

## “Vision, passion, and care:” The impact of charismatic executive leadership communication on employee trust and support for organizational change

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### **Abstract:**

This study explored how charismatic executive leadership communication during change influences employees’ attitudinal and behavioral reaction toward change. Specifically, it proposed and tested a conceptual model that links charismatic executive leadership communication during change, characterized by envisioning, energizing, and enabling behaviors, employee organizational trust during change, and employees’ openness to change and behavioral support for change (i.e., cooperation and championing). Through an online survey of 439 employees who had experienced a company-wide organizational change in the past two years in the United States, results showed that charismatic executive leadership communication during change positively influenced employee organizational trust, openness to change, and behavioral support for change. Employee trust toward the organization during change positively influenced employee openness to change, which in turn, contributed to employee behavioral support for change. Employee trust was revealed as a partial mediator for the positive impact of charismatic executive leadership communication during change on employee openness to change and behavioral support for change. Theoretical and practical implications of the findings are discussed.

**Keywords:** leadership communication | executive communication | change communication | employee reaction to change | organizational trust

### **Article:**

#### **1. Introduction**

In the increasingly versatile and fast-evolving business environment, organizational leaders face immense challenges to gain or maintain employee trust in the organization. Organizational top leaders, especially CEOs, are expected to not only be figureheads, decision-makers, disturbance handlers, and spokespersons (Park & Berger, 2004) but also enablers, “chief engagement officers,” and effective communicators (Smythe, 2019). Informed employees in the unprecedentedly transparent era are placing higher demands on top leaders to come out of their

offices, communicate openly, directly engage with internal and external constituencies, and even take a stand around controversial issues (Men, 2015; Nevins, 2018). The communicative role of top leaders has become more salient and important than ever before. This is particularly the case during turbulent times such as a company-wide change.

In fact, leadership has been suggested as a critical determinant of successful change (Gill, 2002) in that it develops vision, strategy, and culture for change, and motivates employees in change engagement. CEOs are important agents for transformation, and they are charged with communicating the significance of change to employees, role modeling desired mindsets and behaviors, openly engaging others and getting personally involved (Aiken & Keller, 2007). However, despite the crucial role of executive or top leadership communication during change, research that reveals such “know-how” has been surprisingly sparse (Aiken & Keller, 2007). Most existing change communication and management studies that examined leadership focused on how various leadership styles of lower-level *supervisors*, such as transformational leadership (e.g., Hill, Seo, Kang, & Taylor, 2012), charismatic leadership (e.g., Paulsen, Maldonado, Callan, & Ayoko, 2009), and authentic leadership (e.g., Agote, Aramburu, & Lines, 2016), contribute to the success of change processes. Among the very few that explored the role of *top leaders* in organizational change, the communicative component of leadership has seldom been at the center of the discussion (e.g., Jung, Wu, & Chow, 2008). Further, in the public relations literature, despite the growing scholarly attention on theorizing leadership in public relations and leadership communication (e.g., Aldoory & Toth, 2004; Werder & Holtzhausen, 2009; Jin, 2010; Meng & Berger, 2013; Men & Stacks, 2014; Men, 2015) and the wide recognition of CEOs’ symbolic and communicative roles as corporate representatives (Park & Berger, 2004), there has been little research that explores executive leadership communication during organizational change process.

To address this important theoretical gap in public relations and provide insights for organizational leaders to effectively communicate about change, this study draws upon interdisciplinary theories and literature and sets to explore how charismatic executive leadership communication could nurture employee trust and impact employee reaction to change (i.e., openness to change and behavioral support). Charismatic executive leadership communication is defined to encompass three behavioral dimensions: envisioning (i.e., communication about vision), energizing (i.e., communication about passion), and enabling (i.e., communication about care and support) (cf. Nalder & Tushman, 1990). With the global erosion of trust (Edelman, 2019), businesses and organizations are faced with a pressing challenge to foster and maintain trust from the inside. Change communication and management scholars agree that employee trust is fundamental for the success of change processes (Agote et al., 2016; Yue, Men, & Ferguson, 2019). Without employee trust, it is hard to get everyone to work toward the common goal or to generate needed support for the change initiative (Agote et al., 2016; Lewis, 2019).

Considering the innate connection between leadership and employee trust (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996; Bommer, Rich, & Rubin, 2005; Yue, Thelen, Robinson, & Men, 2019), this study proposes employee trust as a potential mediator that underlies the impact of charismatic executive leadership communication during change on employee positive reaction to change, featured by openness to change and behavior support for change (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002). Specifically, employee trust is defined as employees’ level of confidence in and willingness to

open themselves to the organization (Hon & Grunig, 1999) during change. Employee openness to change involves positive affect toward the change outcomes and the willingness to support the proposed change; behavioral support for change is characterized by employee cooperation and championing (i.e., promoting the change) (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002). Overall, a conceptual model that links charismatic executive leadership communication during change, employee organizational trust, and employee change outcomes (i.e., openness to change and behavioral support for change) is proposed and tested.

As one of the first empirical attempts to explore the role of executive leadership communication during change, findings of the study will fill the research gap and contribute to the growing body of literature on leadership communication, change communication, and trust in public relations. The study will also offer critical practical insights for organizational leaders and change communication managers regarding how to involve top executives in the change communication process to boost employee trust and garner attitudinal and behavioral support for change.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Leadership communication and public relations**

The topic of leadership in public relations research has experienced rapid growth in recent years (Men, Chen, & Ji, 2018). Public relations scholars have drawn upon leadership theories from management literature and explored, for instance, the positive effect of transformational leadership, authentic leadership, and ethical leadership in generating public relations outcomes (Aldoory & Toth, 2004; Men, 2015; Yue, Thelen et al., 2019). Additionally, a substantial number of studies have unearthed qualities attached to excellent public relations leaders (e.g., Berger & Meng, 2014; Jin, 2010; Luo & Jiang, 2014). Even though traditional leadership theories on leaders' traits and styles have shed light on the discipline of public relations and communication, these theories rarely consider communication as a key constitutive element of leadership. In this study, we follow what Fairhurst and Connaughton (2014) called a communication-centered view of leadership and conceive of communication as the central, defining, and constitutive feature of leadership. In light of this conceptualization, we focus on leadership communication and its facilitating role in organizational change management.

Leadership communication refers to the process through which organizational leaders connect with and influence stakeholders (Harrison & Mühlberg, 2014). Leadership communication is a core component of organization's internal communication system; it not only sets the tone for internal communication but plays a crucial role in determining how internal and external stakeholders perceive the organization's image and reputation. It is widely acknowledged that senior leaders define corporate DNAs and connect with and influence stakeholders through communicating corporate values, purposes, and culture (Men & Bowen, 2017). Public relations scholars have suggested the key functions of leadership communication to include enhancing organization's internal and external reputation (Park & Berger, 2004), fostering positive organizational culture (Men & Yue, 2019), public engagement (Huang & Yeo, 2018), building quality organization-public relationships (Tsai & Men, 2017), and eventually to contribute to business growth (Harrison & Mühlberg, 2014). Recent research conducted in the field of public relations has both examined executive leaders' communication with online stakeholders (i.e., a

mixed of internal and external stakeholders) and their communication maneuvers with internal stakeholders (Men, 2015). Evidence gathered from these empirical studies has highlighted the value of executive leaders in fulfilling the public relations function and further reinforced the notion that top leaders can and should act as *chief engagement officer* by directly interacting with their constituencies (Edelman, 2019).

Change communication and management has been recognized as both an opportunity and challenge to advance public relations theory and the field's practical value (Johansson & Heide, 2008; Luo & Jiang, 2014; Yue, Thelen et al., 2019). Public relations scholars have examined the role of corporate-level communication on employee outcomes during organizational change and made suggestions such as building an open, transparent, and trusting atmosphere to engender employee positive attitudes and behaviors toward the change (Neill, Men, & Yue, 2019; Yue, Men et al., 2019). However, it remains less clear yet critical as to how organizational leaders, particularly top leaders, could directly influence change outcomes through effective leadership communication. Understanding different communication strategies executive leadership could employ has great implications for public relations as it may elevate public relations' strategic management function in the context of organizational change. For instance, Luo and Jiang (2014) demonstrated the role of public relations leadership in consulting CEOs' communication styles and mitigating conflicts between middle and top management during organizational change. Therefore, to extend this line of research in public relations, this study explores the essential role of executive leadership during organizational change through the theoretical lens of leadership communication and change management.

## 2.2. Conceptualizing organizational change

*Organizational change* refers to the "alternations of existing work routines and strategies that affect a whole organization" (Shin, Taylor, & Seo, 2012, p. 727). Agote, Aramburu, and Lines (2016) view *organizational change* as "the process by which organizations move from their present state to some desired future state in order to foster the achievement of one or more organizational objectives" (p. 37). The types of organizational change range from reengineering, downsizing, mergers and acquisitions, to changes in leadership and corporate culture (Devos, Buelens, & Bouckennooghe, 2007; Luo & Jiang, 2014). Although change management has been practiced and researched as a discipline for more than 30 years, common misconceptions about change and how to effectively manage change remain (Deloitte, 2014). In fact, most studies since 1970s up till recently show a failure rate about 60 %-70 % of all organizational changes (Ashkenas, 2013).

Previous organizational change research has focused on two themes: how *organizations* initiate, implement, and terminate change over time and how *change recipients* respond to organizational change, including the related antecedents and consequences (Bouckennooghe, 2010; Oreg, Vakola, & Armenakis, 2011). Research examining employees' reactions to change has been steadily growing since employees are identified as the key force in determining the success of change (Oreg et al., 2011). As succinctly put by Schneider, Brief, and Guzzo, "If people do not change, there is no organizational change" (1996, p. 7). Consequently, this line of scholars value employees' inputs on change (Lewis & Russ, 2012), highlight employees' responses to change (Lewis, 1997), and have suggested an array of employee affective, cognitive, and behavioral

outcomes (e.g., change commitment, Walker, Armenakis, & Bernerth, 2007; openness to change; Axtell et al., 2002; Yue, Thelen et al., 2019; change resistance, Lewis, 2006; behavioral support for the change, Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002; readiness for change, Holt, Armenakis, Feild, & Harris, 2007). In summary, employee-centered change management research is built on the premise that employees are active participants rather than passive recipients during the change; their change-related attitudes and behaviors have been theoretically and empirically linked to the success or failure of change in organizations (Herold, Fedor, Caldwell, & Liu, 2008; Van Knippenberg, Martin, & Tyler, 2006). Naturally, failure to account for employees' attitudes and behaviors during change is detrimental for both the well-being of employees and change success as employees may experience increased cynicism and stress, and a decline of trust, job satisfaction, and change commitment (Elias, 2009; Vakola & Nikolaou, 2005).

Agreeing on the central role of employees in determining the chance of success for organizational change, we examined employees' openness to change and behavioral support for change as outcomes of charismatic executive leaders' communication. Furthermore, we specified the process through which these positive outcomes can be elicited by proposing employee trust as a potential mediator. In the next section, we first explicate the constructs examined in the study.

### 2.3. Openness to change

Miller, Johnson, and Grau (1994) have conceptualized openness to change as entailing employees' positive affect about the consequences of the change and willingness to support organizational change. Openness to change as a "necessary, initial condition for successful planned change" predicted employees' work-related attitudes and behaviors (Miller, Johnson, & Grau, 1994, p. 60; Wanberg & Banas, 2000). For instance, Wanberg and Banas' (2000) longitudinal study found that employees with higher level of openness toward workplace reorganization at time 1 predicted more job satisfaction, less work irritation, and less intentions to quit 14 months later.

### 2.4. Behavioral support for change

Employees' supportive behavior is the key for successful implementation of change initiatives (Lamm & Gordon, 2010; Shin et al., 2012). Herscovitch and Meyer (2002) categorized behavioral support into three broad types: *Compliance* refers to meeting the minimum requirement of the change such as going along with the change but reluctantly; *Cooperation* is defined as accepting the spirit of the change and making modest sacrifices to advance the change; *Championing* represents the highest level of employee support, referring to going above and beyond what is officially required, exerting considerable sacrifices, and enthusiastically promoting the change to others. In addition, although *compliance* is bound by employees' formal obligations, *cooperation* and *championing* are closely tied together as both refer to employees' discretionary behaviors.

Previous studies have linked employees' behavioral support for change to affective and normative commitment to change (Chou, 2014; Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002). Theoretically, the theory of planned behavior and the theory of reasoned action both argue that attitudes predispose

individuals toward certain behavioral choices (Ajzen, 1991). Moreover, according to the compatibility principle (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977), when attitudes and behaviors are measured at the same level of specificity or correspond with one another, the specific attitudes toward a behavior would be a strong predictor of the behavior. Thus, we argue that employees who hold positive affect and intention to support the change, manifested in *openness to change*, should demonstrate more behavioral support in implementing the change:

**H1.** Employees' openness to change is positively associated with their behavioral support for change.

Communication scholars have identified critical functions of internal organizational communication and executive leadership in advancing organizational change. For example, Neill (2018) suggested the internal communication professionals work closely with senior leaders to construct consistent visions of change, reasons for change, and coach managers to communicate key change messages with employees. Similarly, Luo and Jiang (2014) discussed the role of internal communication managers in consulting with top executives to align the change vision with shared organizational values, manage employees' emotions, and reconcile conflicts between management of different levels. Inspired by this burgeoning line of research on top leadership communication during organizational change, we further explore below why and how organizational top leaders can utilize strategic communication to elicit employees' positive relational, attitudinal, and behavioral reactions during change.

## 2.5. Executive leadership communication during change

Executive leaders, including CEOs, heads of business units, and top management team members who report directly to the CEOs, are seen as central determiners of organization's direction. They make big and small decisions and establish organizational infrastructures to mobilize and inspire organizational members to accept the influence (Finkelstein, Hambrick, & Cannella, 2009). Executive leaders play an even vital role in the context of organizational change. Change creates uncertainty and stress, and the general reaction of people is to react cautiously and even negatively, many times in the form of resistance. While research has extensively examined the factors and mechanisms to overcome resistance to change (Oreg, 2006), one fruitful research area is to explore how employees interpret change positively and thus act upon it. Leadership communication, if done properly, can provide both a template for understanding the change and an upbeat representation of the change (Sonenshein & Dholakia, 2012). Therefore, effective leadership communication should play a pivotal role in successful change implementation.

### 2.5.1. Charismatic executive leadership communication

In this research, we focus on the charismatic form of leadership communication. This is not only because charisma is considered a prototypical characteristic of effective leadership (Den Hartog & Verburg, 1997), but that charismatic leaders engage particularly in *communicative* processes that align followers' interests, values, and beliefs to those of the organizations (Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993). By definition, charisma is values-based, symbolic, and emotion-laden leader signaling, which occurs via verbal and nonverbal communication (Antonakis, Bastardoz, Jacquart, & Shamir, 2016). That being said, for the charismatic effect to occur, the leader must

communicate signals that are appealing to organizational members. Nadler and Tushman (1990) developed a framework of charismatic leaders' behaviors, including envisioning (e.g., creating a picture of the future), energizing (e.g., demonstrating personal excitement and energy), and enabling (e.g., expressing empathy and confidence in the followers). Drawing on this framework, and based on charismatic leadership's definition in terms of its *communicative* component (Antonakis et al., 2016), as well as executive leaders' role in *organizational change* (Venus, Stam, & van Knippenberg, 2018), we thus propose *charismatic executive leadership communication of change*, manifested by envisioning (i.e., communication about vision), energizing (i.e., communication about passion), and enabling (i.e., communication about care and support), to be a critical antecedent to organizational members' attitudinal and behavioral reactions to change. In the following, we elaborate on the three components of charismatic executive leadership communication of change and how each component elicits organizational members' positive and constructive attitudinal and behavioral responses to change.

### 2.5.2. *Envisioning*

Since charismatic leadership communication is about signaling, the first signal that is vital to the success of organizational change is a compelling vision. Vision refers to the "idealized goal that the leader wants the organization to achieve in the future" (Conger & Kanungo, 1987, p. 640). The more idealized the goal, the more discrepant it is relative to the status quo, and thus, a stronger need for change. Top executives play an essential role in crafting and dispersing organizational visions to organizational members. Fairhurst (1993) contended that leaders who communicate a clear vision in change can facilitate employees' shared interpretations of reality and therefore create collective actions which move beyond employees' self-interests. Their messages containing basic organizational values and the rationale for change provide members a good understanding of the change so that members will find more benefits from it. These actions will result in members' positive attitude in the form of openness to change. Additionally, executives' messages concerning organization's strategic directions as well as a clear road map are important to reduce change-related uncertainty. As Venus et al. (2018) have empirically tested, leaders' vision communication during change would assure employees the continuity of their organizational identity, which in turn increases employees' behavioral support for change. Taken together, charismatic executive leadership communication in the form of envisioning can not only induce members' positive attitudes towards change but gain their behavioral support for change.

### 2.5.3. *Energizing*

Charismatic leadership literature argues that charismatic leaders signal about their own skills (Antonakis et al., 2016) and communicate confidence in goal attainment. Moreover, they demonstrate conviction and passion for the vision via emotional displays (Antonakis et al., 2016). Conger (1989) describes the messages of charismatic leaders as energetic, exciting, and emotional. Scholars have argued that positive emotions and mood contagion be one of the basic psychological processes linking charismatic leadership and follower outcomes (Bono & Ilies, 2006). In the context of organizational change, executive leadership communication in the form of energizing can arouse follower's positive affect, leading to increased level of openness to change. Additionally, because positive emotional arousal increases follower's resource

availability (Kanfer & Ackerman, 1989) and cooperation (Barsade, 2002), followers' behavioral support for change is thus expected to arise.

#### 2.5.4. *Enabling*

Since the process of change is usually challenging and emotion-laden, it is important for top executives to communicate that care and support are available for organizational members. As Nadler and Tushman (1990) theorized, enabling is achieved through demonstrating empathy (e.g., listening, understanding, and sharing the feelings), expressing confidence in followers' abilities, and providing individualized support, all of which are critical for coping with organizational change. Research has shown that change recipients who receive social support, such as affection, comfort, encouragement, and reassurance, were more receptive to changes and showed a greater willingness to cooperate with the change (Wanberg & Banas, 2000). In addition, in line with Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory, individuals will not perform well in change contexts when they are not confident in their abilities; rather, they will perform well in areas which they judge themselves to be capable of. This further underscores the important role that executive leader's communication of care and confidence in employee's abilities plays in facilitating followers' positive responses to change. Thus, taken together, we propose:

**H2.** Charismatic executive leadership communication characterized by envisioning, energizing, and enabling during change positively influences employee openness to change.

**H3.** Charismatic executive leadership communication characterized by envisioning, energizing, and enabling during change positively influences employee behavioral support for change.

#### 2.6. The mediator: employee organizational trust during change

Trust is a key indicator of social exchange relationships (Blau, 1964; Colquitt, Baer, Long, & Halvorsen-Ganepola, 2014; Neves & Caetano, 2006). The often cited definition of trust is from Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995): "the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party" (p. 712). This definition notes the trust building process as a series of risk-taking behaviors between relevant parties (Cook et al., 2005), which entails one party's positive expectations of another party (Lewicki, Tomlinson, & Gillespie, 2006).

From the theoretical lens of organization-public relationships (OPRs) in public relations scholarship, trust is framed as an important element of quality OPRs (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Specifically, four dimensions underlie trust: *integrity* refers to a trustor's (e.g., employee) perception of a trustee (e.g., leader, organization) for being fair and just; *dependability* refers to a trustor's belief that the trustee will do what it says it will do; and *competence* is a trustor's belief that the trustee has the ability to do what it says it will do. In addition, *benevolence* is another well-recognized dimension referring to a trustor's belief that the trustee shows goodwill in action (Mayer et al., 1995). This study thus defines employees' *organizational trust* as the willingness



of employees to be vulnerable to the actions of their organizations based on the confidence employees have on their organizations' integrity, competence, dependability, and benevolence.

Trust is earned and needs to be cultivated over time. However, organizational change such as downsizing, reorganization, technological and cultural change typically pose threats to employees' existing values and identity continuity (Agote et al., 2016; Venus et al., 2018), job and status security (Devos et al., 2007), and therefore undermine employees' trust in management (Lines, Selart, Espedal, & Johansen, 2005). Literature has established *trust in management* as one of the major antecedents of employees' change-related attitudes and behaviors (Devos et al., 2007; Larkin & Larkin, 1996; Oreg, 2006). For instance, Devos et al. (2007) found that a trusting relationship between employees and upper and lower management led to stronger employee openness to change. Ertürk (2008) corroborated the mediating role of employee trust between managerial communication and openness to change. However, a scarcity of research has linked employees' *organizational*-level trust with their attitudinal and behavioral reactions during change (Yue, Thelen et al., 2019). This study argues that employees who have high organizational trust during change are more willing to buy in the justifications of the change and demonstrate openness to change and behavioral support for change. The following hypotheses are thus put forth:

**H4.** Employee organizational trust during change positively influences employee openness to change.

**H5.** Employee organizational trust during change positively influences employee behavioral support for change.

Leadership theories have recognized employee trust as a key leadership outcome (Norman, Avolio, & Luthans, 2010; Wang & Hsieh, 2013). For instance, transformational, charismatic, and authentic leaderships have all been suggested to foster employees' trust in the general organizational context (Jiang & Luo, 2018; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996) and during organizational change events (Bommer et al., 2005; Yue, Thelen et al., 2019).

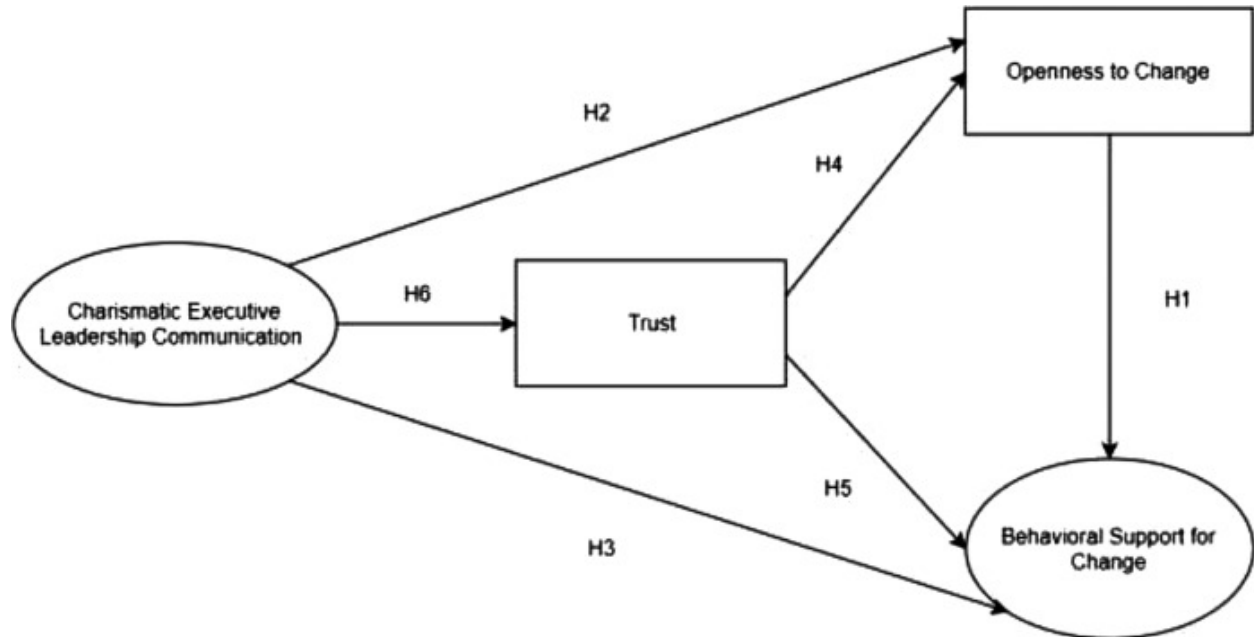
More relevant to the present study is the less researched *communicative* component of top leadership behavior, referred to as leadership communication at the executive level. Allen, Jimmiesons, Bordia, and Irmer (2007) found that although direct supervisors are preferred to convey implementation- and job-related information, employees are in favor of senior management to receive strategic information regarding the rationale of change and the future direction of organizations. Venus et al. (2018) suggested that by framing the vision of change as a vision of organizational continuity and by assuring employees of their unchanged organizational identity, top leaders could assuage employees' resistance to change due to potential identity threat. In addition, charismatic executive leaders' energizing behaviors, demonstrated by expressing energy, passion, excitement, and confidence toward the change initiative (Conger, 1989), can boost employee trust toward the leader and the organization in yielding positive change outcomes. Moreover, the empathy, understanding, confidence, and individualized support for employees communicated by charismatic executive leaders can be important socio-emotional resources for employees who are dealing with change. In accordance with social exchange theory (Eisenberger, Cummings, Armeli, & Lynch, 1997), employees who

feel cared, encouraged, and enabled by executive leaders during change could reciprocate with positive attitudes, such as trust toward the organization, which represents one of the most important means of capturing the social exchange relationships (Colquitt, LePine, Piccolo, Zapata, & Rich, 2012; Yang, Mossholder, & Peng, 2009). Therefore, we propose:

**H6.** Charismatic executive leadership communication characterized by envisioning, energizing, and enabling during change positively influences employee trust toward the organization.

As evident in the above-reviewed literature (e.g., Devos et al., 2007; Yue, Thelen et al., 2019), a trusting relationship between employees and their organizations appear to be one important mechanism linking executive change communication to employee change outcomes. As such, organizations with executive leaders who envision, energize, and enable employees during change tend to yield stronger employee organizational trust, which in turn, leads to employees' openness to change and discretionary support, which are indicators of employees' repayment once trust has been built. Therefore, the following mediating relationship is proposed (see Fig. 1):

**H7.** Employee organizational trust mediates the impact of charismatic executive leadership communication during change on employee openness to change and behavioral support for change.



**Fig. 1.** The conceptual model. *Note.* Mediation hypothesis H7.

### 3. Method

A global survey service company, Dynata (formerly known as Survey Sampling International), was employed in August 2018 to recruit employees who have experienced one or more company-wide planned change(s) in the past two years. The goal of the sampling method was to

gain insights from respondents from a variety of organizational sectors in the United States. Through stratified and quota random sampling, we ensure employee samples are representative of the population across age groups, genders, and levels of position, education, and income. Respondents were instructed to answer the questions based on their experience of the most recent company-wide change. After eliminating streamline cases and cases that failed attention check, a final sample of 439 employees working in various industries in the United States were attained for the data analysis.

Employees were on average 40 years old ( $SD = 13.11$ ), with 42.8 % males and 57.2 % females. Most participants described themselves in middle-level management (32.6 %,  $n = 143$ ) or non-management (31.7 %,  $n = 139$ ), and the rest were in lower level management (24.8 %,  $n = 109$ ) and top management (10.9 %,  $n = 48$ ). More than half participants ( $n = 230$ , 52.4 %) held at least a bachelor's degree (see Table 1 for participant profile). Regarding the types of organizational change, 27.8 % of respondents ( $n = 122$ ) indicated downsizing, 25.3 % indicated mergers and acquisitions ( $n = 111$ ), 19.8 % indicated brand changes ( $n = 87$ ), 27.8 % answered new product lines ( $n = 122$ ), 35.8 % answered reorganization ( $n = 157$ ), 31.4 % indicated leadership change ( $n = 138$ ), 23.9 % indicated the adoption of new technology, and 3.2 % indicated other changes ( $n = 14$ ).

**Table 1.** Participant Demographics.

<b>Respondent profiles</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Valid % of sample</b>
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	251	57.2 %
Male	188	42.8 %
<i>Position</i>		
Non-management	139	31.7 %
Lower-level management	109	24.8 %
Middle-level management	143	32.6 %
Top management	48	10.9 %
<i>Age</i>		
18–24	53	12.1 %
25–34	115	26.2 %
35–44	100	22.8 %
45–54	98	22.3 %
55–64	61	13.9 %
65–74	12	2.7 %
<i>Education</i>		
No college (secondary education or below)	43	9.8 %
Vocational level (diploma, higher diploma and associate)	42	9.6 %
Some college	124	28.2 %
A bachelor's degree	145	33.0 %
A master's degree	63	14.4 %
A doctoral degree	22	5.0 %
<i>Income</i>		
Less than \$10,000	16	3.6 %
\$10,000-29,999	54	12.3 %
\$30,000-49,999	92	21.0 %
\$50,000-69,999	90	20.5 %

Respondent profiles	Frequency	Valid % of sample
\$70,000-89,999	71	16.2 %
\$90,000-109,999	39	8.9 %
\$110,000-129,999	25	5.7 %
\$130,000-149,999	20	4.6 %
\$150,000-179,999	12	2.7 %
\$180,000-200,000	11	2.5 %
More than \$200,000	9	2.1 %
<i>Industry sector</i>		
Banking and Finance	31	7.1
Building and Construction	19	4.3
Government/Public Administration	18	4.1
Healthcare and Social Assistance	50	11.4
Information Technology	41	9.3
Manufacturing	42	9.6
Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	5	1.1
Arts, Entertainment and Recreation	10	2.3
Accommodation and Food Service	4	0.9
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting	7	1.6
Professional, Scientific and Technical Services	27	6.2
Educational Services	38	8.7
Retail Trade	37	8.4
Transportation and Warehousing	16	3.6
Utilities	7	1.6
Others	87	19.8

### 3.1. Measures

The focal independent and dependent variables were measured using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). All the measures of key constructs were adapted from previous studies.

Charismatic executive leadership communication was measured by three dimensions (Nadler & Tushman, 1990). Specifically, four items were used to capture the envisioning dimension (e.g., “The top leaders articulate a compelling vision for the change,”  $\alpha = .87$ ), three items for energizing (e.g., “The top leaders demonstrate personal excitement and energy for the change,”  $\alpha = .82$ ), and three items for enabling (e.g., “The top leaders express personal support for employees during the change,”  $\alpha = .88$ ). The scale of employee organizational trust comprises six items adapted from Rawlins (2009) and Hon and Grunig (1999) (e.g., “I trust my organization to take care of people like me during the change,”  $\alpha = .92$ ). Openness to change was assessed with four items from Wanberg and Banas (2000) (e.g., “I would consider myself open to the changes,”  $\alpha = .87$ ). Finally, we measured *cooperation* and *championing*, two employee discretionary supportive behaviors, conceptualized by Herscovitch and Meyer (2002). The measure of *cooperation* comprises eight items (e.g., “I work toward the change consistently,”  $\alpha = .86$ ) and *championing* six items (e.g., “I speak positively about the change to co-workers,”  $\alpha = .87$ ).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Preliminary analysis

Descriptive analysis as presented in Table 2 showed that respondents on average reported high level of openness to change ( $M = 4.98$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ), and behavioral support for change, including cooperation ( $M = 5.16$ ,  $SD = .95$ ) and championing ( $M = 5.17$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ). Employees surveyed overall reported slightly high on their executive leaders' envisioning ( $M = 4.78$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ), energizing ( $M = 5.04$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ), and enabling ( $M = 4.74$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ) communication behaviors during change. Overall, respondents perceived medium level of trust toward their organization during change ( $M = 4.54$ ,  $SD = 1.50$ ). A series of regression and ANOVA analyses examined the effects of demographic variables on the focal variables in the study. Results showed that only age and position level yielded significant results and were thus controlled in the follow-up structural equation modeling analysis. Specifically, age demonstrated significant negative effects on employees' openness to change ( $\beta = -.18$ ,  $t = -3.31$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and trust toward the organization ( $\beta = -.20$ ,  $t = -3.67$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Younger employees tended to trust the organization more during change and be more open to change than their older counterparts. Unsurprisingly, position level showed significant positive effects on employee organizational trust ( $\beta = .26$ ,  $t = 5.32$ ,  $p < .001$ ), openness to change ( $\beta = .23$ ,  $t = 4.47$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and behavioral support for change ( $\beta = .15$ ,  $t = 2.94$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Those who held higher levels of positions in the organization tended to show more positive attitudinal and behavioral reactions to change.

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics of charismatic executive leadership communication, employee organizational trust, employee openness to change and behavior support for change (Mean, Standard Deviation, and Correlations).

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i><math>\alpha</math></i>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
1. Envisioning	4.78	1.41	.87	1.00						
2. Energizing	5.04	1.36	.82	.82**	1.00					
3. Enabling	4.74	1.56	.88	.79**	.78**	1.00				
4. Trust	4.54	1.50	.92	.78**	.73**	.79**	1.00			
5. Openness to change	4.98	1.37	.87	.66**	.59**	.60**	.73**	1.00		
6. Cooperation	5.16	.95	.86	.51**	.51**	.50**	.56**	.64**	1.00	
7. Championing	5.17	1.09	.87	.56**	.54**	.55**	.63**	.71**	.76**	1.00

\*\*Correlation is significant at  $p < .01$  (2-tailed).

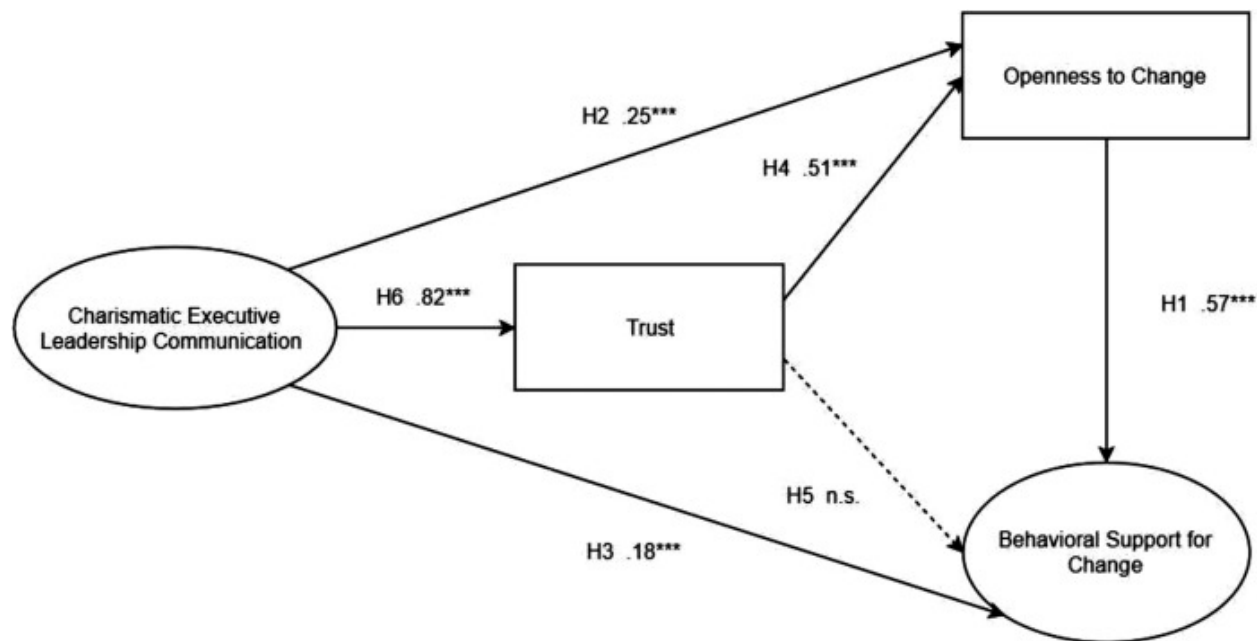
### 4.2. Structural equation modeling analysis

The proposed model was analyzed in two stages: (1) an assessment of the construct validity of the measurement model through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and (2) an assessment of the structural model in AMOS 24.0. For model brevity and sample size consideration, first-order analysis was utilized in the SEM analysis. Specifically, charismatic executive leadership was specified as a latent variable with three subdimensions: envisioning, energizing, and enabling; employee behavioral support for change was specified as a latent variable with two subdimensions: cooperation and championing. Unidimensional variables of employee trust and

openness to change were treated as observed variables in the analyses.<sup>1</sup> The test of the initial confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) model showed satisfactory fit to the data:  $\chi^2(18) = 34.72$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 3.47$ , RMSEA = .07 (90 % confidence interval: .05-.10), RMR = .02, TLI = .98, and CFI = .99. Thus, no modification was made to the initial measurement model. The standardized factor loadings ranged from .83 to .92, which indicated a good construct validity of the measurement model (see Table 3). A second step evaluation of the structural model (with age and position level controlled) also yielded excellent fit to the data:  $\chi^2(16) = 44.05$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 2.75$ , RMSEA = .06 (90 % confidence interval: .04-.08), RMR = .03, TLI = .98, and CFI = .99, and was thus retained as the final model. Six of the seven hypothesized structural paths demonstrated significant results at the  $p < .001$  level (see Fig. 2).

**Table 3.** Standardized Coefficient of Measurement Indicators in the CFA Model (n = 437).

Latent Variable	Indicator Variable	Std. Loading	AVE	Construct Reliability
Charismatic Executive Leadership Communication	Envisioning	.91	.80	.92
	Energizing	.88		
	Enabling	.89		
Employee Behavioral Support	Cooperation	.83	.77	.87
	Championing	.92		



**Fig. 2.** The hypothesized structural model with standardized path coefficients. *Note.* Mediation hypothesis H7. \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

#### 4.3. Hypotheses testing

Hypotheses 1-3 predicted the interrelationships between charismatic executive leadership communication characterized by envisioning, energizing, and enabling during change, employees' openness to change, and their behavioral support for change. Results provided

<sup>1</sup> Mean scores taking the average of measured items were used to generate composite (observed) variables in the analysis.

support for all three hypotheses. Specifically, with demographic variables controlled, charismatic executive leadership communication positively affected employees' openness to change ( $\beta = .25$ ,  $p < .001$  [95 % CI: .11-.39]) and behavioral support for change ( $\beta = .18$ ,  $p < .001$  [95 % CI: .03-.34]). In particular, top leaders' visionary, passionate, and caring communications during change helped foster employees' positive affect toward change, their willingness to support change, as well as their actual discretionary supportive behaviors, demonstrated by cooperation and championing for change. The positive association between employee openness to change and behavioral support was also supported by the data,  $\beta = .57$ ,  $p < .001$  [95 % CI: .44-.68].

Hypotheses 4 and 5 proposed the positive effects of employee organizational trust during change on employee attitudinal and behavioral reactions to change. Results showed that employee trust toward the organization during change showed a strong positive effect on employee openness to change ( $\beta = .51$ ,  $p < .001$  [95 % CI: .37-.64]). However, the direct effect of employee organizational trust on employee behavioral support for change was not statistically significant ( $\beta = .14$ ,  $p = .07$  [95 % CI: -.00-.28]). Therefore, hypothesis 4 was supported, but hypothesis 5 was rejected. In other words, although employees who demonstrated more trust toward the organization tended to show an open and positive attitude toward change, they might not necessarily directly engage in behavioral support toward change.

Hypothesis 6 predicted the positive influence of executive leaders' envisioning, energizing, and enabling communication behaviors on employees' trust toward the organization during change. Results supported this hypothesis by revealing a very strong positive association between charismatic executive leadership communication and employee organizational trust,  $\beta = .82$ ,  $p < .001$  [95 % CI: .78-.86]. Evidently, top leaders' visionary, passionate, motivating, caring, and supportive communications helped enhance employee trust toward the organization during change. Lastly, hypothesis 7 hypothesized that employee trust toward the organization during change mediated the effect of charismatic executive leadership communication on employees' change reactions, which was supported by the data. Specifically, a formal test of indirect effects using a bootstrap procedure ( $N = 5,000$  samples) showed significant indirect effect in paths from top leaders' envisioning, energizing, and enabling communication behaviors to employees' openness to change through employee organizational trust during change ( $\beta = .42$ ,  $p = .001$  [95 % CI: .31-.53]). Likewise, the indirect effects in paths from charismatic executive leadership communication to employees' behavioral support for change through employees' organizational trust and their openness to change were also significant, ( $\beta = .49$ ,  $p = 0.001$  [95 % CI: .36-.62]). In addition, employee openness to change significantly mediated the effect of employee organizational trust during change on employee behavioral support for change, ( $\beta = .29$ ,  $p = .001$  [95 % CI: .20-.39]), which partially explained the non-significant direct effect of employee organizational trust on their behavioral support for change.

## **5. Discussion and conclusions**

Change management communication has been a long-standing challenge for modern organizations. In the midst of chaos and uncertainties of change, employees often look to the leaders for information, assurance, and support. As the change agent, executive leaders and their communication play an irreplaceable role in facilitating change implementation and driving change success (Men & Bowen, 2017). However, although executive leaders' demographics,

personality traits, and strategic choices have been associated with change processes and outcomes in many previous studies (Oreg & Berson, 2019), little empirical evidence exists regarding the role of executive leaders' *communication* behaviors in change management. In the public relations literature, while a growing number of studies have been conducted on leadership communication, particularly on theorizing public relations leadership and leaders' internal and external communication roles, research that is centered on top leaders' communication behaviors in the unique change context has been lacking. Considering the growing public expectations of top leaders' visibility and open communication and the global erosion of trust (Edelman, 2019), research on executive leadership communication, especially in this increasingly versatile, turbulent, competitive, and disruptive business environment is much needed.

The current study served as one of the earliest empirical attempts to examine the impact of executive leadership communication in organizational change management. Specifically, drawing on interdisciplinary theories of charismatic leadership, change management, and leadership communication from a public relations perspective, this study set out to explore the influences of executive leaders' envisioning, energizing, and enabling communicative behaviors on employees' openness to change and behavioral support for change, as well as the mediating role of employee trust toward the organization in this process. Results revealed three major findings: 1). Charismatic executive leadership communication featured by envisioning, energizing, and enabling during change positively influenced employees' level of trust toward the organization, their openness to change, and behavioral support for change; 2) Employees' organizational trust during change strongly and positively contributed to employees' openness to change; 3) Employees' trust toward the organization mediated the effects of charismatic executive leadership communication on employees' openness to change and behavioral support for change. In the following, we further discuss the major findings of this study as well as their theoretical and practical implications.

### 5.1. The impact of charismatic executive leadership communication on employee reaction to change

Results of this study showed that charismatic executive leadership communication, featured by executive leaders' envisioning, energizing, and enabling change communication behaviors, largely contributed to employees' positive reactions to change, including openness to change and behavioral support for change. Such findings are not unexpected.

Leaders' communication of vision of change has been identified as a key vehicle in motivating employees toward change (Venus et al., 2018). In fact, in many cases, leaders' articulation of vision is the starting point of their efforts to implement a change in the organization (Awamleh & Gardner, 1999). The current study showed that executive leaders' envisioning behavior that entails communicating a compelling vision for change, which is meaningful, challenging, and worthy of pursuit, and demonstrating behaviors to symbolize and further the vision of change (Nadler & Tushman, 1990) contributes to employees' open and acceptive attitude and supportive behavior toward change. This is in line with previous research conclusions in change management arena that leaders' vision communication is linked to change outcomes such as employees' decreased resistance to change and change adaptivity (Griffin, Parker, & Mason, 2010; Waldman & Javidan, 2009). It also supports Aiken and Keller's (2007) argument that



CEOs' vision storytelling helps "crystalize the meaning of transformation and gives people confidence that it will actually work" (p. 21). CEOs' role modeling effect helps reinforce desired mindsets and behaviors during change. In the midst of disruption of old roles, routines, and rules, top leaders' envisioning behavior via verbal and non-verbal communication can not only help build shared understanding and interpretation that unites people, but also provide a much-needed clear road map for a desired future state for employees (c.f. Kotter, 1996).

In addition, as the findings revealed, charismatic executive leaders energizing communication behaviors during change, through communicating personal excitement, energy, and passion about the change, expressing confidence, and celebrating successes and progress toward change, mattered for employee positive reaction to change. As the symbolic leader in the organization, CEOs communicative behaviors largely influence how the organization is perceived by its stakeholders, employees' trust in leadership, and their confidence in the organization's future (Men, 2015; Park & Berger, 2004). Thus, in communicating their personal passion, energy, and excitement about change, CEOs convey a notion of positivity, personal involvement, and send motivating and exciting messages to employees; such genuine positive emotions can be contagious (Oreg & Berson, 2019; Sy, Côté, & Saavedra, 2005), energize and mobilize employees, which could further employee openness to change and garner their behavioral support for the organization's strategic initiative. The study finding also underlies previous scholars' argument that *how* top leaders communicate about vision is as important, if not more, as what is communicated (Westley & Mintzberg, 1989). In change communication context, while identifying a compelling and meaningful future state and mental imagery is crucial, executive leaders expressing passion, excitement, confidence and a positive mindset about the change vision could instill confidence in employees. As the transformation progresses, leaders spotting and celebrating successes serves the role of constant reinforcement; and emphasizing what works well also "taps into creativity, passion, and the desire to succeed." (Aiken & Keller, 2007, p. 21).

Further, the study suggested that charismatic leaders' communication of care, emotional support, and empathy, showing understanding of employees' feelings and concerns, and conveying confidence in employees led to employees' openness to change and behavioral support for change. This is aligned with Men and Bowen's (2017) argument that communication with "patience, sensitivity, care, understanding, and compassion is critical because it conveys the message that 'your anxieties are legitimate;' (p. 168) and the notion of "we're in this together." Such empathetic communication approach not only can humanize the leader, remove resistance, but also empower employees to cope with change. This study finding also provides new evidence for Mayfield and Mayfield's (2017) statement that leaders' empathy can translate emotional labor into positive energy. In the oft-emotion-laden change process, where employees may encounter anger, fear, distress, anxiety and insecurity that lead to resistance to change (Klarner, By, & Diefenbach, 2011), top leaders' expression of empathy and emotional support and emphasis on employees' emotional needs and concerns, could reduce employees' anxieties and fears about the change (Huy, 2002), thus fostering employees' openness to change and behavioral support.

## 5.2. Employee organizational trust: the facilitator of executive leadership communication during change

Lastly, one key contribution of the study was to uncover how charismatic executive leadership communication influenced employee positive reaction to change (i.e., openness to change, behavioral support for change) through demonstrating the mediating effect of employee organizational trust in this process. Results showed that when executive leaders articulated a compelling vision for change, communicated personal positive affect, including excitement, energy, passion, and confidence about change, and expressed care, support, and empathy toward employees during change, employees tended to *trust* the organization more. Indeed, an inspirational imagery of the future of the organization during change can instill confidence in employees about the organization. Executive leaders expressing genuine emotions such as excitement about change and communicating individual support, care, and empathy for employees, convey leadership authenticity, which has been linked to trust in management and the organization (Agote et al., 2016). From a public relations standpoint, this finding further highlights the increasingly salient role of CEOs as the most powerful communicator in the organization. Top leaders not only “enable” the public relations function (L. Grunig, 1993), determine the organization’s communication mindset, but also comprise an important communication agent that directly affects public relations outcomes (Men, 2015). Internally, being a figurehead, corporate representation, and whom employees look up to for role models and guidance, how and what top leaders communicate, especially during times of chaos and disruption, largely impacts employee trust toward the organization. This finding in fact is in line with Men’s (2015) conclusion that CEOs’ communication style and quality significantly affects the quality of employee-organization relationships.

Additionally, the study found that when employees reported higher level of trust toward the organization during change, they were more likely to be open to the change initiative. Previous studies have demonstrated that trust in *management* predicts employees’ change-related attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Devos et al., 2007; Ertürk, 2008). Expanding previous literature, the current study testified the positive linkage between employee trust toward the *organization* and their openness to change, which reinforced the role of employee trust in facilitating organizational change implementation. Taken together, the study suggested that executive leaders’ envisioning, energizing, and enabling communication behaviors fostered employee trust toward the organization during change, which in turn, contributed to employee openness to change, a change attitude precedent for employees’ behavioral support for change. Thus, trust-based interaction between top leaders and employees underlies how charismatic executive leadership communication influences employee change-related attitudes and behavior.

## 5.3. Theoretical and practical implications

As one of the earliest empirical attempts to examine the impact of executive leadership communication on employees’ reaction to change, this study first adds to the growing body of knowledge in the public relations/communication functions of top management for organizational effectiveness. While public relations scholars have long advocated the communication roles of top leadership (Grunig, 1993) and their enabling role and functions in building organizational image (Park & Berger, 2004), reputation (Hutton, Goodman, Alexander,

& Genest, 2001), and organization-public relationships (Men, 2015; Tsai & Men, 2017), little empirical evidence exists in regard to the influence of executive leaders' communication particularly in the context of organizational change management. As the publics are placing more demands on CEOs as the agent for change (Edelman, 2019), the field needs more theory-informed and research-based guidance regarding how top leaders can communicate effectively about change. Drawing upon literature in leadership, change management, and communication, the study expands the theoretical understanding of how executive leadership communication works in generating change support from employees. The findings highlight the value of executive leadership communication for public relations effectiveness from an internal perspective during turbulent times and provide new evidence for the notion that strategic leadership communication should be considered as the characteristic for excellent public relations (Men and Stacks, 2014). Second, the study contributes to the theorization of leadership communication in organizational change context. While the role of *leadership* in change management has been studied extensively over decades (Oreg & Berson, 2019), the importance of leaders' *communication* activities in change implementation has often been assumed, implicitly addressed, or underexplored. The study thus fills a research gap in leadership and change management research by demonstrating the contribution of top leaders' envisioning, energizing, and enabling communications on employee organizational trust, change-related attitude (i.e., openness to change), and behavior (i.e. behavioral support for change). Meanwhile, the study advances change communication research by going beyond the corporate and supervisory-level communication effects during change, which have been extensively studied (Lewis, 2019). Lastly, through the lens of employee-organization relationship management, the study demonstrated the importance of one of the oft-cited relational outcomes, employee organizational trust, in effective change communication. By showcasing the direct effects of employee organizational trust on employees' openness to change and its mediating role in the relationship between charismatic executive leadership communication and employee change reaction, the study contributes to the literature on the value of quality employee-organizational relationships. Further, in a macro-environment with global erosion of trust, the study points to new directions of examining the influence of top management and executive leadership communication in garnering employee trust.

From a strategic point of view, the study findings provided important guidelines for organizations, executive leaders, public relations, and change communication managers. First and foremost, organizations and public relations managers must fully recognize the critical communication roles of executive leaders especially in this increasingly transparent, versatile, and connected world, where CEOs' every move, both inside and outside of the organization, can be scrutinized and interpreted, and their words and deeds can be instantly spread and amplified (Porter, Lorsch, & Nohria, 2004). Public relations managers as leadership communication counselors should equip executive leaders with the right public relations mindset and encourage them to communicate authentically, openly, more directly and personally (Edelman, 2019).

Meanwhile, executive leaders should be aware that they are not only the top leaders in the organization who determine the decision, strategy, and direction of the organization, but also the most powerful communicator, whose communication behaviors, styles, or messages can affect employee perceptions, attitudes, and actions toward the organization. Especially in the midst of change, disruption, uncertainties, and chaos, executive leadership communication could largely

impact employees' reaction to change. To foster employee trust, openness to change and garner their behavioral support, executive leaders with the aid of the public relations team should articulate a clear, compelling, meaningful, and worthy-of-pursuit vision to guide change efforts. They should explicitly and consistently communicate about why change is happening, what the big picture is behind the change initiative, where the organization is heading through change, and provide a clear roadmap with regard to how to get there. They should also be the role models and champions to symbolize the vision in their actions and decisions. Executive leaders should also be advised to genuinely communicate their personal excitement, passion, energy, and confidence about change, as the positive affect could be contagious and transfer to employees to motivate their supportive attitudes and actions. In addition, executive leaders should humanize their change communication efforts via expressing care, empathy, concern, compassion, and emotional support for employees. Top leaders who demonstrate personal, authentic, and empathetic communication could foster quality employee-organization relationship (e.g., trust) during change that leads to positive employee reaction to change. In sum, for executive leaders, communicating "vision, passion, and care" during change is essential for successful change management.

To that end, public relations and change communication managers should work with executive leaders and assist them in crafting appropriate communication strategies, tactics, and messages to align executive leadership communication with change goals. While communication skills can be trained, leaders should be advised to communicate in their authentic and personal voice. Overall, effective change communication requires collaborative efforts from top management, public relations, human resources, and related peer functions. Executive leaders, who are often at the top of the pyramid, are change catalysts and champions, and should get fully on board in the change communication process (Kotter, 1996). Additionally, organizations should be cognizant of the value of employee trust toward organizations, which serves the foundation of employees' reaction to change. As trust is not built over night, public relations and relationship management efforts should be in place on a day-to-day basis to nurture employee trust toward the employer, which could significantly facilitate change implementation when it happens.

#### 5.4. Limitations and future research directions

Despite the theoretical contributions and practical implications, the study has encountered several limitations that can be addressed in future studies. First, the study used a generalized approach to test the model that linked charismatic leadership communication during change, employee organizational trust, and employee reaction to change. Although the data from various industries, sectors, and sizes of companies with different types of changes could increase the generalizability of the findings, it may lose sight in how the model works for one particular type of change (e.g., merger and acquisition, culture change) or in a unique context. Future studies could use case studies or ethnographic approaches to provide more context-based understanding of the role of executive leadership communication in change management. Second, from single-employees' perspective, the study did not incorporate management's or the organization's side of views regarding the relationships between the focal constructs. In future, researchers can conduct in-depth interviews from executive leaders or change managers to provide a more complete, comprehensive, and balanced understanding of the model tested in the study. In addition, the study only examined the effects of three typical executive leadership communication behaviors

on employee reaction to change, termed as charismatic executive leadership communication, which understandably is not an exhaustive list of what works for executive leaders' communication during change. In addition to identifying other factors that underlie effective executive leadership communication (e.g., message appeals, communication styles, channels) during change, future research could also explain how executive leadership communication affects change outcomes by exploring new mediating (e.g., empowerment, communication satisfaction) or moderating factors (e.g., employee organizational identification). It is also worthwhile to explore how executive leadership communication during change may impact other change-related outcomes at the individual and organizational levels. With executive leaders' public relations impact becoming increasingly salient, the authors thus call for more future scholarly investigations regarding the know-how of executive leadership communication in various contexts and scenarios.

### **Declaration of Competing Interest**

None.

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