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### **TRANSFORMING MILLENNIAL EMPLOYEES TO BE KEY OPINION LEADERS: LESSONS LEARNED FROM PT PLN (PERSERO)**

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#### **Abstract**

As a state-owned company that provides electricity in Indonesia, PT PLN (Persero) is highly concerned about empowering youth employees and managing the Company's reputation. With the rise of the digitalization era, the challenges to managing reputation have become more complex. Meanwhile, the Company was filled by potential millennials as the majority of employees. Consequently, PT PLN (Persero) established PLN Group's Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) program to forge potential millennial employees into key opinion leaders. This study employed a qualitative approach using summative analysis by interviewing the public relations and talent divisions of PT PLN (Persero) and FGD with the KOLs to uncover the process of millennial employees community establishment, transformation steps to become KOLs, and perceived benefits for the Company. PT PLN (Persero) was observed to fully support the program by conducting an efficient hiring process, sharing information, giving space for the PLN Group's KOLs to personalize their contents, and enabling development groups. The result of the research showed that PLN Group's KOLs were effective in helping the Company disseminate its key messages to the public through social media, tackle negative publications about the Company, and boost brand awareness. This study contributed to employee development, especially on how to transform employees to become opinion leaders that contributed to the Company's reputation management and business as reputation and people are paramount resources to become sustainable competitive elements for corporations.

**Keywords:** Corporate Branding, Employer Branding, Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs), Millennial Employees Community, PT PLN (Persero), Reputation, Youth Empowerment.

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#### **1. Introduction**

People or human resources undoubtedly play a vital role in every organization. Organizations strive to attract the best talents to work together and manage them as employees on a daily-basis strategically (Morhart, Herzog, & Tomczak, 2009; Yeh, 2014). Training developments, key performance indicators or objectives and key results, reward and recognition, and other human resources-related systems are performed to make employees become one of the elements of sustainable competitive advantages for the organizations. Many organizations have also implemented employee branding strategy to develop robust internal communications while attracting potential employees (Backhaus & Surinder, 2004; Miles & Mangold, 2005; Davies, 2008; Foster, Khanyapuss, & Ranis 2010; Schlager, Mareika, Maas, & Cachelin, 2011). Studies have reported that knowing the potential of employees and empowering them could yield promising advantages for organizations, ranging from healthy corporate culture (Craven & Oliver, 2006), structured learning and knowledge management system (Yahya & Goh, 2002;

Abualoush, Obeidat, Tarhini, Masa'deh, & Badi, 2018), to innovation culture (Dedeoglu, Aydin, & Bogan, 2018). On the other hand, failing to do so would cost capital losses for organizations and other permanent damages that may lead to organizations' downturns.

Other than human resources, reputation has also long been acknowledged to be an imperative and fragile asset of organizations. Reputation has a linear relationship with the success of organizations. Positive reputation leads and expedites the business of organizations while negatives one jeopardizes organizations (Porter & Kramer, 2006; Adeosun & Ganiya, 2013; Bennett & Lemoine, 2014). Reputation is fragile as there is no organization in this world that is free of issues and crisis which both are harmful for organizations. Consequently, organizations need to monitor and perform measures to ensure that the desired reputation of organizations is still in hands (Hutton, 2001; Cravens, Oliver, & Ramamoorti, 2003). With the development of digital era or new media, organizations have to tap into digital related channels to deal with the challenges (Romero, 2011; Tuten, 2008; Suryani, 2014). One of the ways that organizations have been doing currently is outsourcing influencers or opinion leaders to promote the organizations and build the desired image. As influencers and external opinion leaders are not from the organizations, however, comprehensive research and a selection process have to be done to ensure the suitability (Tiautrakul & Jindakul, 2019; Chia, Hsu, Lin, & Tseng, 2021). Other than that, the investment for hiring influencers and external opinion leaders is often extravagant which eventually requires organizations to carefully calculate its return of investment.

PT PLN (Persero), a giant Indonesian state-owned company providing electricity, initiated an action that could address both concern about employees' empowerment and reputation management. Established in 1945, the company has been trying to rejuvenate its image to be closer to the stakeholders and more relevant with the era through PLN Transformation program. In 2020, PT PLN (Persero) reported a total of 44.299 employees, 74% of which were categorized as millennial employees (PLN, 2020). The Company has been faced by various issues related to its product and services quality which could damage its reputation if not managed. Consequently, with the potential of millennial employees that were known to be active, digitally savvy, and hunger for contribution, the Company aimed to empower and transform them to become key opinion leaders that could support corporate reputation management efforts and the achievement of PLN Transformation by 2025 by establishing PLN Group's key opinion leaders (KOLs).

## **2. Research Objectives and Methodology**

The study was conducted to observe the process taken in transforming ordinary employees in PT PLN (Persero) to become key opinion leaders (KOLs) and empower them more by establishing millennial employees' community, namely PLN Group's KOLs. This entity has operated since 2018. The study employed a qualitative study by gaining primary data from PT PLN (Persero) through in-depth interviews with senior employees (mid-level leaders) from Talent Development Division and Public Relations Division, and focus group discussion (FGD) with 17 PLN Group's KOLs. The interviews and FGD were conducted using semi-structured questions to gain the necessary information to answer the research objectives while allocating adequate space to get more related insights. The study attempted to uncover PT PLN (Persero)'s efforts to establish millennial employees' community and transform ordinary millennial employees to become key opinion leaders (KOLs). This study also aimed to identify the advantages gained from the establishment of the millennial employees' community.

The data analysis for this study was carried out from the data collection process begun (Glesne, 1999) and continued until all data was complete with an extension within a certain period as needed. In analyzing the data, Creswell's (2014) six steps were adopted: organization and preparation of all data, reading and viewing all data, coding, generating description and

analysis, improving the description and themes, and the last step was findings interpretation. To ensure the validity of this study, data triangulation (Creswell, 2014; Denzin 1978; Moelong, 2007) was done by comparing observational data (secondary data) with the primary data, competing for the state of a person's perspective with the various opinions and views of people, and comparing the results of the interviews with the contents of related documents.

This study was expected to contribute to employee development, especially on how to transform employees to become opinion leaders that contributed to the Company's reputation management and business as reputation and people are paramount resources to become sustainable competitive elements for corporations.

### **3. Literature Review**

The literature review part in this study covered the theoretical framework about opinion leaders and the strategic steps to transform ordinary employees to become brand advocates or in this context was called as key opinion leaders.

#### **3. 1 Opinion Leaders**

The term of opinion leaders is not new in public relations, marketing, and business fields. Opinion leaders' title are given to people who have loyal followers and are able to gauge messages to their followers and influence them to have the desired attitudes, behaviors, and follow up actions (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948; Burt 1999; Valente & Davis 1999). The concept of opinion leaders has been implemented in various fields such as but not limited to agriculture (Lamm, Rumble, Carter, & Lamm, 2016), health (Quinn, 2020), gender studies (Singh, 2013), technology (Wang, Xia, & Guo, 2020), and government (Purnamasari, Aliya, & Kumalasari, 2019).

The concept of opinion leaders is also well discussed in Rogers' (2003) Diffusion of Innovations. Rogers stated that opinion leaders often work together with change agent to support the success of campaign and network diffusion. Collaboration with opinion leaders had been proven to be effective, efficient, and powerful in communication messages of organization to reach and influence the targeted audiences. Further, Rogers (2003) stated seven characteristics of opinion leaders, namely:

- possession of more prominent exposure to mass media,
- more cosmopolite,
- more significant connection to the change agents,
- more involvement to social events,
- upper hand status in terms of socioeconomic,
- more innovative especially when the sytem is supportive, and
- becomes less innovative with the condition happens the otherway around

As opinion leaders also act as communicators, they should also possess the elements that effective communicators must have. According to Smith (2017), there are three Cs that define effective communicators which are *credibility* (consisting of competence, honesty, expertise, and status), *control* (consisting of power, scrutiny, and authority), and *charisma* (consisting of familiarity, likability, attractiveness, and similarity).

#### **3. 2 Transforming Employees to Become Key Opinion Leaders**

There is still a very limited study about the steps or process to transform ordinary employees to become key opinion leaders for the companies. However, Commander (2017) introduced the framework to achieve it, which covered five key steps as follows:

- **Share:** companies should regularly and consistently share information internally as well as share externally. Information should cover vital issues related to the company's products and services, campaigns, and other necessary insights to act as advocates adequately.
- **Involve:** companies ought to involve employees in planning, goal setting, actual decision making, and overall company's journey is essential. Employees who are involved will generally feel honored, encouraged, and respected, which eventually gives them internal motivation to do and get involved even more. On the other hand, the companies' part should prepare, monitor, and give feedback to the employees during their involvement.
- **Personalize:** companies should give space and allow employees to interpret the brand independently to have a more powerful positive feeling and sense of belonging. With this, employees will be more confident in gauging the brand image to their surroundings.
- **Enable:** companies should equip employees with the necessary skills and tools is vital to enrich their knowledge and increase their capability through training and knowledge transfer activities. Within the enabling agenda, companies should highlight customer-centric behaviors and inspire the employees to become brand ambassadors or advocates.
- **Reinforce:** reinforcement is vital to maintain the spirit of employees in becoming advocates and sustain their positive contributions to the company. Companies can share recognition or acknowledgment of the employees for their contributions.

The steps might not be comprehensive enough in explaining the phenomena, but they are sufficient to be used as a preliminary framework for this study.

## **4. Results and Discussions**

### **4.1 Establishment of PLN Group's KOLs**

The establishment of the employees' community of key opinion leaders (PLN Group's KOLs) was started by developing the big picture of the community or concept development stage. The Company firstly defined the criteria of PLN Group's KOLs members, such as active employees of PT PLN (Persero)'s group who were born in 1980 or younger and perceived to be energetic, passionate, agile, adaptive, hard learning, and committed to actively contributing to corporate communication effort within the Company and the state-owned companies in Indonesia in general. As the initial step of establishing the organization, PT PLN (Persero) was reported to determine the objectives and fundamental framework to prop the operation and ensure its sustainability. In designing the blueprint of PLN Group's KOLs, the Company borrowed the concept of McKinsey's 7S framework, which consisted of structure, systems, style, staff, skill, strategy, and shared values. The Company then crystalized the concept and aligned it with the corporate strategy to yield the mapping of PLN Group's KOLs that covered internal and external functions. Internally, PLN Group's KOLs was positioned as an influencer for culture change, internal communicators especially for the corporate values, and promotor of the campaigns to support Company's transformation.

Meanwhile, externally, PLN Group KOL's acted as the brand ambassadors of the Company and Indonesia's state-owned enterprises; executor for Indonesia's state-owned projects for millennial employees; and the marketing agents of the Company to attract high-quality fresh graduates as potential employees. Interestingly, PLN Group's KOLs was run and supervised by the Talent Development Division and with close collaboration with the Public Relations Division. In a bigger picture, PLN Group's KOLs was a form of youth empowerment in the Company to facilitate and ensure their continuous growth in influential fields aside their day-to-day works. Eventually, PLN Group's KOLs had four objectives: to increase the corporate branding, build a better brand awareness toward PT PLN (Persero)'s products and services, act

as Corporate's cyber armies, and earn a return of relationship from the public relations' interests.

Once the concept was developed, the Talent Development Division conducted the selection process. The selection process to trawl the millennial employees who possess the potential to become key opinion leaders was done closely. As the Company has hundreds of units spread in offices all over Indonesia, the Talent Development Division functions as the screening committee by adopting a head-hunting selection system. Initially, the first filter was to look at the candidates' digital presence, which were reflected from the number of followers on social media, such as, but not limited to, Instagram and YouTube. In the second batch of the selection, however, the screening committee valued more than just the number of followers on social media and the proactivity in broadcasting information about the Company to the society. They scrutinized the ability of the candidates to create and lead a community. These unique talents could support their works as key opinion leaders and a positive online and offline image that represented the Company's values and images. The screening committee also opened for recommendations for the leaders in the unit to propose to their members who might fit for the community.

The selected millennial employees who consented to become PLN Group's KOLs were then gathered to receive intensive training as the key opinion leaders. In 2019, the training program was named PLN's KOLs Academy, which could be called a mega-event since it was done at the beginning of the program and involved senior leaders (C-level) of the Company. The materials for the training cover the necessary knowledge and skills that the PLN Group's KOLs needed to do their roles, among others were corporate values, products knowledge, communication and social media skills, and also personal development-related matters. The Company also collaborated with the external parties to enrich the quality and broaden the insights from the mega training programs. The training program also facilitated brainstorming among the key opinion leaders to establish the organizational structure of the PLN Group's KOLs, synchronize their thoughts and understanding, and develop the roadmap for the PLN Group's KOLs itself. It was said the PLN Group's KOLs eventually operated with a hybrid system as claimed by the Company since the selected millennial employees could proactively voice out and act out their ideas while the management was there to monitor and supervise.

As the PLN Group's KOLs was officially launched after finishing the training programs, the selected millennial employees could execute their roles as the key opinion leaders. The roles covered both offline and online activities that involved various stakeholders. The key opinion leaders were given the opportunities to participate in various internal and external events held by the corporate ranging from competitions, CSR, campaign and socialization, summits, up until international conferences. For the online activities, the PLN Group's KOLs mainly helped the Public Relations Division spread information about the Company's products and services, employees' branding activities, and even content developments to tackle negative news once it arises. The Company also provided flexibility for the PLN Group's KOLs to utilize their unique skills in producing creative content that could amplify the key messages of the Company and help manage the Company's reputation. It was reported that the flexibility given was one of the success factors of the program as the selected millennial employees felt trusted and significant in their roles as the Company's key opinion leaders.

The Company also facilitated the employees' other activities besides being as opinion leaders. The PLN Group's KOLs are encouraged to develop and grow according to their interests by dividing them into six development groups. The key opinion leaders also received coaching through the Key Opinion Leaders' Coaching Labs. The coaching labs were also supported by senior leaders in the Company who shared their knowledge, experience, and wisdom to the key opinion leaders as super coaches and coaches. In PT PLN (Persero), the coaching labs were

developed according to the need of the Corporate according to its corporate and business strategy as well as the needs of the PLN Group's KOLs. The six coaching labs were (1) the Digital Media (responsible for broadcasting and spreading positive information about the Company to create the desired corporate branding), (2) the Digital Contents (responsible for creating and editing creative contents), (3) the Business and Marketing Idea or BUMA, (4) the Works and Lives or WOLES (focusing more on the work and life integration matters), (5) the *Pencerah Ketenagalistrikan* or PETIR (tapping on the development and creation of ideas and educative contents about electricity), and (6) the *Pembangkit for Future* or KIT4F (responsible for highlighting the ideas and contents related to renewable energy and the Company initiatives).

At the end of the period, the Company regrouped the PLN Group's KOLs to evaluate their performances and deliverables. The Company also took the opportunity to provide rewards and appreciation for several key opinion leaders who performed exceptionally during the period. The rewards and appreciation were expected to motivate other millennial employees to become key opinion leaders and reflected the corporate culture in acknowledging its employees' tangible contributions.

The steps taken by PT PLN (Persero) above have many similarities with the concept introduced by Commander (2017) from share, involve, personalize, enable, and reinforce. It could be seen that organizations have to penetrate necessary information to the key opinion leaders while involving them to the Corporate's activities. Other than that, PT PLN (Persero) also provided adequate space for the key opinion leaders to personalize their contents and contributions. The Company also enabled the PLN Group's KOLs through provided training and coaching. At the end, PT PLN (Persero) conducted evaluation which result could be used to develop the next batch of the key opinion leaders. Also, commitment and involvement of the senior management were needed to give powerful support to the program and employees. In summary, the steps could be seen in the Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Steps in Transforming Ordinary Employees to Become PLN Group's KOLs



Source: Authors' analysis (2021)

#### 4.2 Impacts on Reputation Management Effort

The PLN Group's KOLs, regardless of its young age of the community, was reported to be a significant entity in the Company that provided a tangible contribution to the Company's reputation management efforts. The PLN Group's KOLs was reported to be an effective agent in penetrating the Company's key messages both through prepared broadcast from the Public Relations Division and creative contents that were curated independently by the key opinion leaders. Once an issue arose, PLN Group's KOL could act as a powerful cyber army that countered negative news or rumors with reliable and updated information about the Company's products and services. The Public Relations Division also reported that the public awareness about the Company's innovation and new products and services was improved with the PLN Group's KOLs. It could be reflected from the observation of brand values over time in Indonesia by Brand Directory (2021), which indicated a significant improvement of PT PLN (Persero) position from being unlisted in 2013 to become the 9<sup>th</sup> rank in 2020. The advantaged gained by PT PLN (Persero) from the establishment of PLN Group's KOLs was in line with the predicted functions of opinion leaders stated by Rogers (2003). Eventually, through continued improvements the PLN Group's KOLs was seen as a valuable asset of the Company to also

support the corporate branding and employer branding efforts which holistically would share competitive advantages factors to the Company.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

People or employees, once managed and empowered, could be more valuable for companies. In the context of millennial employees that dominated most of the companies at the moment, PT PLN (Persero) was able to transform them to become key opinion leaders that support the Company's reputation management through series of strategic steps from concept development, selection process, training program, execution, group development and coaching activities, and evaluation.

For the practical recommendation, the Company should align the key opinion leaders' concept more with the corporate strategy by making necessary adaptation with regards to slight changes and obstacles due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Other companies are also recommended to adopt the established concept from PT PLN (Persero) to their organizations with modifications as needed. For the academic recommendation, future research should include a more profound and broader study about the transformation of ordinary employees to become opinion leaders as well as the potential advantages for the company. This could cover, among others, the study about the criteria of the opinion leaders, the efficacy of the programs, and required skills that leads to the training design.



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