Voices That Build: Exploring the Role of Internal Public Relations in Cultivating Employee Advocacy and Organizational Trust

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Abstract: **This qualitative study investigates the role of internal public relations (PR) in cultivating employee advocacy, with a particular focus on workplace reputation advocacy—employees' voluntary communication that supports or promotes the organization's identity, culture, and leadership. As organizations increasingly recognize employees as influential brand ambassadors, internal communication becomes a strategic lever for fostering trust, alignment, and credible public representation. Through in-depth interviews with mid-level employees and internal communication or HR managers, this research explores how leadership messaging, communication transparency, and feedback mechanisms shape employees' willingness to advocate for their organization. Framed by Stakeholder Theory and the Internal Public Relations Model, the study identifies communication practices that build or hinder trust and examines how internal messaging influences employees' emotional connection, professional identity, and sense of loyalty. The findings aim to provide actionable insights for communication and HR professionals seeking to strengthen internal reputation, foster a culture of trust, and mobilize employees as authentic advocates for the organization.**

Keywords: **Internal Public Relations, Employee Advocacy, Organizational Trust, Leadership Communication, Transparency.**

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Relevance of Internal Public Relations (PR)

Internal public relations (PR) have emerged as a critical strategic function in organizational communication, evolving from mere information dissemination to a relational management practice that fosters employee engagement, trust, and brand ambassadorship (Ijiga, et al, 2024). As organizations face increasing scrutiny from both internal and external stakeholders, the role of internal PR in shaping the emotional and psychological climate of the workplace has become indispensable. Scholars have emphasized that effective internal communication facilitates a positive emotional culture, which in turn drives employee engagement and commitment (Men & Yue, 2019). When employees feel emotionally connected to their organization, they are more likely to act as advocates, sharing messages that support the organization's values and identity both internally and externally.

The relevance of internal PR lies in its ability to align employees with organizational goals through two-way symmetrical communication, transparency, and relational trust. This alignment is especially vital in complex, decentralized, or culturally diverse organizations, where informal networks and interpersonal relationships significantly influence organizational outcomes. Research has shown that well-structured internal communication not only enhances employee satisfaction but also increases organizational performance and stability (Verčič & Vokić, 2017). For example, organizations with clear and credible internal messaging during change or crisis have been found to maintain higher levels of employee trust and discretionary effort. Consequently, internal PR serves as both a cultural integrator and a mechanism for mobilizing employee advocacy in dynamic and trust-sensitive environments.

1.2 Understanding Employee Advocacy and Organizational Trust

Understanding the interconnected dynamics of employee advocacy and organizational trust is pivotal to internal public relations strategy and workforce mobilization. Employee advocacy, particularly in the context of internal reputation-building, is characterized by voluntary behaviors where employees share positive narratives about their organization's values, leadership, and culture (Abiola & Ijiga, 2025). This advocacy is not only a reflection of job satisfaction but also an outcome of symmetrical communication practices that foster relational trust. Kang and Sung (2017) argue that internal symmetrical communication—defined by mutual dialogue, feedback, and shared understanding—cultivates high-quality employee-organization relationships, which in turn increase employees' likelihood of exhibiting advocacy behaviors.

Trust within organizations is both a precursor and product of such advocacy. It is formed when employees perceive that leadership communication is consistent, ethical, and aligned with their lived experiences. Hassan and Hatmaker (2015) found that the quality of manager-employee relationships significantly shapes trust levels and influences discretionary efforts such as speaking positively about the organization. In environments where leaders are approachable and communication channels are open and reciprocal, trust becomes embedded within the organizational fabric, enabling employees to feel psychologically safe in promoting the organization's image. Therefore, employee advocacy cannot be sustained without a solid foundation of organizational trust, and both constructs are interdependent within the architecture of internal public relations.

1.3 Objectives of the Review and Theoretical Foundations (Stakeholder Theory, Internal PR Model)

The primary objective of this review is to critically examine how internal public relations (PR) practices cultivate employee advocacy by building organizational trust, emotional commitment, and communicative alignment. This inquiry is underpinned by two complementary theoretical frameworks: Stakeholder Theory and the Internal Public Relations Model. These frameworks provide analytical depth in understanding employees not merely as operational contributors but as central stakeholders whose perceptions, engagement, and communicative behavior directly shape organizational legitimacy and public reputation.

Stakeholder Theory asserts that organizations must recognize and manage the interests of all parties who affect or are affected by corporate actions—including employees (Roberson, & Kulik, 2007). This perspective repositions employees as strategic actors in sustaining organizational success through advocacy, particularly in digital and decentralized communication environments. Within this paradigm, internal PR must foster inclusive, ethical, and transparent communication systems that build mutual trust (Nwatuzie, et al, 2025).

Complementing this, the Internal PR Model situates employees as internal publics whose communication needs must be strategically managed through tailored messaging, feedback loops, and engagement practices . Welch and Jackson (2007) emphasize that internal communication should be audience-centered and stakeholder-oriented, reinforcing relational quality and enabling proactive employee voice. Thus, this review synthesizes the theoretical constructs to frame internal PR as a mechanism for advancing trust-driven, stakeholder-aligned employee advocacy across organizational contexts.

1.4 Methodological Approach and Structure of the Review

This review adopts a qualitative, narrative synthesis approach to critically examine existing literature on the intersection of internal public relations, employee advocacy, and organizational trust. Rather than conducting a meta-analysis or systematic review with strict inclusion criteria, the methodology is designed to integrate conceptual, theoretical, and empirical insights across disciplines including corporate communication, organizational behavior, and human resource management. The selected body of literature includes peer-reviewed journal articles, theoretical frameworks, and applied case studies that provide diverse perspectives on internal communication strategies and their impact on employee behavior.

The review is structured into seven core sections. Following the introduction, Section 2 defines and contextualizes employee advocacy within organizational settings, differentiating it from adjacent concepts such as loyalty and organizational citizenship behavior. Section 3 examines the evolution of internal public relations from a tactical to a strategic relationship-building function. Section 4 explores the influence of leadership communication on the development of organizational trust, while Section 5 evaluates how transparency and feedback mechanisms shape employee engagement and advocacy. Section 6 identifies barriers to employee advocacy, including organizational silence, cultural misalignment, and trust deficits. Finally, Section 7 synthesizes key insights and offers practical recommendations, theoretical contributions, and future research directions. This structure ensures a comprehensive and coherent exploration of how internal PR practices can empower employees as credible advocates and trust-builders within organizations.

2. DEFINING EMPLOYEE ADVOCACY IN THE ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT

2.1 Conceptual Clarifications: Advocacy, Loyalty, and Organizational Citizenship

Clarifying the conceptual boundaries between advocacy, loyalty, and organizational citizenship is essential to understanding the mechanisms through which internal public relations influences employee behavior. Advocacy, in the internal communication context, refers to employees' deliberate and voluntary efforts to support, promote, and defend their organization in both formal and informal settings (Idoko et al, 2024). Kim and Rhee (2011) conceptualize advocacy through the lens of megaphoning behavior—where employees externally communicate positive organizational experiences, effectively acting as brand ambassadors. Advocacy behavior is inherently discretionary, often motivated by relational trust and alignment with organizational values.

Loyalty, by contrast, is a psychological attachment that binds employees to the organization, typically reflected in sustained tenure and resistance to external job offers. While loyalty implies a passive or internalized commitment, it does not necessarily translate into outward communicative support or active engagement in reputational defense (Goerge et al, 2025).

Organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) occupies a complementary but distinct space. It encompasses voluntary actions that go beyond formal job requirements, such as helping colleagues, endorsing organizational policies, or representing the organization positively to outsiders. Podsakoff et al. (2009) identify OCB as a critical predictor of organizational effectiveness, noting that citizenship behaviors often mediate the relationship between trust and performance. Understanding these distinctions enables organizations to design internal communication strategies that not only reinforce loyalty but also encourage active advocacy and sustained citizenship engagement.

2.2 Types of Employee Advocacy: Informal, Formal, and Reputation-Based

Employee advocacy manifests across multiple dimensions, each shaped by the context, communication platform, and organizational culture in which it occurs. Informal advocacy refers to spontaneous, unsolicited expressions of support or promotion by employees within their social or professional networks. This type often emerges organically through casual conversations or social media interactions where employees share positive workplace experiences or defend the organization against criticism. Andersson (2019) highlight that informal advocacy is largely driven by employees' sense of autonomy and perceived communication responsibility, reflecting an authentic form of engagement that can be more persuasive than institutional messaging.

Formal advocacy, by contrast, involves structured or organizationally endorsed initiatives such as employee ambassador programs, curated content sharing, or designated spokesperson roles. These efforts are typically embedded within internal communication strategies and are often supported by HR and PR departments to align with brand messaging. Although formal mechanisms can increase consistency and reach, they may be perceived as less credible if not rooted in genuine employee sentiment as presented in Table 1 (Ijiga, et al, 2024).

Reputation-based advocacy represents a hybrid, where employees intentionally engage in behaviors aimed at protecting or enhancing the organization's image during critical moments such as crises, leadership transitions, or public scrutiny. Van Zoonen et al. (2017) emphasize that such advocacy is often moderated by boundary management tensions—where employees weigh reputational defense against personal identity and work-life boundaries.

Table 1: Summary of Types of Employee Advocacy: Informal, Formal, and Reputation-Based

Type of Advocacy	Key Characteristics	Typical Platforms or Contexts	Considerations
Informal Advocacy	Spontaneous, unsolicited expressions; occurs in casual or social settings; driven by autonomy.	Social media, peer conversations, community forums.	Highly authentic but less controlled; difficult to monitor.
Formal Advocacy	Structured and endorsed by the organization; includes programs and designated roles.	Ambassador programs, internal campaigns, curated messaging channels.	More consistent and scalable but may lack perceived authenticity.
Reputation-Based Advocacy	Intentional behaviors aimed at protecting or enhancing reputation during critical moments.	Crisis events, leadership transitions, public scrutiny scenarios.	Effectiveness depends on balancing personal boundaries with organizational loyalty.

2.3 Strategic Value of Advocacy in Internal Branding and Corporate Identity

Employee advocacy holds strategic significance in reinforcing internal branding and corporate identity, serving as a relational bridge between internal culture and external reputation. As brand ambassadors, employees embody and communicate the values, purpose, and identity of the organization, directly influencing how internal branding initiatives are perceived and operationalized as shown in Figure 1. Punjaisri and Wilson (2011) argue that employee advocacy is a critical outcome of effective internal branding mechanisms, which include consistent internal communication, leadership alignment, and brand-centered training. These mechanisms instill a shared understanding of brand values, prompting employees to reflect those values authentically in their professional conduct and interpersonal interactions.

Moreover, employee advocacy amplifies the credibility of the corporate brand by linking employee experiences with brand promises. This alignment ensures that corporate identity—defined as the self-presentation and projected image of the organization—is not only symbolically constructed but behaviorally enacted. Heath, Tynan, & Ennew, (2015) highlight that advocacy behaviors serve to reconcile internal brand culture with public perceptions, enhancing organizational reputation and stakeholder trust. For instance, when employees voluntarily share brand messages or defend the organization during reputational threats, their actions serve as persuasive validators of corporate authenticity. Therefore, advocacy is not a peripheral communication act but a strategic asset that integrates internal branding with sustainable corporate identity and long-term reputational capital.

Figure 1: An Image Showing the Core Components of Internal Branding that Drive Employee Advocacy and Corporate Identity Alignment (Brandylane. 2023)

Figure 1 visually represents the cyclical framework of internal branding, emphasizing how strategically integrated components—vision, mission and values, service standards, communication and messaging, training, measurement, and evaluation—collectively foster employee alignment and advocacy. This framework highlights that employee advocacy is cultivated not as an isolated initiative but as the outcome of a coherent internal branding system. By embedding organizational values into every touchpoint—such as training that reinforces brand behavior, transparent communication that connects employees to purpose, and service standards that reflect cultural expectations—organizations create conditions where employees internalize the brand and voluntarily promote it. Measurement and evaluation serve as feedback mechanisms that ensure advocacy efforts are credible and aligned with both internal perceptions and external identity. When employees see consistency between what is communicated and what is operationalized, they are more likely to act as authentic brand ambassadors, thereby reinforcing corporate identity from within. The image thus illustrates the strategic interdependence of branding elements that empower employees to transition from passive recipients of messaging to active custodians of organizational reputation.

2.4 Emotional Commitment and Employee Voice

Emotional commitment and employee voice are mutually reinforcing constructs that play a pivotal role in shaping the culture of advocacy within organizations. Emotional commitment refers to an employee's affective attachment to their organization, whereby they identify with its goals and values and genuinely desire its success (Manuel et al, 2024). Meyer and Allen (1997) established this dimension of organizational commitment as a key predictor of pro-social work behavior, noting that emotionally committed employees are more likely to engage in behaviors that exceed formal job expectations—such as promoting the organization or defending it during external criticism.

Employee voice, on the other hand, is the proactive expression of constructive ideas, concerns, or feedback intended to improve organizational functioning. It reflects both agency and psychological safety in communication. Morrison (2011) emphasizes that voice behavior is influenced by the perceived responsiveness of leadership, trust in organizational justice, and emotional investment in the company's future. Employees with high emotional commitment are more inclined to use their voice not only for problem-solving but also to express support for organizational initiatives, thereby reinforcing collective purpose and cohesion.

When internal public relations strategies foster emotional connection and establish responsive communication systems, employees feel valued and empowered to speak up. This sense of empowerment elevates voice from an isolated act to a systemic driver of innovation, reputation building, and employee-led advocacy (Ijiga, et al, 2024).

3. INTERNAL PUBLIC RELATIONS: FROM INFORMATION MANAGEMENT TO RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

3.1 Evolution of Internal PR: Tactical Messaging vs. Strategic Engagement

The evolution of internal public relations reflects a paradigm shift from linear, top-down information delivery to dynamic, dialogic engagement rooted in relational strategy. Historically, internal PR functioned primarily as a tactical communication tool, focused on disseminating company news, policy updates, and operational instructions through formalized channels such as newsletters, bulletin boards, or memos (Balogun, et al, 2024). This approach emphasized message control and consistency but often overlooked employee agency, emotional connection, and feedback mechanisms.

Contemporary internal PR, however, has evolved into a strategic engagement function that supports organizational transformation, culture building, and trust development. Linke and Zerfass (2013) argue that this shift has been accelerated by digital communication platforms and heightened stakeholder expectations for transparency and authenticity. Employees today demand participatory communication structures that allow for real-time interaction, reciprocal feedback, and personalized messaging—components that align with the principles of two-way symmetrical communication.

Strategic engagement requires internal communicators to act not just as content distributors but as cultural architects, facilitating meaning-making processes that shape employee identity and advocacy behavior. For instance, strategic engagement may involve co-creating communication narratives with employees, involving them in brand storytelling, or embedding internal campaigns within values-based leadership communication as presented in Table 2 (Ijiga, et al, 2024). This transition from tactical messaging to strategic engagement positions internal PR as a core organizational function,

critical to building credibility, fostering advocacy, and sustaining employee trust in increasingly complex corporate ecosystems.

Table 2: Summary of Evolution of Internal PR: Tactical Messaging vs. Strategic Engagement

Aspect	Description	Communication Characteristics	Impact on Employee Advocacy
Historical Role of Internal PR	Primarily tactical; focused on one-way communication through newsletters, memos, and bulletin boards	Top-down, controlled messaging; limited feedback mechanisms.	Limited employee agency and emotional connection; low advocacy potential.
Contemporary Role of Internal PR	Strategic and relational; supports culture building, transformation, and trust through participatory methods.	Two-way symmetrical communication; interactive and personalized.	Strengthens trust, identity alignment, and voluntary promotion behaviors
Drivers of Evolution	Influenced by digital platforms, employee expectations for transparency, and demand for real-time engagement.	Shift from message control to dialogue; transparency-focused.	Encourages active employee voice and authentic representation.
Strategic Engagement Practices	Includes co-creating narratives, involving employees in storytelling, and aligning messaging with leadership values	Relational, collaborative, and emotionally intelligent content design.	Positions employees as cultural co-authors and brand ambassadors

3.2 The Two-Way Symmetrical Model in Internal PR Practice

The two-way symmetrical model is foundational to contemporary internal public relations, emphasizing mutual understanding, dialogue, and reciprocity over message dissemination or persuasion. Developed as part of excellence theory, this model advocates for balanced communication between management and employees, where both parties influence organizational decisions and co-create meaning through transparent exchanges. Grunig (2009) highlights the strategic relevance of this model in digitally connected organizations, where communication is no longer hierarchical but networked and participatory.

In practice, the two-way symmetrical model transforms internal PR into a relationship management function that prioritizes trust-building, inclusivity, and responsiveness. It enables organizations to move beyond monologic communication structures by institutionalizing platforms for dialogue—such as interactive intranets, employee advisory panels, and cross-functional collaboration forums (Ijiga, et al, 2024). These mechanisms allow internal PR professionals to gather authentic feedback, adapt messaging strategies, and ensure employees feel heard and valued, especially during times of change, crisis, or cultural realignment.

Moreover, this model is particularly effective in fostering advocacy behaviors, as it aligns communicative processes with employee identity and emotional investment. For example, organizations that apply symmetrical practices report higher levels of employee engagement, organizational commitment, and voluntary promotion of corporate values. Thus, the two-way symmetrical model operationalizes internal PR as a strategic enabler of employee voice, cultural cohesion, and sustained internal reputation capital in increasingly complex organizational environments (Okeke et al, 2024).

3.3 Internal PR as a Driver of Organizational Culture and Belonging

Internal public relations play a pivotal role in shaping and sustaining organizational culture by embedding shared values, norms, and beliefs into communicative practices that promote belonging and purpose. Rather than merely conveying policies or corporate updates, internal PR acts as a cultural architect that curates the symbolic and relational environment in which employees interpret their organizational experiences. Theunissen, and Noordin, (2012) argue that when internal communication is dialogic and grounded in mutual meaning-making, it becomes a vehicle through which culture is not only transmitted but co-created.

Belonging, as an emotional and cognitive state, emerges when employees perceive alignment between their personal identity and the organizational ethos. Internal PR facilitates this alignment by championing inclusive narratives, celebrating diverse voices, and fostering horizontal communication flows that reinforce psychological safety and group cohesion. For instance, storytelling campaigns, cultural rituals, and employee recognition programs strategically managed through internal PR can reinforce core values while promoting emotional connection (Ijiga, et al, 2024).

Moreover, internal PR enhances culture by making it visible and participatory. This includes enabling feedback loops, cross-cultural sensitivity, and leadership visibility—all of which deepen employee engagement. In diverse and hybrid work environments, internal PR becomes even more critical in sustaining an adaptive, inclusive culture that fosters advocacy and long-term commitment settings (Idoko et al, 2024). Thus, it is not merely a communication function but a strategic driver of belonging and cultural vitality.

3.4 Empirical Insights into Internal PR Tools and Channels

Internal public relations rely on a wide range of tools and communication channels to cultivate transparency, trust, and employee advocacy. Empirical evidence suggests that the effectiveness of these tools is contingent not only on their technical sophistication but on their ability to foster genuine two-way interaction and participatory engagement. Karanges, Johnston, Beatson, and Lings (2015) found that face-to-face communication, intranet portals, internal social media, and newsletters were most impactful when they served relational functions—such as reinforcing shared purpose, enabling dialogue, and humanizing leadership as shown in Figure 2.

These tools are not simply conduits for information but mechanisms for enhancing visibility, responsiveness, and alignment. For example, live town halls and interactive webinars offer platforms for leadership transparency, while internal blogs and enterprise social networks allow employees to co-create and disseminate organizational narratives. The strategic use of these tools has been shown to elevate employee engagement and advocacy by promoting openness, relevance, and accessibility (Ijiga, et al, 2024).

Ruck, Welch, and Menara (2017) reinforce that employee voice is amplified when internal PR channels facilitate responsiveness and ongoing feedback. Tools that enable timely, bottom-up communication—such as digital suggestion boxes or engagement analytics dashboards—signal that employee input is valued and acted upon. These findings emphasize that the success of internal PR tools lies not merely in dissemination, but in their capacity to build authentic relational capital and reciprocal communication within the organizational ecosystem.
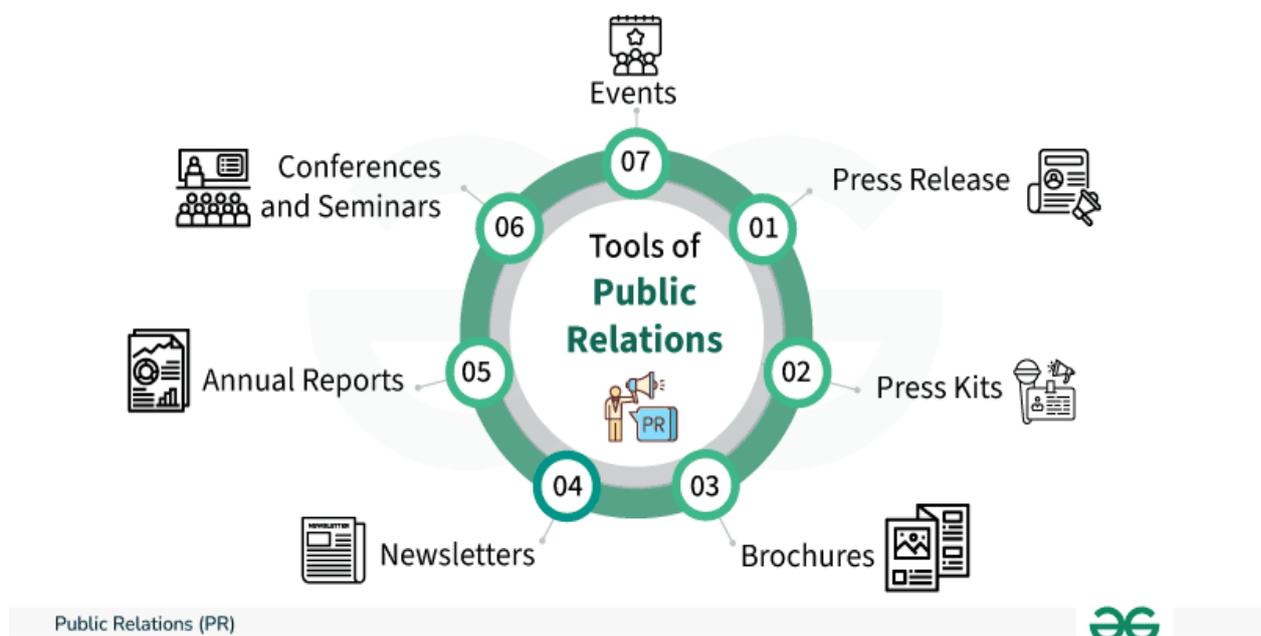

Figure 2: An Image Showing Core Public Relations Tools Utilized for Strategic Internal Communication and Employee Engagement (GeeksforGeeks. 2025).

Figure 2 visually outlines key instruments commonly employed in organizational communication, including press releases, press kits, brochures, newsletters, annual reports, conferences and seminars, and events. These tools form the backbone of formal communication strategies used to inform, engage, and align employees with organizational goals. While traditionally associated with external stakeholders, their internal application—such as using newsletters for cultural reinforcement or press releases to update staff on strategic shifts—has proven effective in cultivating engagement and trust. Empirical studies support that internal PR effectiveness depends not just on the presence of such tools but on their strategic deployment within a dialogic and participatory framework. For instance, newsletters become powerful when paired with feedback options, and conferences evolve into advocacy platforms when employees are given roles beyond passive participation. As internal communication expands to digital and interactive platforms, these conventional tools remain relevant when integrated with real-time responsiveness and authenticity, contributing meaningfully to internal reputation management, alignment, and ultimately, employee advocacy.

4. LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION AND ORGANIZATIONAL TRUST

4.1 Role of Executive and Mid-Level Leaders in Shaping Trust

The role of executive and mid-level leaders in shaping organizational trust is central to fostering a communicative culture where employee advocacy and engagement can thrive. Leaders act as the symbolic and operational face of the organization, embodying values, setting the tone for internal communication, and influencing relational dynamics (Abdallah, et al, 2024). Trust in leadership emerges when employees perceive consistency between what leaders communicate and how they behave, particularly during moments of change, uncertainty, or institutional stress. According to Dirks and Ferrin (2002), both executive and mid-level leaders play a critical role in cultivating this trust by demonstrating integrity, competence, and concern for employee welfare.

Executives are responsible for articulating the organization's vision and ensuring alignment between strategic priorities and communicative actions. Their visibility and transparency in addressing challenges contribute to the credibility of internal PR initiatives. Mid-level leaders, however, serve as the daily translators of executive messaging, making abstract values tangible and contextually relevant. Through their proximity to frontline teams, they reinforce trust by listening, providing feedback, and responding to employee concerns in real-time as presented in Table 3 (Ijiga, et al, 2024).

This dual-layer leadership structure ensures that trust is not only proclaimed at the top but enacted throughout the organizational hierarchy. When both executive and mid-level leaders embody authenticity, openness, and consistency in communication, they create an environment where employees feel secure, respected, and motivated to engage as vocal and loyal advocates (Atache, et al, 2024).

Table 3: Summary of Role of Executive and Mid-Level Leaders in Shaping Trust

Leadership Level	Key Responsibilities	Influence on Trust	Impact on Internal PR
Executive Leaders	Set organizational vision, ensure alignment between communication and strategic priorities, and model transparency.	Establish credibility through visible, value-driven leadership and strategic clarity.	Legitimizes internal PR initiatives through top-level endorsement and ethical leadership
Mid-Level Leaders	Translate executive messaging into actionable context, maintain daily communication with teams, and provide feedback.	Reinforce relational trust through responsiveness, presence, and frontline engagement.	Bridges strategic messaging with daily operations; reinforces internal narratives.
Combined Role	Collaborate to build consistent messaging across levels; demonstrate unified commitment to values and communication integrity	Ensure trust is practiced across the hierarchy; strengthen consistency in leadership communication.	Supports holistic communication strategy; fosters symmetrical communication.
Trust Outcomes	Create a culture of openness and security, encouraging employee advocacy and loyalty through trust-based relationships.	Motivate employees to act as vocal brand ambassadors in supportive and trustworthy environments	Enables authentic employee engagement and amplifies internal advocacy efforts.

4.2 Communicative Behaviors that Build or Undermine Trust

Communicative behaviors are foundational to the construction—or erosion—of trust within organizational environments. The frequency, tone, clarity, and responsiveness of leader communication directly influence how employees perceive the trustworthiness of both individuals and the institution. Norman, Avolio, and Luthans (2010) assert that leaders who consistently demonstrate transparency, optimism, and relational openness in their communication are more likely to be perceived as credible and trustworthy by employees. For example, clearly articulating the rationale behind decisions, acknowledging challenges, and inviting dialogue fosters a climate of mutual respect and psychological safety as shown in Figure 3.

Conversely, trust is quickly undermined by vague messaging, defensive communication, information hoarding, or inconsistent behavior. When leaders evade accountability, obscure critical information, or adopt an overly transactional tone, employees may perceive such behaviors as manipulative or disingenuous (Oloba, et al 2024). This perception breeds skepticism, diminishes organizational commitment, and weakens advocacy potential. In contrast, behaviors such as active listening, regular two-way communication, recognition of employee contributions, and authentic storytelling reinforce relational trust and encourage employee voice.

Moreover, communicative behavior is not solely about message content but also about interaction quality and follow-through. Trust is reinforced when communicative promises are honored in practice. Therefore, organizations seeking to cultivate employee advocacy must prioritize not only what leaders communicate but how they communicate it—emphasizing consistency, empathy, and shared meaning to foster sustainable trust across hierarchical levels (Ononiwu, et al, 2025).
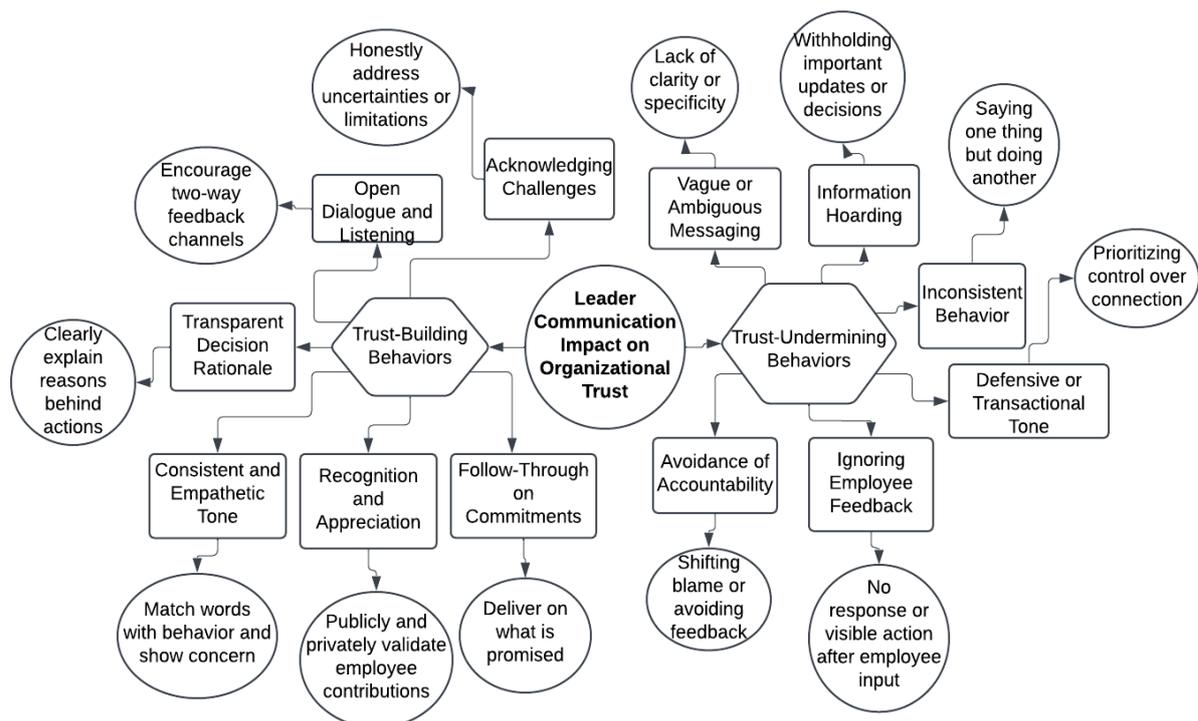

Figure 3: A diagram Showing Communicative Behaviors That Build or Undermine Trust in Leadership.

Figure 3 presents a comparative visual framework that distinguishes between communicative behaviors that foster trust and those that undermine it within organizational settings. On the left, trust-building behaviors—such as transparent decision rationale, open dialogue, empathy, recognition, and follow-through—are shown to enhance psychological safety and strengthen employee commitment. These behaviors encourage advocacy by reinforcing credibility and relational integrity. On the right, the diagram contrasts this with trust-undermining behaviors like vague messaging, information hoarding, defensive tones, and inconsistent actions, all of which erode trust and contribute to employee disengagement. A central

node labeled "Leader Communication Impact on Organizational Trust" connects both sides, emphasizing that communication quality—both in content and delivery—directly determines the level of trust employees place in leadership. The diagram concludes with directional arrows indicating that consistent, respectful, and transparent communication fosters a culture of advocacy, while neglectful or manipulative communication results in silence, mistrust, and diminished engagement.

4.3 Values-Based Messaging and Ethical Leadership

Values-based messaging and ethical leadership are intrinsically linked in shaping a high-trust organizational climate where employee advocacy can flourish. Ethical leadership refers to the demonstration of normatively appropriate behavior through personal actions and interpersonal relationships that promote integrity, fairness, and accountability. Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005) emphasize that leaders who consistently model ethical conduct serve as role models, influencing follower attitudes and behaviors through social learning mechanisms. Their communication becomes a moral compass that guides organizational discourse and cultural expectations.

Values-based messaging, when authentically delivered, conveys organizational priorities rooted in transparency, respect, and purpose. This form of communication is not confined to mission statements but is embedded in daily interactions, strategic narratives, and decision-making rationale. Ethical leaders articulate these values through consistent messaging that aligns what is said with what is done—thereby enhancing their credibility and the legitimacy of internal public relations efforts (Ijiga, et al, 2024).

Moreover, ethical communication encourages voice behavior and psychological safety, creating a platform for employee engagement and advocacy. When employees perceive that organizational messages are values-driven rather than performative, they are more likely to internalize those values and represent the organization positively to external audiences. Thus, the integration of values-based messaging within ethical leadership practices not only reinforces internal trust but also cultivates a culture of authenticity, empowerment, and employee-driven reputation advocacy (Ononiwu, et al, 2024).

5. THE ROLE OF TRANSPARENCY AND FEEDBACK LOOPS

5.1 Communicative Transparency and Its Impact on Trust Formation

Communicative transparency is a foundational element in cultivating organizational trust and fostering an environment where employee advocacy can thrive. It encompasses the clarity, timeliness, completeness, and honesty of the information shared by organizational leaders. Rawlins (2008) identifies three dimensions of transparency—information substantiality, participation, and accountability—that significantly influence employee trust formation. When organizations provide access to relevant and complete information, invite employee participation in decision-making, and accept responsibility for outcomes, they build a relational framework rooted in mutual respect and authenticity.

Transparency signals integrity and reduces uncertainty, especially in dynamic or crisis-laden environments. Employees interpret transparent communication as a sign of respect and competence, which strengthens their emotional bond to the organization. For instance, when leadership openly discusses organizational challenges and future strategies without obfuscation or corporate spin, employees are more likely to trust the intent and direction of the message. This trust, in turn, enhances their willingness to advocate for the organization both internally and externally (Ononiwu, et al, 2025).

Conversely, opaque or selective communication can erode trust and lead to cynicism, disengagement, or organizational silence. Employees may feel excluded or manipulated, undermining their identification with the organization. Thus, communicative transparency is not merely a rhetorical ideal but a practical strategy for trust-building and advocacy cultivation, especially when integrated into the core of internal public relations efforts (Idoko, et al, 2024).

5.2 Designing Feedback Loops: Formal, Informal, and Digital Channels

Effective internal communication systems require the intentional design of feedback loops that enable employee voice, foster reciprocal dialogue, and strengthen organizational trust. Feedback loops refer to structured or organic mechanisms through which employees share their perspectives and receive acknowledgment or action from leadership as shown in Figure 4. Men (2014) emphasizes that diverse communication channels—formal, informal, and digital—each play a unique role in creating a multidirectional flow of information that enhances employee satisfaction and engagement.

Formal feedback mechanisms, such as surveys, suggestion boxes, and structured performance reviews, provide measurable and scalable means for capturing employee sentiment. These tools offer strategic insight but may lack immediacy or personalization. Informal feedback, including spontaneous discussions, team debriefs, or leader walkarounds, contributes to a culture of openness and psychological safety by normalizing dialogue across hierarchies. Digital channels, such as enterprise social networks, intranet forums, and internal communication apps, expand the reach and frequency of feedback, enabling asynchronous participation and real-time interaction (Ononiwu, et al, 2023).

The efficacy of feedback loops depends not only on the availability of channels but also on leadership responsiveness. Feedback without follow-through can diminish trust and fuel disengagement. When feedback loops are integrated into the organizational communication architecture and actively supported by leadership behaviors, they serve as relational infrastructures that validate employee voice, enhance transparency, and strengthen the foundation for internal advocacy and organizational alignment.
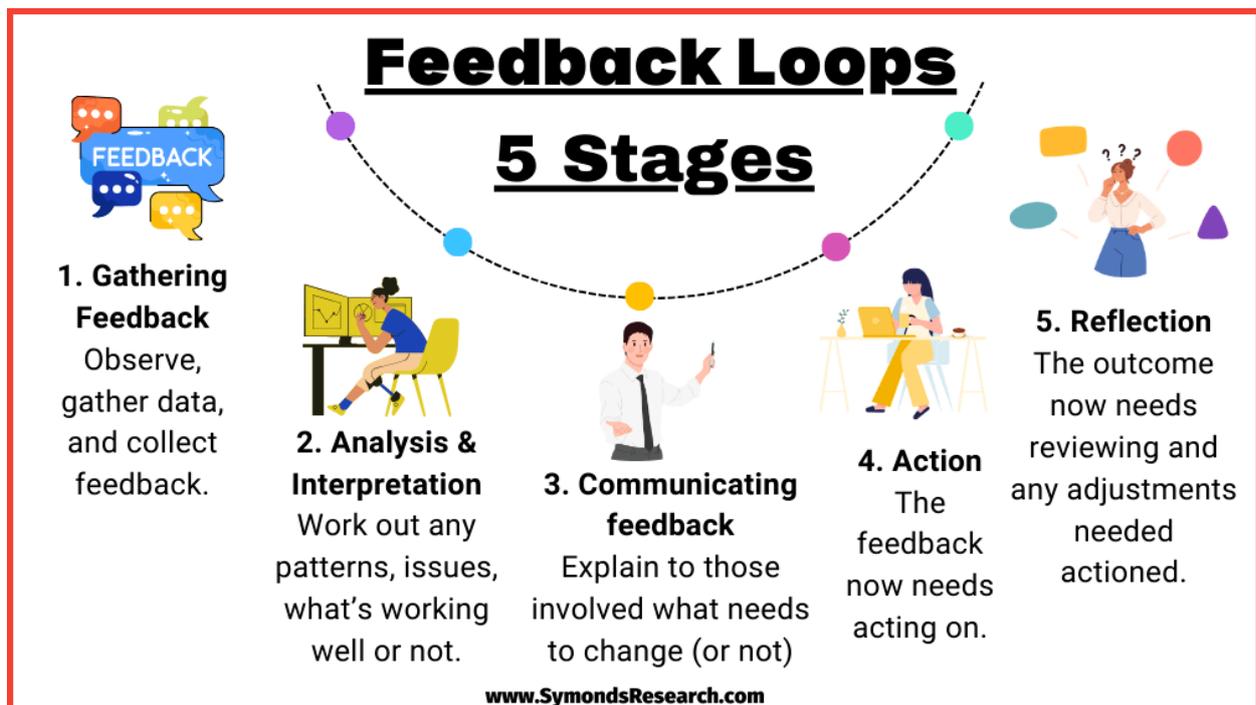

Figure 4: An Image Showing the Five Stages of Feedback Loops in Internal Communication Systems (Symonds, 2025).

Figure 4 illustrates the five critical stages of a feedback loop—gathering feedback, analysis and interpretation, communicating feedback, action, and reflection. These stages represent a structured approach to enabling employee voice and fostering reciprocal communication across various organizational channels. Stage 1 emphasizes observation and data collection, foundational to formal tools like surveys or digital platforms. Stage 2 involves analyzing patterns and determining areas for improvement, often supported by analytics or managerial insight. In Stage 3, communicating feedback ensures transparency, a critical factor in both formal reviews and informal discussions. Stage 4 involves taking actionable steps, showcasing leadership's responsiveness—especially in digital channels that demand agility. Finally, Stage 5 reflects on the outcomes, allowing organizations to adjust their strategies and complete the loop. This cyclical process reinforces psychological safety, trust, and continuous engagement, ensuring that feedback is not just collected but meaningfully integrated. The image effectively captures the dynamic, iterative nature of feedback loops that empower employees and support strategic internal PR and HR initiatives.

5.3 Responsive Listening: Closing the Loop to Encourage Advocacy

Responsive listening—defined as the active, attentive, and reciprocal engagement with employee feedback—is a critical process for closing communication loops and fostering advocacy. While many organizations collect employee input, only those that listen responsively—by acknowledging, validating, and acting on feedback—create the trust required for

sustained engagement. Holland, Cooper, and Sheehan (2017) found that trust mediates the relationship between voice behavior and engagement, with supervisor responsiveness playing a central role in strengthening this link.

Responsive listening goes beyond hearing employee concerns; it involves timely acknowledgment, meaningful dialogue, and visible follow-through. When employees observe that their insights are acted upon or constructively addressed, they experience a sense of efficacy and organizational belonging. This validation cultivates loyalty and strengthens their willingness to advocate publicly for the organization's values, leadership, and mission (Ononiwu, et al, 2025).

Moreover, responsive listening is essential in high-change or high-risk environments, where silence or neglect may be perceived as a breach of psychological contract. Organizations that institutionalize mechanisms for feedback acknowledgment—such as leadership town halls, feedback response dashboards, or anonymous follow-up reports—signal that employee voice is a valued component of strategic decision-making. In doing so, they convert passive listeners into active participants in organizational life. Ultimately, responsive listening serves as both a trust-building and advocacy-enabling tool within internal public relations strategy.

5.4 Transparency During Change, Crisis, and Strategic Shifts

Transparency during organizational change, crisis, and strategic realignment is not only a communicative necessity but a strategic imperative for maintaining trust, credibility, and employee advocacy. During uncertain or disruptive periods, employees seek clarity, consistency, and honesty from organizational leadership. Failure to deliver transparent communication can lead to confusion, distrust, and disengagement. Mazzei, Kim, and Dell'Oro (2012) emphasize that high-quality internal communication marked by openness and reliability enables organizations to navigate crises more effectively by reinforcing employee relationships and reducing resistance to change.

Transparent messaging during these times must go beyond superficial updates to include rationale, anticipated impact, and opportunities for employee involvement. When leaders are candid about challenges and articulate the strategic vision behind difficult decisions, employees are more likely to perceive the organization as authentic and ethically grounded. This perception fosters a deeper sense of organizational commitment and primes employees to defend and promote the company, even amidst adversity as presented in Table 4 (Ononiwu, et al, 2023).

Additionally, real-time transparency through multiple channels—such as internal webinars, FAQs, or executive blogs—can help maintain a continuous narrative that mitigates rumors and restores confidence. Transparency acts as a signal of accountability and respect, particularly when it is paired with mechanisms for dialogue and responsive listening. Ultimately, communicative transparency in times of disruption enables organizations to convert turbulence into opportunities for reinforcing trust and sustaining internal advocacy (Godwins et al 2024).

Table 4: Summary of Transparency During Change, Crisis, and Strategic Shifts

Context	Transparency Requirements	Impact on Trust	Contribution to Advocacy
Organizational Change	Provide clear rationale, impact projections, and avenues for employee involvement.	Builds authenticity and fosters employee belief in the organization's values.	Increases employee willingness to support and communicate change positively.
Crisis Situations	Ensure open, timely, and reliable communication to reduce anxiety and rumors.	Preserves credibility and strengthens relational bonds with employees.	Motivates employees to defend the organization externally during crisis.
Strategic Shifts	Articulate strategic direction and challenges with honesty and ethical framing.	Enhances perceptions of ethical leadership and vision clarity.	Encourages employees to align with and promote new strategic directions.
Communication Channels	Use real-time platforms like webinars, executive blogs, and FAQs to maintain narrative clarity.	Reinforces leadership accountability and responsiveness through consistent updates.	Supports continuous engagement and trust-based dialogue, even under pressure.

6. BARRIERS TO EMPLOYEE ADVOCACY: SILENCE, MISTRUST, AND MISALIGNMENT

6.1 Organizational Silence and Fear of Repercussion

Organizational silence—where employees consciously withhold feedback, concerns, or ideas—represents a significant barrier to cultivating a culture of advocacy and trust. This phenomenon is particularly harmful in environments where internal public relations aim to encourage employee voice and engagement. Milliken, Morrison, and Hewlin (2003) found that fear of negative consequences, such as retaliation, damage to reputation, or strained relationships with superiors, is one of the primary drivers behind employee silence. This fear-based withholding of input inhibits critical dialogue, suppresses innovation, and ultimately erodes psychological safety within the workplace.

The perpetuation of silence is often tied to organizational structures and leadership behaviors that discourage dissent or fail to respond constructively to feedback. Employees may interpret silence as the safest option in contexts where past efforts to speak up were ignored or punished. In such climates, even well-intentioned internal communication strategies fail to yield engagement, as employees disengage from processes they perceive as insincere or performative.

Furthermore, silence may be reinforced by hierarchical rigidity and a lack of transparent escalation channels. Without clear protections or role models who exemplify candid communication, fear becomes institutionalized. Addressing organizational silence requires intentional efforts to reshape internal communication norms, build trust through responsiveness, and model openness from leadership—thereby enabling internal public relations to serve as a bridge to authentic advocacy rather than a barrier veiled by risk aversion (Ononiwu, et al, 2023).

6.2 Cultural and Structural Inhibitors of Internal Trust

Internal trust is profoundly shaped by both the cultural assumptions and structural frameworks that define an organization's daily functioning. Cultural inhibitors such as rigid hierarchies, fear-based leadership styles, and low tolerance for dissent undermine employees' willingness to engage openly with internal communication systems (Aigbogun, et al, 2025). Schein (2010) argues that organizational culture operates at a deep, often unconscious level, shaping the norms that govern employee behavior and perception. When cultural values emphasize conformity, obedience, or deference to authority, trust deteriorates, and employee voice becomes constrained.

Structurally, trust can be inhibited by bureaucratic complexity, opaque decision-making processes, and centralized control over communication. These structural barriers limit employees' access to meaningful participation and create distance between leadership and staff, fostering a sense of alienation. For example, when decision-making is confined to top-level executives without opportunities for input from lower tiers, employees may perceive the organization as unresponsive or dismissive of their concerns (Ijiga, et al, 2025). This perception directly weakens relational trust and diminishes motivation to act as advocates.

Moreover, when internal public relations efforts are embedded within these restrictive cultural and structural environments, they risk being viewed as performative rather than transformative. Overcoming such inhibitors requires deliberate cultural change initiatives, including leadership modeling of transparency, inclusive communication practices, and the decentralization of voice-enabling mechanisms (Azonuche & Enyejo, 2025). Only by addressing these embedded inhibitors can organizations build the trust infrastructure necessary to support authentic internal advocacy.

6.3 Misalignment Between Communicated Values and Lived Experiences

A persistent misalignment between communicated organizational values and employees' lived experiences poses a critical threat to internal trust and employee advocacy. When an organization promotes aspirational values—such as inclusion, transparency, or collaboration—but fails to operationalize them in day-to-day practices, employees perceive a breach of behavioral integrity. Simons (2002) defines behavioral integrity as the consistency between a leader's words and actions, noting that discrepancies between espoused values and observed behaviors erode employee trust and engagement.

This misalignment is particularly damaging in internal public relations, where credibility hinges on the authenticity of organizational messaging. For instance, if an organization emphasizes openness yet discourages dissent or fails to act on employee feedback, its internal communication strategies lose legitimacy. Employees who witness such contradictions may become cynical, disengaged, or resistant to participating in reputation-enhancing behaviors like advocacy as shown in Figure 5 (Okereke et al, 2025).

Moreover, perceived value incongruence generates emotional dissonance, undermining employees' psychological safety and sense of organizational belonging. The result is not only reduced advocacy but also potential reputational risk, as disillusioned employees may disengage silently or vocalize their discontent externally (Azonuche & Enyejo, 2024).

To reconcile this gap, internal PR must shift from value promotion to value embodiment—ensuring that strategic communication is backed by consistent leadership behaviors, institutional practices, and relational accountability. Only when values are reflected in lived organizational realities can trust be sustained and advocacy authentically mobilized (Ononiwu, et al, 2023).
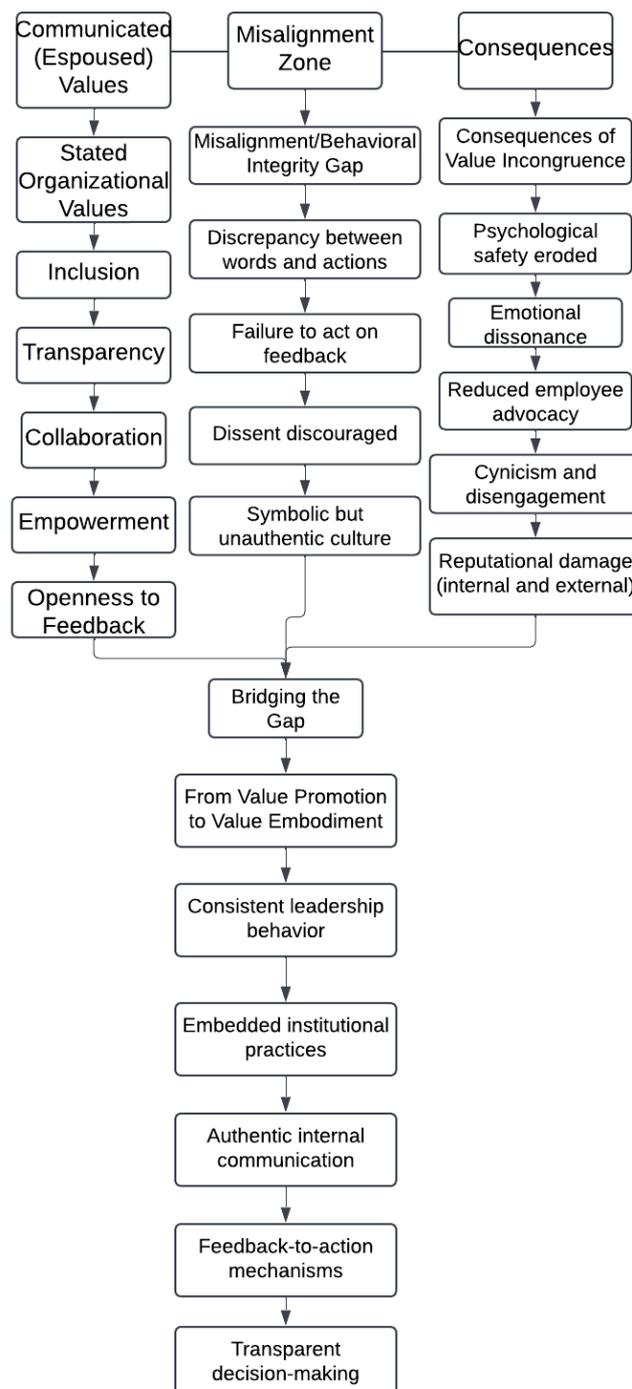

Figure 5: A Block Diagram Showing the Impact of Misalignment Between Communicated Values and Lived Experiences on Employee Trust and Advocacy.

Figure 5 illustrates the critical disconnect that occurs when there is a misalignment between an organization's communicated values—such as inclusion, transparency, and openness—and the lived experiences of its employees. On the left, it highlights the aspirational values typically promoted through internal communication. However, when these values are not reflected in everyday behaviors, leadership actions, or decision-making processes, a behavioral integrity gap forms at the center. This misalignment zone undermines organizational credibility and signals inauthenticity, particularly when feedback is ignored or dissent is discouraged. On the right, the diagram outlines the negative consequences of this incongruence, including emotional dissonance, reduced psychological safety, disengagement, and a decline in employee advocacy. At the bottom, a resolution pathway is proposed, showing how organizations can bridge this trust gap by transitioning from value promotion to value embodiment—through consistent leadership behavior, transparent communication, embedded cultural practices, and actionable feedback systems. The diagram ultimately emphasizes that internal trust and advocacy can only be sustained when what an organization says is fully aligned with what it does.

6.4 Breaking the Cycle: Conditions for Empowering Employee Voice

Empowering employee voice requires dismantling implicit and structural barriers that suppress expression and inhibit participation. Detert and Edmondson (2011) argue that employees often internalize "implicit voice theories"—tacit beliefs that speaking up is risky or futile—which perpetuate cycles of silence even in organizations that claim to value openness. These self-censorship patterns are reinforced by hierarchical power dynamics, ambiguous norms, and prior negative experiences, all of which contribute to a muted communicative climate.

To break this cycle, organizations must cultivate conditions that actively dismantle fear and encourage authentic dialogue. Central to this transformation is psychological safety—a shared belief that employees can express concerns, dissenting views, or innovative ideas without fear of retribution. Empowering voice also requires visible leadership support, not only through verbal endorsement but through concrete follow-up actions that signal responsiveness and accountability (George, & Peter-Anyebe, 2024)

Internal public relations can serve as a strategic enabler by embedding voice mechanisms into formal processes, such as cross-level communication forums, anonymous digital platforms, and leader–employee feedback loops. These systems must be designed for accessibility, confidentiality, and impact, ensuring that employee input leads to organizational learning and visible change as presented in Table 5 (Azonuche & Enyejo, 2024).

Furthermore, storytelling, peer recognition, and inclusive campaigns that spotlight employee contributions help normalize voice behavior. When communicative space is psychologically safe, structurally accessible, and meaningfully consequential, employees are far more likely to move from silent observers to active, trusted advocates.

Table 5: Summary of 4 Breaking the Cycle: Conditions for Empowering Employee Voice

Barrier to Voice	Condition for Empowerment	Role of Internal PR	Impact on Advocacy
Implicit Voice Theories	Challenge self-censorship by promoting open expression and dispelling fears.	Communicate value of employee voice through campaigns and leadership messaging.	Increases belief that speaking up matters and will be respected.
Hierarchical and Structural Constraints	Flatten hierarchies, clarify norms, and encourage participation across levels.	Embed inclusive dialogue in PR strategy and facilitate leader-employee interaction.	Reduces communicative fear and encourages continuous feedback loops.
Lack of Psychological Safety	Cultivate a culture where employees can speak without fear of retaliation.	Showcase voice-friendly leadership behaviors and peer modeling via internal media.	Builds trust and identity alignment, encouraging vocal organizational support.
Insufficient Feedback Mechanisms	Design accessible, anonymous, and responsive platforms for input.	Institutionalize storytelling, digital suggestion systems, and recognition programs.	Elevates engagement, inclusion, and willingness to represent the organization externally.

7. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

7.1 Synthesis of Key Insights on Internal PR and Employee Advocacy

This review establishes that internal public relations is no longer confined to message dissemination but operates as a strategic, relational infrastructure critical to trust formation and employee advocacy. The integration of two-way symmetrical communication, values-based leadership, and responsive feedback systems enhances the credibility and authenticity of internal PR practices. Employee advocacy emerges not from directive campaigns but from environments where employees experience alignment between organizational values and their lived realities. The data shows that advocacy is not merely behavioral—it is attitudinal, emotional, and relational, fostered through transparent leadership communication, cultural congruence, and a systemic commitment to dialogue. Trust, once established, becomes the medium through which employees willingly assume the role of brand ambassadors. Conversely, barriers such as organizational silence, fear of retaliation, and inconsistent leadership behaviors undercut internal credibility and suppress voice. Internal PR that succeeds in positioning employees as internal stakeholders—through inclusivity, recognition, and communicative responsiveness—transforms passive compliance into active advocacy. As organizations navigate hybrid work, volatility, and generational shifts, internal PR must recalibrate from transactional communication to adaptive engagement. The synthesis highlights that employee advocacy is not a peripheral communication outcome but the cumulative product of a trust-based, dialogic, and value-consistent internal ecosystem stewarded through strategic public relations practices.

7.2 Practical Recommendations for Communication and HR Leaders

To embed a culture of employee advocacy, communication and HR leaders must align their strategies with relational trust-building and value embodiment across organizational levels. First, they should institutionalize two-way communication platforms—such as digital town halls, employee roundtables, and peer feedback networks—that invite continuous dialogue rather than periodic surveys. These must be accompanied by mechanisms for follow-through and public acknowledgment of employee input. Second, leaders should train middle managers in empathetic communication and ethical leadership to ensure value transmission and trust consistency across hierarchical layers. Messaging should be inclusive, transparent, and emotionally intelligent, especially during change, crisis, or strategic shifts. Third, communication teams should avoid over-curated content and instead empower authentic employee storytelling that reflects real experiences and identities. Recognizing grassroots advocacy efforts—such as organic brand endorsements or voluntary participation in corporate initiatives—fosters intrinsic motivation. Fourth, HR must embed employee voice into performance development, change management, and diversity strategies, ensuring that advocacy is not a public relations function alone but a core HR concern. Finally, integrating engagement analytics and internal sentiment tracking tools can help leaders identify silent zones, intervene in trust erosion, and realign communication tactics. Through these actions, organizations can transition from message control to trust-driven employee participation and reputation co-creation.

7.3 Theoretical Contributions and Research Gaps

This study advances the theoretical discourse by reframing internal public relations as a dialogic trust-building process rather than a content delivery function. It demonstrates that employee advocacy is a downstream outcome of consistent, ethical, and inclusive communicative ecosystems grounded in Stakeholder Theory and the Internal PR Model. The findings deepen our understanding of behavioral integrity, psychological safety, and emotional commitment as essential antecedents to advocacy. Moreover, the study reveals that trust is not merely an outcome of internal PR but a strategic resource that mediates the relationship between communication quality and employee voice. However, research gaps persist in quantifying the impact of advocacy on organizational performance across diverse sectors and cultures. Little empirical work examines the long-term effects of internal PR on post-crisis reputation recovery or employee-driven brand legitimacy in decentralized and hybrid environments. Additionally, the intersection of digital communication, AI-enhanced engagement tools, and authenticity in employee advocacy remains underexplored. Future theoretical frameworks should integrate cross-disciplinary insights from organizational psychology, digital communication, and ethics to better explain how internal PR can serve as a fulcrum for relational governance and employee-led reputation building. Addressing these gaps can inform more adaptive, inclusive, and technologically responsive models of internal advocacy development.

7.4 Future Pathways for Cultivating Trust-Driven Advocacy in Organizations

Future efforts to cultivate trust-driven employee advocacy must move beyond communication output metrics and toward integrated trust ecosystems that align values, structures, and behaviors. Organizations should prioritize embedding advocacy

potential into onboarding processes, leadership development, and cultural assimilation. This begins by cultivating psychological safety as a structural norm, allowing dissent, innovation, and feedback without penalty. Technology must be harnessed not just for message dissemination but for real-time listening, predictive sentiment analytics, and micro-feedback loops that surface emerging concerns. Internal PR teams should collaborate with data analysts, organizational psychologists, and digital architects to create adaptive communication systems that personalize engagement while preserving collective alignment. Strategic emphasis must also be placed on repairing misalignments between stated values and employee realities by integrating advocacy feedback into corporate strategy reviews. Peer-driven advocacy networks, ambassador councils, and employee co-creation labs can serve as grassroots platforms for surfacing authentic narratives and sustaining trust. In an era of hybrid work, geopolitical tension, and stakeholder capitalism, trust must be both measurable and operationalized across all communication and HR touchpoints. The future of internal PR lies not in controlling voice but in cultivating the conditions where advocacy emerges organically from shared purpose, credible leadership, and relational transparency.

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