Guiding employees through the COVID-19 pandemic: An exploration of the impact of transparent communication and change appraisals

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Funding information
Arthur W. Page Center for Integrity in Public Communication

Abstract
Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic and drawing on literature from change management, internal communication and cognitive appraisal theory, this study provided accounts of how transparent communication during organizational change affects employees' cognitive appraisals of the change, behavioural reactions to the change, and subsequently, turnover intentions. Our findings of 414 full-time US employees revealed that transparent internal communication is positively related to employees' challenge appraisal of the change, which, in turn, is related to change compliance and championing. In addition, transparent communication is negatively associated with threat appraisal of the change, which in turn is connected to lower change compliance. Further, employees' turnover intention was negatively associated with their compliance and championing for the change. This study has made several contributions to internal communication scholarship, appraisal theory and change management literature. We also offer several suggestions to improve communication during organizational change periods.

KEYWORDS
challenge appraisals, change management, communication management, threat appraisals, transparent communication

1 | INTRODUCTION

The declaration of the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in 2020 presented organizations across the globe with previously unimaginable levels of challenges. Many business-as-usual approaches to serving customers, working with suppliers and normal work routines were disrupted (McKinsey & Company, 2020). As a result, organizations initiated speedy changes in response to the disruptions brought by COVID-19 (Li et al., 2021). Reported COVID-19-related organizational changes included downsizing and layoffs, furloughs, reorganization and digital transformation, all of which aimed to sustain organizational productivity and innovation during this time of uncertainty (Borden et al., 2020; McKinsey & Company, 2020).

COVID-19’s emergence as a global health problem and the sudden and drastic changes in organizational life called for effective leadership and communication to help employees navigate the turmoil. The critical role of information and communication transparency in facilitating organizational day-to-day practice has been documented in the literature (Jiang & Men, 2017; Rawlins, 2008; Welch & Jackson, 2007). More specifically, scholars have zoomed in on how to leverage effective communication during organizational change (Allen et al., 2007; Endrejat et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021; Yue et al., 2019; Yue, 2021, 2022). The free flow of information within organizations helps employees overcome a variety of stressors and uncertainties in their internal and external organizational lives (Lewis, 2019; Li et al., 2021). Clear and timely communication from
organs also signals to employees that they are trusted and valued (Bonev, 2020). Overall, effective internal communication about organizational change can strengthen employee-organization relationships, increase employees' job engagement and engender their support for organizational change (Bonev, 2020; Einwiller et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021; Men et al., 2020).

While change management research rooted in psychology and management tends to overlook or simply assume the function of internal communication, internal communication is a unique organizational resource that can be leveraged during change periods (Li et al., 2021; Men et al., 2020; Yue et al., 2019). To paint a more complete picture of change management from the employee's perspective, we draw on two intersecting sources of literature: Internal communication and organizational change. Our primary interest is in the role of internal communication during change periods. Specifically, we wanted to understand how transparent internal communication about organizational change can reduce employees' turnover intention during or after pandemic-incurred organizational changes. Transparency is a deliberate attempt to make organizational information available in a timely, accurate and balanced way (Rawlins, 2008, 2009). This is vital during change periods, which often bring about uncertainty and misinformation for employees. Although prior research showed that transparent internal communication helped employees cope with organizational change by reducing perceived change uncertainty (Li et al., 2021) and fostering greater organizational trust (Yue et al., 2019), these studies did not examine the relationship and the mechanism between transparent internal communication and employees' intention to quit.

The current study also draws upon cognitive appraisal theory (Folkman et al., 1986; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and organizational support theory (OST) (Eisenberger et al., 1986) to understand the process through which transparent communication leads to lower turnover intention. We provided detailed theoretical accounts of how employees' cognitive assessments of change—specifically, their challenge appraisal (i.e., focus on the potential for gain or growth related to the change) and threat appraisal (i.e., focus on anticipated haram or losses related to the change)—mediate the impact of transparent communication on employees' behavioural response to change and eventually their turnover intention. Furthermore, we advanced previous studies by exploring in greater depth employees' distinct forms of behavioural support for change (Oreg et al., 2018). Specifically, we differentiated employees' compliance behaviour and championing behaviour. While both responses encapsulate employees' behavioural support, compliance only represents employees' minimum support for the change. In comparison, championing is a more active form of discretionary support (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002). Taken together, through the lens of COVID-19 incurred organizational change, we advanced a conceptual model that maps out the relationships between transparent internal communication, employees' cognitive appraisal of change, behavioural support for change and turnover intentions. This informs both the literature on internal communication and the literature on change management and provides theoretical explanations for these change processes.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Organizational change refers to an organization's transition from one state to another (Lewin, 1951), and it involves introducing new ideas into organizational practice (Lewis, 2019). During organizational change, employees face varying levels of stress, anxiety and uncertainty (Elving, 2005). Not knowing the rationale for the change or what the future holds for themselves or their organizations, employees often react to organizational change with low openness, minimum commitment, strong cynicism and resistance (Oreg et al., 2011). Research on organizational change has identified employees as the key determinant of change success. Naturally, a plethora of studies has focused on identifying organizational strategies to boost employees' positive change responses while mitigating their negative sentiments (Oreg et al., 2011). Internal communication has shown its unique power among resources organizations can leverage (Lewis, 2019; Neill, 2018).

The internal communication literature has generally recognized the importance of prioritizing employees as valued organizational stakeholders (Lee & Yue, 2020; Welch & Jackson, 2007). Internal communication takes place within four primary domains: Front line communication between managers and employees; task and team-focused peer communication; work group-focused peer communication; and strategic corporate communication which most typically involves executives and key organizational departments sharing information with employees (Welch & Jackson, 2007). Lee and Yue (2020) put forth a conceptual definition of internal communication 'as the strategic management of interactions and relationships between stakeholders at all levels within an organization through different communication processes including business communication, management communication, organizational communication, corporate communication and strategic communication'. In the current study, we take a communication perspective on change implementation, believing that change is created, sustained and managed through the interactions between implementers and stakeholders (Ford & Ford, 1995; Lewis, 2019). That is, we hold that internal communication can substantially influence the ways in which employees understand and interpret what the change is, how it affects their stakes in organizations, and shape their reactions toward change (Lewis, 2019).

2.1 Transparent internal communication during change

To show support for employees during change and to get their buy-in for change requires an organization to provide adequate amounts of information to employees (Rafferty & Restubog, 2010). The challenge from a communication standpoint is that when an organization enters into a change period, rumours and informal talk about the change will often surface (Lewis, 2019; Lewis et al., 2013). This may distort official organizational messages, create confusion about policy and contribute to uncertainty. Organizations must therefore focus on providing quality information to employees and make sure they are
aware of the goals and direction of the change (Allen et al., 2007; Endrejat et al., 2020; Lewis, 2006). Effective change communication is proactive in nature in that it involves providing employees with relevant information and countering misinformation in organizations. Strategic internal communication programs can also positively influence change outcomes by helping employees prepare for change, cope with change (Elving, 2005) while also creating a sense of community and continuity within the organization in such a way that employees remain committed and loyal to the firm throughout the adjustments (Elving, 2005; Venus et al., 2019). On the contrary, employees who deem that information coming to them is poor in quality and have a problematic understanding of the change are likely to resist the change (Erwin & Garman, 2010; Lewis, 2006).

Practitioners and managers have generally favoured an inclusive and transparent approach to change management because it alleviates change resistance and increases employees' commitment to change (Men et al., 2022; Yue et al., 2019). The benefit of transparent communication was highlighted in 2020 with the COVID-19 pandemic. A study of Austrian workers early in the pandemic suggested the importance of organizations sharing instructional information transparently (Einwiller et al., 2021). Relational communication with employees focusing on appreciation, mutual understanding and participation also boosted employees' affective commitment and job engagement during COVID-19 (Einwiller et al., 2021). Meanwhile, Li et al. (2021) drew upon a survey panel of employees from the first two months of the pandemic in the United States to conclude that when employees have access to high-quality and accountable information during a change period, they are better equipped to cope with change.

Transparent internal communication, which consists of accountability, substantiality and participation, has been viewed as an excellent characteristic of strategic internal communication (Jiang & Men, 2017; Rawlins, 2008). These elements work together but have distinct empirical characteristics (Balkin, 1999; Rawlins, 2009). Accountability involves the sharing of both positive and negative information about the organization (Rawlins, 2009). In the context of organizational change, organizational communications that feature both sides of the story (e.g., disclosing both benefits and risks of the change) show that the organization does not want to manipulate employees' perceptions about the change (Yue et al., 2019). Substantiality is about providing truthful, useful and substantial information to stakeholders (Rawlins, 2009). This requires an organization to identify employees' needs and provide them with access to substantial information rather than throwing overabundant information to confuse them (Yue et al., 2019). Participation ensures that stakeholders can identify the organizational information they need to make decisions (Rawlins, 2009). In the context of change, organizations need to seek feedback from employees throughout the change period to understand what topics are most concerning and relevant to them (Li et al., 2021; Yue et al., 2019). Engaging in transparent communication is an ongoing process that requires multiple channels and all levels of an organization (Men et al., 2022).

2.2 | Employee cognitive assessments of change

Individuals determine how to cope with stressors and life events based on their appraisals of these situations (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This assessment drives an individual's coping strategies in response to change and has implications for subsequent cognitive, behavioural and affective responses (Fugate & Soenen, 2018; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In the workplace, how employees assess the impact of the change on them will predict their subsequent responses to the change (Kaltiainen et al., 2020; Lewis, 2006; Lewis et al., 2013; Shin et al., 2012). Of note is that an employee's cognitive assessment of an organizational change should impact the degree to which they support the change (Biggane et al., 2017; Fugate & Soenen, 2018).

To understand these assessments, we turn to cognitive appraisal theory, which holds that an individual will seek to evaluate the significance of the situation as it relates to their health and well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). These appraisals first involve assessing the relevance and the nature of the event in question (i.e., whether they are favourable or unfavourable). Following the primary appraisal, individuals engage in secondary appraisal to evaluate the likelihood of successfully coping (Lazarus, 1993; Rafferty & Restubog, 2017). In the context of organizational change, employees develop two cognitive responses simultaneously that build on their assessments of the change, which shape their subsequent reactions to that change (Fugate & Soenen, 2018). On the one hand, change can be assessed as a challenge. For instance, employees may view the change as contributing to their personal growth, mastery of new knowledge and bringing potential future benefits to them (Kaltiainen et al., 2020; Rafferty & Restubog, 2017). On the other hand, change can also be viewed problematically and as a threat (Rafferty & Restubog, 2017). Threat appraisals of a change capture employees' future-oriented concerns (Biggane et al., 2017), which may arise from loss of relationships (e.g., co-workers who are furloughed or relocated), opportunities (e.g., miss promotional opportunities because of reorganization) and employment (e.g., position cut due to mergers and acquisitions). Notably, both appraisals are forward-looking and anticipatory. This has important implications for organizational managers, as understanding employees' future-oriented perspectives enables managers to intervene and proactively address potential concerns before they exacerbate (Biggane et al., 2017). Studying employees' change appraisals helps explain 'how cognitions today might influence behaviours tomorrow (e.g., withdrawal)' (Fugate et al., 2012, p. 892).

2.3 | Linking transparent communication to employees' change appraisals

Scholars have generally recognized that transparency is an important organizational resource that shapes favourable employee perceptions, attitudes and behaviours. Transparent communication has been empirically linked to several employee outcomes, including trust in
the organization (Rawlins, 2008; Yue et al., 2019), employee engagement (Men & Hung-Baesecke, 2015; Vogelgesang et al., 2013), work-life enrichment (Jiang & Men, 2017) and organization–employee relationships (Li et al., 2021). The constructive role of transparent internal communication can be explained by OST (Eisenberger et al., 1986). The theory posits that employees act in accord with the norm of reciprocity, investing in efforts to help their organization achieve its goals and succeed while expecting rewards in return (Kurtessis et al., 2017). In other words, OST invokes the social exchange process wherein employees feel obligated to be committed to their employers and return the favour by engaging in supportive behaviours (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

We believe that transparent internal communication—through the demonstration of accountability, involvement of employee participation in organizational decision-making and delivery of a substantial amount of useful and accurate information (Rawlins, 2008)—serves as perceived organizational support that can meet employees’ socioemotional needs and therefore plays a pivotal role in employees’ secondary appraisal process. Secondary appraisal reflects an individual’s evaluation of whether s/he has sufficient resources to deal with an event and the extent to which these resources will help s/he respond to the event adequately (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). We argue that transparent communication propels employees to re-evaluate organizational change and to engage in a secondary appraisal process in which they likely reframe the organizational change in a more positive light. In other words, organization-initiated transparent communication acts as a source of social and emotional support that facilitates employees’ positive reappraisal of stressful events.

With transparency viewed as a tool to support employees and other publics (Lee & Li, 2021; Li et al., 2021; Rawlins, 2008; Yue et al., 2019), it stands to reason that transparency should act as an organizational resource that helps employees view the change as an opportunity rather than a threat. Employees may not control the uncertain situation entirely but having an accurate depiction of the change and feeling they have adequate resources to endure through the change can decrease their threat appraisal (Biggane et al., 2017). The current study seeks to build on Biggane et al.’s (2017) finding that quality communication enhances an employee’s resource base to focus on problem-solving.

We suggest that through the delivery of substantial amounts of information about the change, the inclusion of employees’ opinions in communicating the change, and overall openness and impartiality in disclosing change information (Rawlins, 2009), organizations are giving employees a meaningful frame to interpret the change and to think that their employers can be trusted. Thus, transparent change communication should enable employees to see the change with a positive frame that can bring potential future benefits to them (i.e., challenge appraisal). By the same logic, transparent change communication should reduce employees’ future-oriented concerns regarding the change (i.e., threat appraisal). Following this reasoning and empirical evidence, we proposed the following hypothesis:

**H1(a):** Transparent communication during organizational change is positively related to challenge appraisal of the change.

**H1(b):** Transparent communication during organizational change is negatively related to threat appraisal of the change.

### 2.4 Supporting change in action: Compliance and championing

Managing change in organizational settings is a complex process, especially when it comes to trying to engender championing and compliance from employees (Fugate & Soenen, 2018; Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002; Oreg et al., 2018; Yue, 2022). These two responses are the building blocks of change management since they are both change-supportive behaviours (Meyer et al., 2007). The difference between championing and compliance is that the former requires a much greater level of involvement and support for the change than the latter (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002). With championing, employees engage in discretionary efforts to promote the value of the change (Fugate & Soenen, 2018). This can involve making personal sacrifices to help embody the spirit of the change (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001). This extra-role behaviour contrasts with compliance, which involves an individual making minimal effort to support the change (Oreg et al., 2018). Even though compliant employees go along with the change by following orders, they do not actively advocate for the change, nor are they passionate about the change in action (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002; Yue, 2022).

### 2.5 Linking employees’ change support to change appraisals

Given the power that change appraisals can exert over employees, we wanted to better understand the relationships between challenge and threat appraisals and the behaviours of compliance and championing. Cognitive appraisal theory suggests that challenges can be seen as opportunities to grow, while threats are negative assessments by the employee that can be seen as obstacles (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Although sparse, emergent research examining the impact of cognitive appraisals has drawn a meaningful association between employees’ cognitive assessments and their behavioural reactions to change (e.g., Fugate & Soenen, 2018; Rafferty & Restubog, 2017). For instance, Fugate and Soenen’s (2018) investigation of a merger suggested a direct connection between employees’ change appraisals and employees’ compliance and championing for change. Specifically, employees’ threat appraisals of a merger-related change reduced their championing behaviour, whereas challenge appraisals led to an increase in championing and compliance behaviours (Fugate & Soenen, 2018).

Protection motivation theory and related research indicate that individuals respond to adverse events by removing themselves from the source of threats (Fugate et al., 2012; Rogers, 1975). In the context of organizational change, this behaviour may manifest in
avoiding or disengaging from the proposed change (Fugate & Soenen, 2018; Michela & Vena, 2012). On the flip side, when appraising work stressors as a positive challenge, employees demonstrated higher work engagement, job performance (Karatepe et al., 2014), creativity and proactive behaviour (Ohly & Fritz, 2010). Thus, it is reasonable to infer that positive change assessment can boost employees' coping efficacy, reduce change-related anxiety and uncertainty, and motivate employees to leverage the change for self-improvement and growth. Taken together, it stands to reason that challenge appraisal of the change should be positively associated with employees' willingness to support the change, which not only entails compliance (i.e., minimal effort to support the change) but also championing (i.e., discretionary efforts to promote the change). Threat appraisal, on the other hand, should lead to employees' avoidance and disengagement in change. We proposed the following hypotheses.

**H2:** Challenge appraisal is positively related to employee (a) compliance and (b) championing of organizational changes.

**H3:** Threat appraisal is negatively related to employee (a) compliance and (b) championing of organizational changes.

### 2.6 Linking employees' change support to turnover intention

One potential outcome of poor change management is employees' decision to leave the organization (Cunningham, 2006). Considered the most extreme form of withdrawal from work, employees' voluntary turnover is rampant during and after an organizational change (Kiefer, 2005). Employee turnover brings about direct costs to replace individuals and indirect costs such as loss of institutional memory and a reduction in the remaining employees' morale (Hausknecht & Holwerda, 2013; Morrell et al., 2004). Thus, it is pivotal for change theorists and practitioners to identify factors that can help prevent a high turnover rate (Shin et al., 2012). Our study focused on employees' turnover intention, which represents employees' desire to exit the organization. Turnover intention has been consistently shown as a proximal antecedent of actual turnover (Griffeth et al., 2000).

Returning to cognitive appraisal theory, studies show that when change is viewed as threatening, employees will be inclined to devalue their employment relationship and leave their organization (Biggane et al., 2017; Fugate et al., 2012; Michela & Vena, 2012). This line of work has generally identified a connection between change perception and withdrawal behaviour. For instance, in the context of organizational restructuring, employees' challenge appraisals of the reorganization were significantly and negatively associated with psychological contract violation, which was positively related to turnover intentions, and, ultimately, with voluntary employee turnover (Rafferty & Restubog, 2017). The same study also revealed a direct and positive relationship between employees' threat appraisal and subsequent voluntary turnover. Furthermore, research has found that positive employee attitudes, such as openness to change (Bordia et al., 2011) and change commitment (Rafferty & Restubog, 2010), predicted decreased turnover intention and actual turnover.

Nevertheless, research examining the relationship between change-related behaviours and employee withdrawal remains sparse. Indeed, the relationship between behavioural antecedents and turnover has traditionally received little theoretical and empirical attention (Chen et al., 1998). Although only sparsely examined, some preliminary support can be gleaned from Chen et al. (1998) and Coyne and Ong (2007), who both showed that employees who exhibited higher levels of organizational citizenship behaviours were less likely to leave their organizations. Championing and compliance are both change-supportive behaviours (Meyer et al., 2007), which, as previously argued, are the outcome of employees' positive cognitive response to the change. These behaviours reflect how much employees like to be involved with their organization. It is conceivable that the higher the levels of behavioural support, the stronger the indication that employees want to be part of the organization, therefore, the lower the possibility that they would leave the organization. Therefore, we argue that if employees react to the change with positive behaviours (as seen in championing and compliance behaviours), we should expect them to remain with their organizations. In other words, employees who have already been invested in supporting the change through actions are less likely to leave their organization. In light of this, we proposed the following hypotheses:

**H4:** Compliance with organizational changes is negatively related to employee turnover intention.

**H5:** Championing of organizational changes is negatively related to employee turnover intention.

### 2.7 The mediating role of cognitive appraisals

As evident in the literature mentioned above (e.g., Biggane et al., 2017; Fugate et al., 2012), cognitive appraisal of change appears to be one critical mechanism linking organizational actions and employees' change support. Organizations that practice transparent communication during change tend to elicit employees' positive framing of the change (i.e., challenge appraisal) while inhibiting negative assessment (i.e., threat appraisal). Cognitive appraisals, in turn, guide employees' subsequent behaviours, with challenge appraisal leading to supportive behaviours such as compliance and championing for change and threat appraisal exerting the opposite effect. Therefore, we propose that cognitive assessments of change should act as powerful agents that mediate the relationship between transparent communication and employee behavioural support of change. The following mediating relationships were proposed:

**H6(a):** Challenge appraisal of the change mediates the relationship between transparent communication and employee compliance, such that transparent communication is positively...
associated with challenge appraisal and challenge appraisal is positively associated with employee compliance.

**H6(b):** Challenge appraisal of the change mediates the relationship between transparent communication and employee championing, such that transparent communication is positively associated with challenge appraisal and challenge appraisal is positively associated with employee championing.

**H7(a):** Threat appraisal of the change mediates the relationship between transparent communication and employee compliance, such that transparent communication is negatively associated with threat appraisal and threat appraisal is negatively associated with employee compliance.

**H7(b):** Threat appraisal of the change mediates the relationship between transparent communication and employee championing, such that transparent communication is negatively associated with threat appraisal and threat appraisal is negatively associated with employee championing.

The conceptual model is shown in Figure 1.

### 3 | METHOD

With the assistance of a professional survey company, Dynata, we collected data in October 2020. An online survey administered through Qualtrics was sent to Dynata’s panel participants using the quota sampling method. The final data set contained 414 participants selected based on two criteria. First, their employed organizations must either be undergoing or have recently undergone a change due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, participants had to be working at a medium- or large-sized organization (i.e., an organization with at least 50 employees; Investopedia, 2019) when the survey was taken.

#### 3.1 | Participants

Overall, respondents consisted of 52% men and 47.5% women, and participants’ average age was 49 years old (SD = 14). There were 74.3% of our participants who identified as White, 6% identified as Hispanic, 11.8% identified as Black or African American, 8.4% identified as Asian, 3.1% identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, 0.2% identified as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 1.2% identified as others. Regarding their positions in organizations, most participants fell under the nonmanagement category (52.3%), followed by middle-level (25.4%), lower-level (13.9%) and top management (8.4%). In addition, about 51% of participants obtained a bachelor’s degree or higher. Regarding tenure, 21.8% indicated having worked 2–5 years with their current organizations, followed by 6–10 years (21.6%) and 11–15 years (16.5%). Participants also answered the types of COVID-related organizational changes in a close-ended question. The top three changes were layoff or furlough \(n = 196\), pay or benefits cut \(n = 126\) and digital transformation \(n = 90\).

#### 3.2 | Measurements

All the key constructs—that is, transparent internal communication, cognitive change appraisals, behavioural support for change and turnover intention—were measured using items derived from established literature that were modified to fit in the organizational change context. All the key variables were measured on 7-point Likert scales, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

##### 3.2.1 | Transparent internal communication

The current study adopted transparent internal communication from Rawlins (2009). The 16-item scale (\(\alpha = .97\)) consisted of three dimensions. Participation included six items (e.g., ‘The organization asks for feedback from people like me about the quality of its information’, \(\alpha = .95\)), substantiality six items (e.g., ‘The organization provides information that is easy for people like me to understand’, \(\alpha = .96\)) and accountability four items (e.g., ‘The organization freely admits when it has made mistakes’, \(\alpha = .90\)).

##### 3.2.2 | Cognitive change appraisal

To measure challenge and threat appraisal, we adopted items from Fugate and Soenen (2018). Challenge appraisal included six items (e.g., ‘I see the changes as a challenge’, \(\alpha = .86\)). Threat appraisal was evaluated by asking participants to rate their perceived level of threat in eight areas (e.g., ‘your job security’, ‘relationships with your co-workers’, \(\alpha = .93\)).

![FIGURE 1 The conceptual model. Mediation paths H6–H7 are not shown.](image-url)
3.2.3 | Behavioural change support

Taken from Herscovitch and Meyer (2002), the three-item compliance scale (e.g., ‘I comply with my organization's directives regarding these changes’, $\alpha = .87$) and the six-item championing scale (e.g., ‘I persevere with these changes to reach goals’, $\alpha = .92$) both demonstrated good reliabilities.

3.2.4 | Turnover intention

Turnover intention was measured by three items taken from Carmeli and Freund (2009) (e.g., ‘Recently, I think a lot about leaving the organization’, $\alpha = .92$).

3.3 | Data analysis

This study applied Structural Equation Modelling for data analysis, which allowed us to examine interrelationships between multidimensional latent constructs. We adopted the following model-fit indices to evaluate the measurement and the structural model: Comparative Fit Index (CFI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR). A CFI value of more than 0.90 shows an acceptable fit, and a value of more than 0.95 signals a close fit to the model. An RMSEA value of 0.06 or less shows a close fit. RMSEA between 0.08 and 0.09 indicates a mediocre fit, and between 0.08 and 0.10 indicates a poor fit. Additionally, an SRMR value between 0.08 and 0.10 indicates a moderate fit, and a value less than 0.08 is a good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

Transparent internal communication was treated as a second-order construct containing three subdimensions of transparent internal communication1. Challenge appraisal, threat appraisal, compliance, championing, and turnover intention were all treated as first-order latent constructs. We conducted the analysis using SPSS AMOS 23.0 under maximum likelihood estimation.

4 | RESULTS

Following Anderson and Gerbing's (1988) two-step modelling approach, we first conducted a confirmatory factor analysis to evaluate the fit of the measurement model. The initial measurement model showed an acceptable fit to the data: $\chi^2 (806) = 2324.44$, $p < .001$; CFI = 0.91; TLI = 0.90; RMSEA = 0.07; 90% CI [0.065, 0.071], $p < .001$; SRMR = 0.060. Furthermore, all constructs demonstrated good convergent validity with AVE (averaged variance extracted) scores above the minimum threshold of 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Strong reliability was supported by composite reliabilities (CRs) ranging from 0.87 to 0.95 and Cronbach’s alpha scores ranging from 0.86 to 0.97, both of which were above the minimum threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2009). Discriminant validity was confirmed because all square roots of AVEs were larger than the correlations between the focal construct and any other constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Therefore, the initial model was retained as the final measurement model. Table 1 showed means, SDs, CRs, AVEs, and correlations. The confirmatory factor loadings are shown in Table 2.

The structural model was estimated next. However, it did not show an adequate fit to the data: $\chi^2 (806) = 2618.21$, $p < .001$; CFI = 0.89; TLI = 0.88; RMSEA = 0.07, 90% CI [0.07, 0.08], $p < .001$; SRMR = 0.11. An inspection of the modification indices showed a large error variance between two items under championing and two items under threat appraisal. According to Byrne (2010, p. 111), ‘forcing large error terms to be uncorrelated is rarely appropriate with real data’. With this line of thinking, two error covariances were added to the respecified model. The adjusted model indicated an acceptable fit: $\chi^2 (806) = 2316.08$, $p < .001$; CFI = 0.91; TLI = 0.91; RMSEA = 0.07, 90% CI [0.06, 0.07], $p < .001$; SRMR = 0.10. Thus, this model was retained as the final model. Regarding control variables, we followed Becker et al. (2016) suggestion to run SEM models twice with and without control variables. Results did not show significant changes in the path coefficients among focal constructs before and after adding control variables2. Therefore, the more parsimonious model without controls was retained and reported. Figure 2 shows the standardized path coefficients of the structural model.

### Table 1: Composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), mean (M), SD, and correlation between latent variables.

|     | CR   | AVE  | M    | SD   | TC   | CA   | TA   | Compliance | Championing | TI    |
|-----|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------------|------------|-------|
| TC  | 0.96 | 0.88 | 4.40 | 1.44 | 0.94 |      |      |            |            |       |
| CA  | 0.87 | 0.55 | 4.94 | 1.19 | 0.71*** | 0.74 |
| TA  | 0.94 | 0.64 | 3.56 | 1.69 | −0.20*** | −0.17** | 0.80 |
| Compliance | 0.87 | 0.69 | 5.73 | 1.17 | 0.35*** | 0.36*** | −0.24*** | 0.83 |
| Championing | 0.92 | 0.65 | 4.94 | 1.42 | 0.60*** | 0.63** | −0.10 | 0.66*** | 0.81 |
| TI  | 0.93 | 0.81 | 3.45 | 1.95 | −0.36*** | −0.30*** | 0.58*** | −0.28*** | −0.29*** | 0.90 |

Note: The bolded numbers on the diagonal are the square roots of the AVE.

Abbreviations: CA, challenge appraisal; TA, threat appraisal; TC, transparent communication; TI, turnover intention.

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

**Correlation is significant at $p < .001$ (two-tailed).
| Factor                     | Scale items                                                                 | Std. loadings | SE  |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|-----|
| Transparent communication  | *Participation*                                                               | 0.97         | NA  |
|                            | The organization asks for feedback from people like me about the quality of its information | 0.83         | NA  |
|                            | The organization involves people like me to help identify the information I need | 0.88         | 0.05|
|                            | The organization provides detailed information to people like me              | 0.86         | 0.04|
|                            | The organization makes it easy to find the information people like me need     | 0.86         | 0.04|
|                            | The organization asks the opinions of people like me before making decisions  | 0.80         | 0.05|
|                            | The organization takes the time with people like me to understand who we are and what we need | 0.91         | 0.05|
| Substantiality             |                                                                             | 0.91         | 0.05|
|                            | The organization provides information in a timely fashion to people like me    | 0.89         | NA  |
|                            | The organization provides information that is relevant to people like me       | 0.91         | 0.04|
|                            | The organization provides information that is complete                        | 0.93         | 0.03|
|                            | The organization provides information that is easy for people like me to understand | 0.86         | 0.04|
|                            | The organization provides accurate information to people like me              | 0.87         | 0.03|
|                            | The organization provides information that is reliable                        | 0.85         | 0.04|
| Accountability            |                                                                             | 0.92         | 0.05|
|                            | The organization presents more than one side of controversial issues         | 0.83         | NA  |
|                            | The organization is forthcoming with information that might be damaging to the organization | 0.79         | 0.05|
|                            | The organization is open to criticism by people like me                       | 0.86         | 0.05|
|                            | The organization freely admits when it has made mistakes                     | 0.88         | 0.05|
| Challenge appraisal       | I see the changes as a challenge                                             | 0.33         | NA  |
|                            | The changes provide opportunities for me to show my abilities and potential   | 0.79         | 0.40|
|                            | I feel I can overcome the obstacles I encounter as a result of the changes   | 0.75         | 0.34|
|                            | The changes provide opportunities for me to boost my self-esteem and feel good about myself | 0.89         | 0.46|
|                            | Overall, I feel I have control over the outcomes of the changes              | 0.84         | 0.47|
|                            | I feel I have the abilities necessary to perform well during and after the changes | 0.70         | 0.30|
| Threat appraisal (due to the changes, to what extent do you feel that each of the following is threatened—a possibility that it will get worse in the future?) | Your job security                                                 | 0.75         | NA  |
|                            | Relationships with your co-workers                                          | 0.79         | 0.06|
|                            | Relationships with your supervisor                                          | 0.84         | 0.06|
|                            | Ability to perform your job                                                  | 0.81         | 0.06|
|                            | Desirability of your job (i.e., aspects you like)                            | 0.82         | 0.06|
|                            | Personal job opportunities within your organization                          | 0.80         | 0.06|
|                            | Your pay and benefits                                                        | 0.78         | 0.06|
|                            | Your general working conditions                                              | 0.82         | 0.06|
| Compliance                | I comply with my organization's directives regarding these changes           | 0.75         | NA  |
|                            | I accept role changes                                                        | 0.90         | 0.06|
|                            | I adjust the way I do my job as required by these changes                     | 0.84         | 0.06|
4.1 | Hypotheses testing

H1 predicted that transparent communication is (a) positively related to challenge appraisal and (b) negatively related to threat appraisal of the change. The results supported H1(a) ($\beta = .73$, $p < .001$) and H1(b) ($\beta = -.20$, $p < .001$). H2(a, b) was also supported as challenge appraisal was positively related to employee compliance ($\beta = .38$, $p < .001$) and championing ($\beta = .67$, $p < .001$). Regarding H3(a, b), findings demonstrated that threat appraisal was negatively related to employees' compliance ($\beta = -.18$, $p = .001$) but not championing ($\beta = .04$, $p = .39$). Therefore, H3 was only partially supported. In addition, results supported H4 as there was a negative relationship between compliance and turnover intention ($\beta = -21$, $p = .002$). We also identified a significant negative relationship between championing and turnover intention ($\beta = -16$, $p = .02$). Therefore, H5 was supported.

Mediation effects were tested using a bootstrapping procedure ($N = 5000$ samples). Results supported that challenge appraisal mediated the positive relationship between transparent communication and employee compliance ($\beta = .19$, $p < .001$, 95% bias-corrected CI = [0.13, 0.27]), thereby supporting H6(a). Moreover, challenge appraisal mediated the positive relationship between transparent communication and employee championing ($\beta = .46$, $p < .001$, 95% bias-corrected CI = [0.38, 0.57]), thus supporting H6(a). Overall, H6 was fully supported. Turning to H7, we found that threat appraisal of the change mediated the negative relationship between transparent communication and employee compliance ($\beta = .03$, $p = .001$, 95% bias-corrected CI = [0.01, 0.06]), supporting H7(a). However, threat appraisal did not mediate the effect of transparent communication on employee championing ($\beta = -.01$, $p = .28$, 95% bias-corrected CI = [-0.03, 0.01]), rejecting H7(b). Thus, H7 was only partially supported.

4.2 | Post hoc mediation analyses

To further unpack the mechanism through which transparent communication influences turnover intention, we conducted exploratory post hoc mediation analyses. Specifically, we examined whether change appraisal and behavioural support were serial mediators of the relationship between transparent communication and turnover intention. To answer this question, we performed four serial mediation models with various combinations of the two mediators: challenge appraisal $\rightarrow$ compliance, challenge appraisal $\rightarrow$ championing, threat appraisal $\rightarrow$ compliance, threat appraisal $\rightarrow$ championing. Results illustrated two significant serial mediation pathways. First, the relationship between transparent communication and turnover intention was serially mediated by challenge appraisal and compliance behaviour ($\beta = -.08$, $p = .001$, 95% bias-corrected CI = [-0.14, -0.03]). Furthermore, the relationship was serially mediated by threat appraisal and compliance behaviour ($\beta = -.01$, $p = .001$, 95% bias-corrected CI = [-0.03, -0.002]).
In addition, this model explained 4% of the variance in threat appraisal, 53% of the variance in challenge appraisal, 19% of the variance in compliance, 44% of the variance in championing, and 9% in turnover intention.

5 | DISCUSSION

The current study draws on literature from change management, internal communication, and appraisal theory to explore the process through which transparent communication can mitigate employees’ turnover intention. Our findings revealed that transparent internal communication is positively related to employees’ challenge appraisal of the change, which in turn, is related to change compliance and championing. In addition, transparent communication is negatively associated with threat appraisal of the change, which in turn, is connected to lower change compliance but not championing. Finally, we found significant negative relationships between employees’ change compliance and turnover intention and between employees’ championing for change and turnover intention.

5.1 | Theoretical implications

This study has made several contributions to internal communication scholarship, appraisal theory, and change management literature. First, this study provides theoretical insight into how internal communication can facilitate organizational change implementation from the lens of employees. Building on previous endeavours to examine organizational change from a communication-centred perspective (Johansson & Heide, 2008; Luo & Jiang, 2014; Men et al., 2020; Yue, 2021, 2022), we showcased the effectiveness of communication transparency during organizational change. More importantly, we offered a detailed theoretical explanation of how transparent internal communication simultaneously elicited higher challenge appraisal and lower threat appraisal of the change, which subsequently influenced change compliance and turnover intention. This finding is in line with previous literature which has identified the instrumental function of transparent internal communication in generating employee trust, engagement, and quality relationships with organizations (Li et al., 2021; Men & Hung-Baescke, 2015; Men et al., 2022; Vogelgesang et al., 2013; Yue et al., 2019).

Additionally, although recent studies have provided accounts of how effective internal communication in various forms helped boost employees’ support during organizational changes and crises (e.g., Einwiller et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021; Yue et al., 2019; Yue, 2022), they predominantly examined employees’ attitudinal and behavioural responses, overlooking employees’ cognitive evaluations of the change. Complementing this line of research, the current study presented novel evidence in linking internal communication to employees’ underlying cognitive process in responding to change, therefore expanding the downstream outcomes of transparent internal communication.

Second, this study contributes to Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) appraisal theory and joins an emerging line of research to apply cognitive appraisal theory in studying organizational change and crises (Biggane et al., 2017; Fugate & Soenen, 2018). Aligning with existing research which found individuals’ cognitive appraisal mediates the effect of organizational resources on employees’ behaviours (Biggane et al., 2017; Fugate et al., 2012), we similarly identified cognitive appraisals as a linking mechanism between internal communication, employees’ support for change, and their intention to quit. Moreover, this study explores change events from employees’ perspectives (Rafferty & Restubog, 2017). By incorporating positive (i.e., challenge) and negative (i.e., threat) cognitions in one model and comparing their functions in parallel, we advance prior studies that only examined either the challenge appraisal or the threat appraisal (e.g., Fugate et al., 2012).

Ample evidence from the management literature suggests that change history and management support affected employees’ change-related appraisals (Fugate & Soenen, 2018; Rafferty & Restubog, 2017). Contributing to this line of research, the current study concluded that employees would re-evaluate the change based on organizational communication efforts (i.e., transparent internal communication). When changes occur, employees automatically engage in the primary appraisal, in which they assess the change by the degree to which it is beneficial or detrimental. After the primary appraisal, the secondary appraisal takes place when employees start to evaluate their environment to decide whether they can cope with the change (Lazarus, 1993). Grounded in OST (Eisenberger et al., 1986) and cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), our results show that transparent internal communication plays a critical role in employees’ secondary appraisal of the change event. Specifically, transparency can foster positive, challenge-based appraisals and reduce negative, threat-based appraisals of change.

Third, this study contributes to organizational change literature by differentiating employees’ compliance and championing behaviours. Results further revealed distinct patterns of relationships between compliance, championing, and their respective antecedents. Following the recent scholarly call to go beyond emotional valence (either positive or negative emotions; Oreg et al., 2018) in studying employees’ change reactions, we examined employees’ change-related support based on levels of behavioural activation. Specifically, we viewed employees’ discretionary effort as a critical differentiator for compliance and championing behaviour. Similar to Fugate and Soenen (2018), we found that compliance and championing have different antecedents. To elaborate, compliance was influenced by both types of appraisals and also served as the mediator interlinking challenge and threat appraisals to turnover intention. However, to our surprise, championing behaviour was only influenced by challenge appraisal. This implies that employees’ discretionary behaviour is more likely to occur when there is a favourable perception of the organizational change. In comparison, reducing threat appraisal is more instrumental in generating employees’ nondiscretionary compliance than eliciting their proactive behavioural support.
Additionally, echoing previous research (e.g., Bordia et al., 2011; Rafferty & Restubog, 2017), which linked employee turnover intention with their change-related perceptions and attitudes, our study suggested that change supportive behaviours, manifested in compliance and championing, played a pivotal role in reducing employees’ willingness to leave their organization. This finding, therefore, adds novelty to the existing literature by identifying context-specific behavioural antecedents of turnover intention.

Last, this study advances the understanding of COVID-19-related organizational change by outlining and testing the organizational antecedent, employee cognitive processes, and behavioural outcomes in one model. While change communication quality has been addressed as an integral part of successful change management (Barrett, 2002; Lewis, 2019; Yue et al., 2019), there has not been adequate theoretical justification of why and how transparent communication works to produce desirable employee-related outcomes during change, particularly related to its impact on employees’ voluntary turnover intention. The current study contributes to existing research, showing that employees’ turnover intention was negatively associated with transparent internal communication through the mediating effect of employees’ challenge appraisals and compliance behaviour.

5.2 | Practical implications

COVID-19’s arrival ushered in a period of radical change for organizations, with significant interruptions to most organizational operations and disruptions to employees’ personal lives (Bonev, 2020; Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). The challenges brought about by the pandemic drew attention to the organizational communication practices that help employees cope with change (Einwiller et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021). It was clear from a number of trade and scholarly commentaries about the pandemic that there is a need to assess information sharing during periods of significant organizational change. From our study’s findings, we offer several suggestions to improve communication during organizational change periods.

Organizations are ideally served when employees view change as a challenge because it can have two important outcomes. Namely, challenge appraisals positively impact employees’ willingness to champion change, and these challenge appraisals, through the mediating role of change compliance and championing, also reduce employee turnover intentions. Both of these outcomes can be beneficial to organizations, and strategic communication practitioners should actively foster the internal conditions that can help employees feel empowered to make the most of the change and to view the change in a more positive light. This can mean, for example, hosting town-hall-style meetings in which employees receive important organizational updates and having strategic internal communication practitioners work with managers and human resources staff to ensure that employees’ questions about the change are answered in smaller meetings. These activities are even more critical in times of extreme change or events with great uncertainty, as we saw in the early days of the pandemic in 2020.

Our findings put into context the considerable importance of organizational transparency (Rawlins, 2008, 2009) during organizational change. As this study showed, enacting transparency has the potential to help employees view change as a challenge that can be overcome, which then sets the stage for their change supportive behaviours. Therefore, organizations need to make sure that employees have adequate access to information, are involved in organizational decision-making, and that organizations are being accountable for their actions during change periods. This means that internal communication professionals should ensure that employees’ demands for transparent communication are met. The three key features of transparent communication should be properly reflected, addressed, and incorporated into message design and dissemination. Practitioners can also invite employees to evaluate levels of perceived transparency in change communication, which can be used to improve aspects of communication that are lacking. Further from our findings, internal communication practitioners should strive to exert upward influence on organizational leaders, advocate the value of internal communication, and secure the resources and support from top leaders so that communication can be the centrepiece during the change initiative.

We found that employees’ cognitive appraisals of change can predict their change-related supportive behaviours and ultimately turnover intentions. Given that cognitive appraisals are forward-looking, it offers change managers an opportunity to be proactive in managing employees’ behavioural reactions. We recommend managers assess employees’ challenge and threat appraisals through formal surveys and interviews throughout the change periods, particularly at the onset of the change. To elicit employees’ challenge appraisal, change managers should look for organizational tools and resources that can help employees view the change as an opportunity.

5.3 | Study limitations & directions for future research

Despite this study’s contributions to theory and practice in the area of change management and internal communication, we must acknowledge several key limitations. Notably, participants were recruited from different organizations, and therefore the specific organizational change contexts were overlooked. The particular scope of the changes was not taken into consideration with our measures, which raises the possibility that the stress or impact of the pandemic’s changes was not evenly felt by participants. Scholars who wish to study communication in change management are advised to conduct case studies of individual companies to ensure that these organizational contexts are consistent for study participants.

A second limitation was that data were cross-sectional, and we could not definitively assert causality among our focal variables. Although temporally, there was a clear logic in the order of our variables, it is possible that employee turnover intentions were formed well before they developed their change appraisals or made their decisions to either champion or comply with the change.
Scholars are encouraged to either conduct experiments or to study participants over time to definitively assess the impact of organizational change experiences on turnover intentions (and other outcomes).

Third, although transparent internal communication has been examined as a holistic construct comprising participation, substantiability, and accountability, future research should compare the respective function of each of the subdimensions, including differentiating their predictive power. For instance, compared to substantiability and accountability, participation may generate stronger feelings of autonomy and control given its focus on involving employees in making decisions. Therefore, we encourage internal communication scholars to provide a more nuanced look at transparent communication and develop more actionable, concrete behavioral interventions. Relating to measurement, although our SEM model fit was acceptable, it was not excellent. We recommend future research to examine and compare other ways of operationalization of the focal constructs and delve into theories to specify a better model.

6 | CONCLUSION

COVID-19 pandemic has forced organizations to confront an array of drastic and previously unimaginable organizational changes. The single biggest challenge organizations face when implementing changes is to gain employee buy-in. Effective internal communication plays a crucial role in driving employees’ support for organizational change. It is against this background that the current study explored if, and how transparent internal communication can induce employees’ support toward organizational change. We found that transparency can foster positive, challenge-based appraisals and reduce negative, threat-based appraisals of change. Favourable change appraisals, in turn, lead to behavioral support for the change and lower turnover intention. Overall, this study contributes to change communication theory building and sheds light on the practice of transparent internal communication during change management.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This project was supported by a Page Legacy Scholar Grant from the Arthur W. Page Center for Integrity in Public Communication at the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications at The Pennsylvania State University. Any opinions, findings and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of Penn State.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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ENDNOTES

1 We ran an alternative measurement model, treating ‘transparent internal communication’ as a one-factor first-order construct rather than a three-factor second-order construct. A chi-square difference test revealed that the alternative model was significantly worse than the original model.

2 Control variables included in the SEM model were age, gender, organizational tenure, and position in organization. The selection of these demographic variables was informed by prior literature especially in the context of organizational change (e.g., Hanpachern et al., 1998; Hill et al., 2012).

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