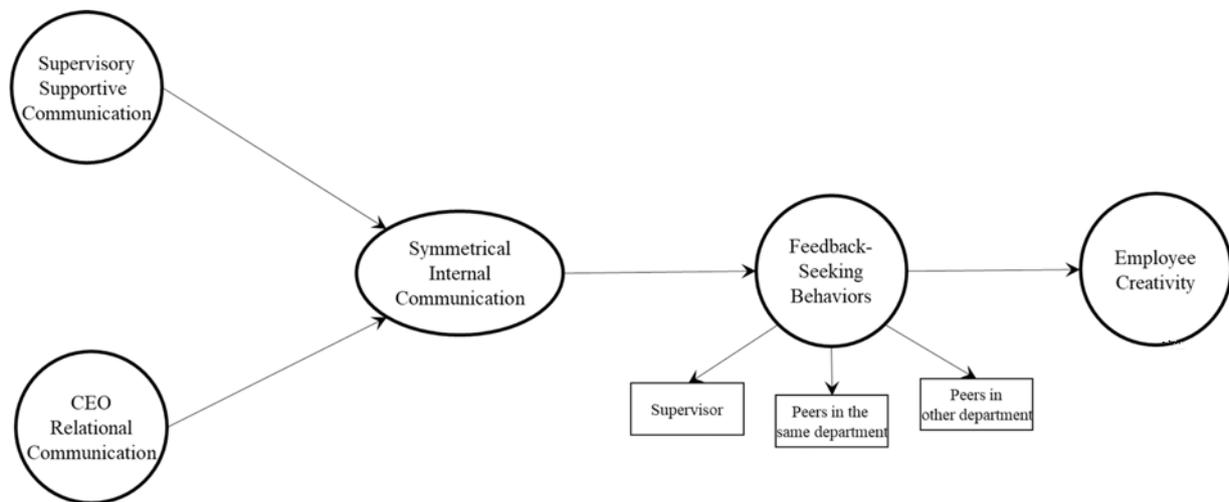Fig. 1 summarizes the conceptual model.

Fig. 1. Conceptual Model.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

An online survey was conducted with full-time employees in the U.S. from various industry sectors. With the assistance of an online research tool, Qualtrics, a stratified random sampling strategy was used to recruit a sample that was representative in terms of age, gender, race/ethnicity, and education level in the United States. Participants were paid $5 for completing the survey. The mean age of the final sample of 405 participants was 31.04 ($SD = 5.46$) and 47.7 % were female. The majority of the sample was White (66 %), followed by Black (17.5 %), Hispanic (7.2 %), and Asian (6.2 %). About four-fifths of participants (78.3 %) held bachelor's degrees or higher. In terms of participants' position levels, 49.9 % were non-managerial, 46.4 % were managerial, and 3.7 % were top management. The sizes of participants' organizations varied. About half of them (54.1 %) worked for employers with between 100 and 999 employees, 24.2 % worked for employers with more than 1000 employees, and 21.7 % worked for employers with fewer than 100 employees. On average, participants had worked with their current supervisors for the preceding 27.28 ($SD = 34.90$) months, and 78.3 % had worked with their current employers for fewer than 6 years. Employers' industries included manufacturing (15.8 %), finance and insurance (14.6 %), information and telecommunication (11.9 %), and education services (10.9 %) among others.

3.2. Measures

All measured items were adopted from previous literature. For the study's leadership communication independent variables, seven items from Rhee and Moon (2009) and nine items from Wang et al. (2011) were used to measure supportive supervisory communication ($\alpha = .901$) and CEO relational communication ($\alpha = .934$), respectively. Five items from Dozier, Grunig, and Grunig (1995) were used to measure symmetrical internal communication ($\alpha = .888$). A 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5) was used to measure leadership communications and symmetrical communication.

To measure FSB and employee creativity, a 5-point Likert scale from "never" (1) to "always" (5) was used. FSB was assessed using a total of nine items adopted from De Stobbeleir et al. (2011). Items began with "how often do you directly ask for" and ended with each statement. The same questions were asked three times to measure employee FSBs with supervisors (three items, $\alpha = .844$), peers in the same departments/units/teams (three items, $\alpha = .850$), and peers in other departments (three items, $\alpha = .901$). For employee creativity, nine items ($\alpha = .908$)

from Zhou and George (2001) were used. Items began with "at work, how often do you" and ended with each statement. Table 1 includes measurement items.

3.3. Analysis

To test the hypotheses, a two-step structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis with the Mplus was performed. The measurement model was evaluated before the structural model. In interpreting data, joint-criteria satisfying either "CFI $\geq$ .95 and SRMR $\leq$ .10" or "RMSEA $\leq$ .06 and SRMR $\leq$.10" were employed following Hu and Bentler (1999). Employees' education levels, positions, and company sizes were included as covariates in the SEM analysis as these variables were found to be significantly correlated with the main variables in the study.

4. Results

4.1. Testing measurement and structural model

Table 2 summarizes descriptive statistics and correlations among the variables. The CFA results showed that the measurement model achieved a good model fit: $\chi^2(689) = 1417.247$, RMSEA = .051 [.047, .055], CFI = .951, TLI = .946, SRMR = .049. All factor loading values were significant and higher than the threshold value of 0.5 ($p < .001$). To assess internal consistency, the composite reliabilities (CR) for all variables were generated. The CR values were all greater than .6 (see Table 1). Furthermore, the values of the average of variance extracted (AVE) were calculated and they were greater than .5 while the square root values of AVE were higher than the construct correlations. The convergent and discriminant validity of the measures were shown to be satisfactory (Bentler, 1990). The researchers thus proceeded with the structural model testing.

The hypothesized model (Fig. 1) predicting that symmetrical internal communication would have a full mediation effect showed a satisfactory model fit: $\chi^2(693) = 1409.386$, RMSEA = .050 [.046, .053], CFI = .956, TLI = .951, SRMR = .040. The researchers compared the baseline model with other alternative models to identify the best-fitting model through nested model comparison. Following recommendations made in previous studies (e.g., Holbert & Grill, 2015; Horstman, Colaner, & Rittenour, 2016), the chi-squared difference test of nested models was used to evaluate the statistical significance. In the first alternative model, the direct effect of supervisory supportive communication on feedback-seeking behavior was added. The alternative model 1 ($\chi^2(692) = 1403.467$, RMSEA = .050 [.046, .053], CFI = .956, TLI = .951, SRMR = .040) showed satisfactory model fits but had no

Table 1

Measurement Items.

Constructs	Measurement Items	Standardized Factor Loadings	S.E.	CR	AVE	The square root of AVE
Supervisory Supportive Communication	My manager/supervisor			.903	.574	.758
	clarifies meaning	.743*	.03			
	checks for accuracy.	.551*	.04			
	manages employees' conflicts.	.737*	.03			
	gives employees like me clear instructions.	.753*	.02			
	actively listens to employees like me.	.827*	.02			
	empathetically listens to employees like me.	.813*	.02			
	listens carefully to the opinions of employees like me.	.843*	.02			
CEO Relational Communication	The CEO in my company			.932	.606	.778
	has good skills in dealing with interpersonal relationships effectively.	.768*	.02			
	is able to communicate well with employees.	.704*	.03			
	is good at balancing interpersonal relationships.	.767*	.02			
	gets along with employees very well.	.704*	.03			
	is able to facilitate interpersonal relationships.	.760*	.02			
	shows concern for employees' family members.	.770*	.02			
	shows concern for employees' personal lives.	.831*	.02			
	treats employees like family members.	.831*	.02			
	shows love and care for subordinates.	.857*	.02			
Symmetrical Internal Communication	Most communication between my company and me can be said to be two-way communication.	.787*	.02	.885	.605	.778
	My company encourages differences of opinion.	.766*	.02			
	The purpose of communication in our company is to help managers be responsive to the problems of employees.	.754*	.02			
	Supervisors encourage employees to express differences of opinion in my company.	.813*	.02			
	Employees are not afraid to speak up during meetings with supervisors and managers.	.769*	.02			
Feedback-Seeking Behaviors (FSB)	How often do you directly ask for..					
FSB-supervisor		.796*	.02			
FSB-peers		.866*	.01			
FSB-peers in other departments		.870*	.02			
(to supervisor)	feedback about your work?	.822*	.03	.844	.643	.802
	an informal appraisal of your work?	.829*	.02			
	information concerning your performance?	.754*	.02			
(to peers in the same department/ unit/team)	feedback about your work?	.734*	.01	.850	.653	.808
	an informal appraisal of your work?	.844*	.02			
	information concerning your performance?	.843*	.02			
(to peers in other departments)	feedback about your work?	.874*	.02	.901	.753	.868
	an informal appraisal of your work?	.862*	.02			
	information concerning your performance?	.867*	.02			
Employee Creativity	At work, how often do you			.909	.527	.726
	come up with new and practical ideas to improve performance?	.779*	.02			
	suggest new and better ways of performing work tasks?	.753*	.02			
	consider yourself a good source of creative ideas?	.727*	.03			
	promote and champion ideas to others?	.737*	.03			
	develop adequate plans and schedules for the implementation of new ideas?	.747*	.03			
	search out new technologies, processes, techniques, and/or product ideas?	.711*	.03			
	exhibit creativity on the job when given the opportunity to?	.664*	.03			
	have a fresh approach to problems?	.675*	.03			
	come up with creative solutions to problems?	.730*	.03			

Notes. CR, composite reliabilities; AVE, average variance extracted.

* $p < .001$.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among the Variables.

	M (SD)	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Supervisory Supportive Communication	3.89 (0.90)	.90	–						
2. CEO Relational Communication	3.53 (0.85)	.63	.530**	–					
3. Symmetrical Internal Communication	3.63 (0.99)	.89	.618**	.517**	–				
4. FSB (Supervisor)	3.39 (1.10)	.84	.333**	.409**	.452**	–			
5. FSB (Peers in the same department)	3.15 (1.18)	.85	.280**	.429**	.400**	.625**	–		
6. FSB (Peers in other departments)	2.78 (1.23)	.90	.205**	.488**	.393**	.566**	.713**	–	
7. Employee Creativity	3.81 (0.77)	.91	.385**	.429**	.428**	.549**	.479**	.385**	–

Note. FSB (Feedback-seeking Behaviors).

** $p < .01$.

significantly better fits than the baseline model ($\Delta\chi^2(1) = 5.91$, $p = .02$). Next, the direct path from CEO relational communication to FSB was added to alternative model 2. The model showed a significantly better fit ($\chi^2(692) = 1398.203$, RMSEA = .049 [.046, .053], CFI = .957, TLI = .952, SRMR = .046) than the baseline model ($\Delta\chi^2(1) = 11.18$, $p < .001$). Finally, in the third alternative model, the direct paths from all leadership communication variables to FSB were added. Alternative model 3 ($\chi^2(691) = 1390.195$, RMSEA = .049 [.046, .053], CFI = .957, TLI = .952, SRMR = .046) showed a significantly better fit than either the baseline model ($\Delta\chi^2(2) = 19.19$, $p < .001$) or alternative model 2 ($\Delta\chi^2(1) = 8.01$, $p = .004$). Based on these results, the researchers selected the alternative model 3, including direct paths from leadership communication to FSB, as the final model (see Fig. 2). The researchers then interpreted the path coefficients.
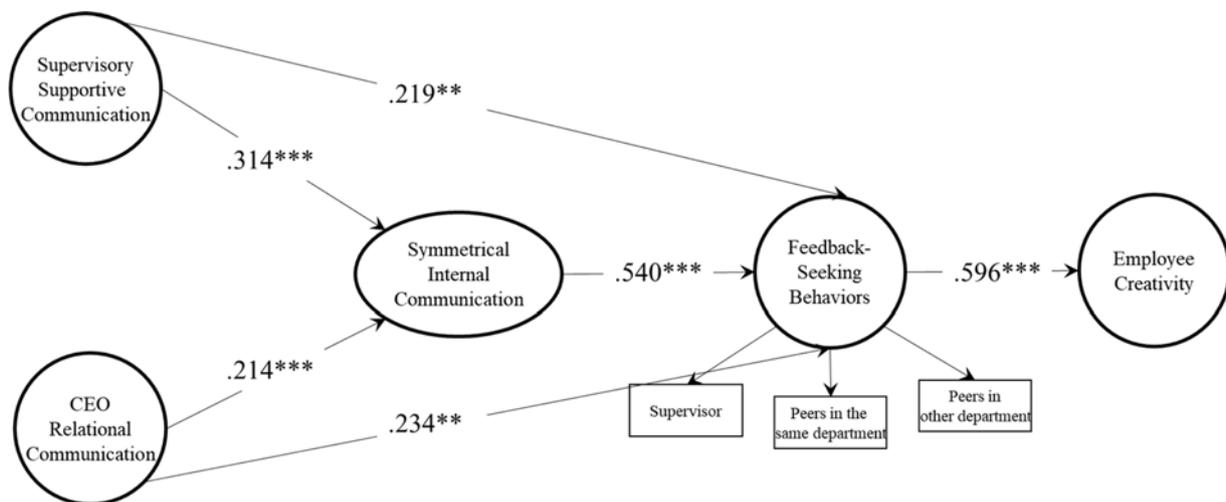
4.2. Hypotheses testing

H1 tested how supportive supervisory communication influenced symmetrical internal communication. The analysis showed the path was positive and significant (.314, $p < .001$), supporting H1. H2 examined the effect of CEO relational communication and the analysis showed it had a positive and significant effect on symmetrical communication (.214, $p < .001$). Thus, H2 was also supported.

H3 tested the mediation effect of symmetrical internal communication on the relationships between the antecedents of symmetrical communication (i.e., supportive supervisory communication, CEO relational communication) and employees' FSB. The analysis showed that symmetrical internal communication had a direct and positive effect on employees' feedback-seeking behaviors ($\beta = .540$, $p < .001$).

Additionally, as shown in Fig. 2, both elements of leadership communication—supportive supervisory communication ($\beta = .219$, $p = .009$) and CEO relational communication ($\beta = .234$, $p = .003$)—had positive and significant direct effects on FSB. Thus, H3 was supported. H4 predicted that employees' FSB would have a positive effect on employee creativity. The results of the analysis supported this hypothesis, showing a positive and significant effect ($\beta = .596$, $p < .001$).

H5 investigated the mediating role of each dimension of employees' FSB on the relationship between symmetrical communication and employee creativity using a bootstrap procedure ($N = 2000$). As Table 3 shows, symmetrical communication positively influenced employee creativity through employees' FSBs to supervisors ($\beta = .155$, $p < .001$ [95 % CI: .11–.21]), peers in the same department ($\beta = .113$, $p < .001$ [95 % CI: .07–.16]), and peers in other departments ($\beta = .077$, $p < .001$ [95 % CI: .04–.11]). Therefore, H5 was supported.

Apart from the hypotheses testing, this study also explored the role of FSBs in the relationship between leadership communication and creativity. The results showed significant indirect effects in the paths from supervisory supportive communication to creativity through FSBs to supervisors ($\beta = .136$, $p < .001$ [95 % CI: .09–.19]), peers in the same department ($\beta = .097$, $p < .001$ [95 % CI: .06–.14]), and peers in other departments ($\beta = .066$, $p < .001$ [95 % CI: .03–.09]). The indirect effects in paths from CEO relational communication to creativity through FSBs to supervisors ($\beta = .144$, $p < .001$ [95 % CI: .10–.20]), peers in the same department ($\beta = .114$, $p < .001$ [95 % CI: .07–.16]), and peers in other departments ($\beta = .087$, $p < .001$ [95 % CI: .05–.13]) were also significant.

$\chi^2(691) =1390.195$, RMSEA = .049 [.046, .053], CFI = .957, TLI = .952, SRMR = .046
** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Fig. 2. Hypotheses Testing Results.

Table 3
Results of the Mediation Effects of FSBs.

Paths	β	Standard Error (*S.E.*)	Boot 95 % CI Lower	Boot 95 % CI Upper
Symmetrical communication → FSB to supervisor → Creativity	.155 ***	.02	.109	.206
Symmetrical communication → FSB to peers in the same department → Creativity	.113 ***	.02	.073	.160
Symmetrical communication → FSB to peers in other departments → Creativity	.077 ***	.02	.044	.114
Supervisory supportive communication → FSB to supervisor → Creativity	.136 ***	.02	.092	.187
Supervisory supportive communication → FSB to peers in the same department → Creativity	.097 ***	.02	.059	.143
Supervisory supportive communication → FSB to peers in other departments → Creativity	.066 ***	.01	.028	.091
CEO relational communication → FSB to supervisor → Creativity	.144 ***	.02	.100	.195
CEO relational communication → FSB to peers in the same department → Creativity	.114 ***	.02	.073	.160
CEO relational communication → FSB to peers in other departments → Creativity	.087 ***	.01	.052	.127

FSB (Feedback-seeking Behaviors).
*** $p < .001$.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine whether and how organizations' internal communication affects employee creativity by exploring the antecedents of symmetrical communication and testing the mediation effects of FSB at multiple levels. The results revealed that supportive supervisory communication and CEO's relational communication positively influence symmetrical communication. Symmetrical internal communication enhances employees' FSB in the workplace, which in turn increases creativity.

5.1. Theoretical implications

By applying a theoretically grounded model of employee creativity, this study advances public relations theory-building in several ways. The findings of this study highlight the role interconnected communication plays at different levels in fostering organizational creativity. In particular, this study clarifies two major underlying processes through which leadership communication influences employee creativity—organizations' symmetrical internal communication systems and employees' feedback-seeking behaviors. First, the current study demonstrates the value of the normative model of public relations, and symmetrical communication in particular, in eliciting employee creativity within organizations. To a line of prior research regarding the outcomes of symmetrical communication (e.g., Kang & Sung, 2017), this study adds another important organizational outcome of communication—creativity. Previous studies of employee creativity have mainly focused on individual-level determinants such as personal traits, intrinsic motivations, or the effects of leadership practices (e.g., Ashford et al., 2003). Incorporating public relations perspective, this study shows how planned, strategic communication activities within organizations can help increase employees' active FSB, which in turn, fosters

employee creativity.

Second, the role of FSB as a mediator between symmetrical internal communication and employee creativity should be noted. The more employees perceive their companies' communication environments as symmetrical, the more likely they are to seek feedback about their work from multiple sources, ranging from their direct supervisors to co-workers across their organizations. These active feedback-seeking behaviors in the workplace, indeed, give individual employees diverse points of view on their work, motivating them to adjust their work styles or try new things to improve their work (De Stobbeleir et al., 2011). That is, by seeking feedback, individuals can develop creativity-relevant skills and acquire fresh perspectives on their ideas. In other words, the power of symmetrical internal communication in employee creativity is manifested through employees' active FSB. Supporting COR theory (Demerouti et al., 2001; Hobfoll, 1989), therefore, this study provides empirical evidence of the effectiveness of symmetrical internal communication environments as socio-emotional resources that employees can utilize to actively seek feedback across organizations.

FSB was also shown to mediate the effect of leadership communication on employee creativity, highlighting the importance of employees' active participation in leadership communication processes. The fact that individuals' creativity cannot be enhanced by simply accepting leaders' supportive and relational messages or behaviors makes a great deal of sense. Instead, individuals' engagement in feedback loops in which they interact with others in the workplace by requesting feedback—getting stimulated by others' via different types of feedback, coming up with new ideas, and again requesting feedback about their new ideas—enhances their creativity. Leadership communication, which highlights the interpersonal aspects of leadership behaviors (De Vries et al., 2010), thus plays a critical role in boosting employee creativity in the workplace by motivating employees to actively seek feedback regarding their work. The way organizational leaders communicate is often associated with their companies' values, missions, and visions. Supervisors' supportive communication and CEOs' relational communication enable employees to perceive the value of asking for feedback from their leaders and other members of their organizations as greater than the costs. Moreover, leadership communication that emphasizes interpersonal concerns and cares tends to signal that leaders are considerate toward their followers, which helps leaders cultivate connections and trust with their followers; in other words, leadership communication can improve the quality of the relationships between feedback sources (i.e., leaders) and feedback seekers (i.e., followers) (Levy, Cober, & Miller, 2002). Employees then engage in frequent FSB across organizations, which allows them to acquire a wide range of information and insights from multiple sources. The more various the views that serve as the bases for employees' creative responses, the more they are likely to make new creative links that are relevant to their work. In short, as one of the first empirical attempts to identify the role of FSB in relationships among leadership, internal communication, and employee creativity, this study enhances scholarly understanding of the theoretical value of communication in relation to employee outcomes.

Furthermore, this study extends current internal communication research in public relations discipline, in relation to leadership communication. The value of symmetrical communication has been widely acknowledged in the literature as it increases employees' satisfaction, relationship quality, commitment, and positive behaviors (e.g., Kang & Sung, 2017; Men, 2014). However, acknowledging that symmetrical communication is an ideal status that organizations should strive to achieve (Browning, 2015; Murphy, 2000) makes the *how* question more critical. To answer the question of *how* to establish a symmetrical organizational communication system, this study identified an important theoretical antecedent of symmetrical communication: leadership communication. Specifically, the results showed that supportive supervisory communication and CEOs' relational communication are all significantly and positively associated with symmetrical

communication, which boosts FSB. In fact, FSB from various sources can be a valuable resource for employees seeking to generate creative ideas because it enables them to acquire useful and important information about their work. This finding builds on previous studies, suggesting that, in addition to supervisory leadership behaviors (e.g., Men, 2014), CEOs' communication styles also matter in fostering excellent employee communication systems. Given that symmetrical communication is a critical predictor of employees' FSB and a potential indicator of creativity, this result suggests that effective leadership communication activities at both managerial- and senior-levels play important roles in improving employees' work-related outcomes. This study's finding that communication skills are essential qualifications for organizational leaders expands an ongoing discussion regarding the importance of leadership communication in current public relations research. In other words, leadership communication is a critical component in achieving the goals of organizations' overall internal communication plans.

5.2. Practical implications

This study also has practical implications for corporate leaders, managers, and communication practitioners. At the supervisory-level, the findings of this study suggest that leaders or managers in organizations should practice supportive communication with their subordinates by displaying empathy, listening to their concerns and needs, and giving constructive feedback so that employees feel valued. At the senior level, company CEOs need to demonstrate relationship-oriented communication, valuing person-to-person relationships with subordinates and showing genuine benevolence toward employees. Given that CEOs' visions and behaviors play critical roles in shaping organizational structures and climates (Men & Bowen, 2017), such relationship-focused behaviors of senior leaders will help build symmetrical organizational systems. Public relations and internal communication practitioners should also guide organizational leaders and CEOs to practice appropriate communication with their employees by identifying the characteristics of their employees and organizational issues and providing information to leaders in a timely manner. To bolster employees' perceived supportiveness in the workplace and symmetrical communication, communication practitioners can coordinate formal or informal meetings to give employees opportunities to share their ideas, concerns, and needs where they can obtain valuable feedback. Moreover, intervening with organizational leaders by developing and implementing formalized training programs and manuals that incorporate the specific needs of organizations to enhance their leadership communication abilities may prove necessary. Through such internal communication efforts, organizations can both encourage their employees to actively engage in FSB at work and acquire invisible organizational assets derived from employees' creative work performance.

6. Limitations and future studies

This study had several limitations that need to be addressed in future research. The survey recruited employees from various industries and the meaning of creativity may vary from one industry to another. For example, advertising agencies may require more creative work engagement than others such as manufacturing. Thus, future studies should consider these potential effects. In addition, the data was collected via employees' self-reporting and gaps regarding some variables such as creativity or commitment may exist between managers' or organizational views and employees' self-perceptions. Future studies should incorporate more holistic approaches to such variables by examining both leaders' and followers' perspectives on internal communication and creativity concurrently through various methodologies. Furthermore, the fact that the notion of symmetrical communication is characterized by two-way mutual interactions and reciprocity indicates that employees' proactive behaviors likely shape leaders' communication styles. Future studies should examine this possibility to

contribute to theory-building symmetry research in internal communication. While the significant theoretical evolution from symmetry to dialogue has occurred in the public relations discipline (Kent & Taylor, 2002), dialogic theory has been underutilized in internal communication research (Lee & Yue, 2020). Future researchers should therefore explore the intersections between symmetry and dialogue to advance public relations theories in the context of internal communication.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors report no declarations of interest.

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