

# PERCEPTIONS OF EUROPEAN MIDDLE MANAGERS OF THEIR ROLE IN STRATEGIC CHANGE

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## ABSTRACT

*The middle management role in strategy execution remains a critical issue in the success of strategic initiatives. The management literature has viewed middle managers as 1) implementers of top-management defined strategic changes, 2) relationship managers in strategic-change programs and 3) key strategic actors in the emergence of the strategic change. The paper summarizes the development of these three views of the strategic implementation role of middle management. The perceptions of experienced European middle managers are used to validate and augment the three formulations. Conclusions are drawn that yield 1) insights into the middle-management roles in strategic changes, 2) a preliminary typology of these middle-management roles and 3) an exploratory test of the sufficiency of this typology in covering the breadth of middle-management role behaviors in strategic change initiatives. Implications for further research on the role set of middle managers in the implementation of strategic-change initiatives are drawn.*

**JEL:** L25; M14

**KEYWORDS:** Strategy implementation, middle-management roles, middle management

## INTRODUCTION

Management strategy development and implementation is facing unprecedented change from the adoption of new technologies, new interfaces with customers and suppliers, and industry consolidation. Other globalization drivers such as competition, customer and cost (Yip, 2003) are forcing the evolution of global strategies by most companies. In order to keep pace, top management needs to plan, motivate and lead these changes. However, Balogun and Haley (2008) found the failure rate of strategic change programs to be 70%. Little is known about the actual practices of middle managers (Rouleau, 2005) and how their activities can be facilitated (Balogun, 2007). Mayer and Smith (2007) conclude their role is often misunderstood and unsupported by top management. This paper focuses on the role of middle management as one of the key actors in strategic change implementation in order to uncover principles that will improve strategic implementation success. Middle managers face challenges in strategy implementation. They do not define the new strategy. They function in a complex environment where they manage the relationship with top management and face questions and resistance from their teams. They often manage the relationships with internal and external stakeholders. They may face issues and constraints that are often not aligned to the new strategy.

Recent research has expanded the understanding of this problem. Balogun (2007) and Rouleau (2005) point out the importance of managing the day-to-day functions of middle management. Johnson, Scholes and Wittington (2008) define three trends affecting middle-management focus on strategic change including 1) organizational decentralization of strategic initiatives, 2) increased middle manager confidence in the strategic domain due to improved training and 3) operational responsibility and knowledge being pushed onto the middle-management tier. This paper makes three contributions. First it summarizes models and tools used to study middle-management performance in strategic change

initiatives. Second, it explores the complex and demanding role of middle managers in strategic change as seen by members of the sample. Finally, it develops a typology drawn from existing research, and tests its sufficiency in capturing the breadth of middle-management role behavior in strategic change implementation. The key research issue is to enhance the understanding of the role of middle management in strategic change. Four questions drive the research: 1) What is the current view in the literature of middle management in strategy implementation? 2) What is an appropriate typology to use to study the complexity of middle-management role behavior in strategic change? 3) How do the perceptions of practicing middle managers compare with the literature and the typology? 4) Does the typology cover the breadth of role behavior reported by the sample?

In order to lay the foundation for the assessment the perceptions by middle managers of their role in the implementation of strategic initiatives, we need to explore the answers developed by researchers to two questions. First, how is middle management's role in implementing strategic changes defined? Second, what typology will capture the complexity of this role set? We will approach these two questions by first presenting an overview of the strategic process defined in the literature and its impact on middle management's role in strategy implementation. Next we examine three views representing a different conceptions of the middle management role including as 1) implementers of strategies mandated by senior management, 2) networkers that coordinate strategic programs and 3) interpreters of expectations in the implementation process. From this foundation, we explain the data and research methodology used to test the hypotheses and report the results. The concluding section draws future research implications.

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND BACKGROUND

The traditional view of the strategy process is one of a rational, planned, top-down activity leading to an action plan that is passed down to line managers for implementation. Strategy formulation is the task of the CEO and top management. This view was common until the early 1980's, when the complexity of the business environment was incorporated in the strategic-process model. Middle management's main tasks were implementation and control. They were the implementers of top management strategies. In the late 1980's, slower growth drove business priorities toward speed and flexibility. Organizations needed to be more flexible and adaptable to demands of customers that drove the need for more effective implementation methods. More focus was given to effective strategy implementation with strategy seen as an executive-driven activity based upon a balance between hard, quantitative tools and a softer, judgmental approach (O'Shannassy, 2003: p. 60). A view expressed by Floyd and Wooldridge (1994: p. 48) defined middle management and the middle manager as: "the coordinator between daily activities of the units and the strategic activities of the hierarchy." They stress the middle manager's role as "a link, a tie between top managers and operational workers ... more than the 'hierarchical' definitions" (as cited in Vogler, 2007). This view applies across a wide range organization types and organization contexts.

Three different views of the middle-management role in strategy development and implementation have emerged from this traditional foundation. The first from Hrebiniak (2008) sees middle managers as implementers of top-management, defined strategy. The second represented by Floyd and Wooldridge (2000), defines middle management's role as participants in strategic conversations and as boundary spanners between top-management and lower levels. In this view, middle management makes an important contribution both upwards and downwards in strategic-change implementations. In the third view represented by Balogun and Hailey (2008), middle management is the key strategic actor who is "making sense" of the need, plan and actions required to make strategic changes within their team. The first view (Hrebiniak, 2008) identifies middle managers as implementers of strategies developed by top-management teams. It relates to a traditional view of middle managers as the "linking pin" between

upper and junior-levels of management. By linking the organizational space between strategy and operations, middle managers connect strategic objectives with day-to-day objectives and concerns of personnel at different organizational levels. Maintaining these complex links requires a well-defined, logical approach with planned activities. In Hrebiniak's view, execution represents a disciplined process or a logical set of connected activities that enables an organization to develop a strategy and make it work.

Hrebiniak (2008) talked to hundreds of managers with responsibility for strategy execution. From these discussions, he identified twelve execution challenges in the strategy-execution process. He then completed two surveys of 400 managers in order to rank hurdles according to their importance in strategy execution. His work showed that "lack of upper-management support" and "insufficient financial resources" were not considered to be important hurdles in the process of strategy execution. His explanation of this outcome is that managers do think that top-management support and adequate financial resources are critical, but that these had developed in the planning process and become "givens" in the execution process (Hrebiniak, 2008).

In Hrebiniak's view, a well-defined, logical, structured approach is crucial to the success of strategy execution. Although his view is consistent and provides interesting conclusions, consulting experience in strategy implementation projects (Kuyvenhoven, 2008) leads to the conclusion that this approach may be most effective in complex strategic changes such as a major reorganization or urgent, critical initiatives. Many strategic changes occur on a smaller scale or when a sense of urgency is not present. This type of change often requires a more bottom-up approach that gives freedom to middle management to develop and implement their strategic ideas. In this type of process, strategy formulation and strategy execution are not two separate steps, but emerge as a natural outcome of the implementation of strategy.

This more bottom-up view expands on the middle-manager-as-implementer, top-down perspective. This view is focused internally and does not incorporate management's relationship with the outer world like suppliers, customers, and politics. Neither does this view focus on the "softer" parts of managing change, like how to deal with employee resistance or generate employee empowerment (Beer and Nohria, 2000). The second view augments the top down, hierarchical approach with the implementation role of middle management by viewing middle managers as co-actors in effective strategic changes as represented by Floyd and Wooldridge (1994, 1997). They identify middle managers as "linking pins" between top and bottom, but their view goes beyond the implementation role of middle managers found in View 1 above. In the Floyd-Wooldridge view, middle management involvement is significant in both the definition and the execution of strategy. By performing these dual functions, middle managers contribute to the competitive advantage of the company (Floyd and Wooldridge; 1997, 1994). They view strategic change as an emergent process, rather than "a process of deliberate decisions by top management" (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1997).

Floyd and Wooldridge (1992, 1994, 1997, 2000) define middle-management roles in strategy development and implementation. Middle managers contribute to strategy by the way they behave and how they think. In their model, Floyd and Wooldridge view middle managers as "linking pins" between the top and the bottom of the organization, they connect the overall direction provided by top management with their subordinates' day-to-day activities. Middle managers coordinate strategy and action by mediating, negotiating and interpreting connections between the strategic and operational levels in the organization. Middle managers take actions that have both upward and downward influences on strategy formation. Their upward influence affects senior management's view of organizational circumstances and alternatives to the intended strategic change. Middle managers' downward influence

affects the alignment of organizational arrangements with the strategic context (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992). Middle management's cognitive distribution can be seen as a continuum with two poles: divergent and integrative. At the divergent pole, strategy is a change process and divergent ideas alter the organization's concept of strategy. At the integrative pole, strategy requires coherent ideas that support a common direction and coordinates and reconciles these views (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992).

Floyd and Wooldridge define two dimensions of the middle-manager role set including a behavioral or action dimension and a cognitive dimension. The action dimension is defined by whether the middle manager is acting upward in the organization hierarchy or downward. The cognitive dimension depends on whether the middle manager is dealing with ideas that diverge from the planned strategy or whether the ideas are integrated within this strategy. When the action is up the hierarchy, the middle manager may be championing divergent alternatives or synthesizing information for senior managers about the planned implementation. Middle managers engage in two types of downward action including facilitating divergent adaptations to the strategy or implementing the planned strategy directly with minimal adaptation.

The third view of middle management's role in strategic changes is the strategy-as-practice (SAP) view. In this view, strategy is something that organization members are doing, not something an organization has. The focus is at the micro level of the practices and practitioners of strategy (Johnson et al., 2003). Balogun (2003, 2008) focuses on the way middle managers experience their role in making strategic changes. Balogun concludes that middle managers have a complex, demanding role to play in connecting the strategic and operational levels of the organization. The tasks they perform include a translation task, a mediation task, a buffering task and a negotiation task. The translation task involves the communication and interpretations of plans so that subordinates can understand what actions to take and the context for those actions. The mediation task requires the middle manager to reconcile the divergent demands and activities performed by the strategic and operational levels in the organizations. The buffering task requires the middle manager to reduce the emotional shock and negative impact of actions of others across the boundaries between senior management and lower organizational levels. Finally, the middle management layer acts as a go-between or negotiator between the levels of the organization.

Balogun sees middle managers as key strategic actors in the strategic process. Due to their position in the organization, middle managers are both recipients and implementers of change. Balogun (2003) defines their role as "change intermediaries" or "boundary spanners." The way middle managers interpret and make sense of the strategic change is crucial and directly influences the outcome achieved by the strategy. In Balogun's view, failure of interpretation is a key cause of differences between top management intentions and the actual implementation. Balogun (2003) defines four middle-management roles by combining orientation ("team" or "self") and nature of activity ("coordination and management" and "sense making"). By "coordination and management" Balogun refers to traditional middle management activities like planning, budgeting, resourcing, overseeing change-related activities. "Sense making" is the process individuals undertake when they try to understand what is going on around them, i.e. - making sense of experiences and events. Interpreting events and translate what it means for behavior.

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## METHODOLOGY AND DATA DESCRIPTION

An exploratory study was completed in order to assess the completeness of the three views developed above. The objective was to determine if the model covers the types of roles and actions used by middle managers in strategic change implementation. Two questions were addressed: 1) How do middle managers perceive the range of their role set as implementers of strategic change initiatives? 2) Does current research and theory cover the range of roles performed by middle managers in strategic change implementation? Two research hypotheses were tested in this exploratory study:

*H1. The roles middle managers perform in strategic changes can be clustered into three types: the implementer, the networker and the sense-maker.*

*H2. The role typology - implementer, networker and sense-maker - covers the role set performed by middle managers.*

Given the exploratory nature of the study, a small convenience sample was used to test these hypotheses. The interviewees were middle managers from different organizations that varied from commercial to public, from domestic to international, and small to large. Three subjects worked for domestic Netherlands organizations and three for international or global companies. One of the companies is in the public sector. The other five are public. Two companies have more than 40,000 employees. The others have a staff between 150 and 350 employees. Two of the six managers are women. The same interview protocol was used for all respondents. Questionnaires, research protocol and complete data are available from the authors.

All respondents were satisfied with their role in the strategic change implementation. The subjects stated they made a positive contribution in supporting the change, realizing target results and motivating their teams. The subjects are proud of “understanding the objective, reasons and urgency of the strategic change and carrying out the steps on the roadmap with enthusiasm and energy” (Subject 1); “Realizing the objectives. I had big impact on my team, the new label was a success, and both customers and candidates liked it” (Subject 2); “People are moving and have not lost anyone along the way (yet)” (Subject 3); “Giving response to support the business decision and making it happen ... I had a very good personal relationship with my team and kept the motivation running until the last day” (Subject 4); “Providing top management with new ideas” (Subject 5); “...my contribution in reaching the target ... We made it and our team got closer together.” (Subject 6) Two of the interviewees (Subjects 3 and 6) also grade the result and the approach very high. Subjects 4 and 2 were not satisfied with their results.

Subjects 1,2 and 4 all ascribe the differences in evaluations of their approach and its result to gaps between senior management and middle management/staff. Subject 1 said, “There is a gap between the high level objectives defined by our directors and the realization of those objectives at the offices. ... Due to other change initiatives and the business of daily operations, we are not able to reach the objective defined by top management. But, in my view, the quality of our implementation is good.” Subject 1 also reported, “It was good that I as a middle manager was involved [in making the reorganization decision].” “Senior management often thinks that they can cut a function, but they might have no insight in the consequences for operations, for example, interface with other functions... The US team got work for 4 people without increasing its staff. I think this is not realistic and I have heard complaints from the US people that the work cannot be done properly.” Subject 2 reported, “The marketing director and I had a different vision on the implementation of the new label. Moreover, communication between the teams was bad. If the marketing director had new ideas, she did not discuss them with me, but implemented them right away.” Subject 4 said, “I was very happy with the way we implemented the new way of

working in our team. We made good progress...” In the interviews, the middle managers mentioned the following roles: Initiator (2x), Co-designer (1x), Implementer (3x), Coordinator (1x), Team developer (1x), Coach (1x), Motivator or driver (2x), Boundary spanner (1x). Table 1 summarizes the interviews.

Table 1: Summary of the Interviews

Subject, organization	Strategic change	Role and metaphor	Obstacles	Success factors
Subject 1, Male, Profit Local IT/internet 200 emp.'s	Implementation of new proposition	Implementer “Mountain climbing”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strategic change was not defined as a project</li> <li>- time/plan/milestones defined</li> <li>- Balance between change and operations</li> <li>- Hard interpretation of strategic plans</li> <li>- Top management does not accept implementing timeline</li> <li>- Discussions with top management takes lot of time</li> <li>- Dealing with emotions/resistance of employees</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Invest in the understanding “what” and “why” of the strategic change</li> <li>- Clear framework from top management with objectives/expectations</li> <li>- Agreement on objectives</li> <li>- Realize that it takes time for people to internalize change</li> <li>- Stick to your plan</li> <li>- Focus, make choices</li> <li>- Give people responsibility</li> </ul>
Subject 2, Male, Profit , Local, HR Recruiter 350 emp.'s	Implementation of new label	Implementer and team developer “Cricket Bat”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Bad relationship with senior mgt</li> <li>- Economic downturn</li> <li>- Role definition too much focused on execution, not on development</li> <li>- Lack of communication between top and middle management.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Good relationship both upwards and downwards</li> <li>- Use your internal network in developing ideas</li> <li>- Be part of the change program, also in the development phase</li> <li>- Senior management must recognize middle managers added value in development of strategic direction</li> <li>- Freedom to choose own way of implementing</li> </ul>
Subject 3, Male, Profit, Intl., Industrials, 200 emp.'s	Reorganization of Sales Department	Initiator and motivator “Football coach”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of sense of urgency</li> <li>- Dealing with people’s emotions</li> <li>- Clash of cultures</li> <li>- Gap between top management - staff</li> <li>- Balance change and operations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Communication</li> <li>- Constant check if everyone is still on same page</li> <li>- Give room and take time for emotions and questions</li> </ul>
Subject 4, Female, Profit Global Consumer goods, 30,000 emp.'s	Cost reduction: team restructuring	Implementer and team motivator “Clown”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Dealing with emotions of employees</li> <li>- Interpretation of strategic plans lead to confusion</li> <li>- Decision by top management not realistic from operational point of view</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Clear approach with timelines</li> <li>- Visible support from top mgt</li> <li>- Good relationship with team</li> <li>- Communication</li> <li>- Consistent strategy that makes sense</li> <li>- Being able to cope with stress</li> <li>- Realize change involves dealing with emotions</li> </ul>
Subject 5, Male, Public, Local, Logistics 350 emp.'s	Implementation of performance management system	Boundary spanner and co-designer “Walking on eggs/ tight-rope”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Dealing with resistance</li> <li>- Culture not aligned with change</li> <li>- Political environment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Visible support from top management</li> <li>- Formal mandate</li> <li>- Short communication lines</li> <li>- Realistic timeframe</li> <li>- Understand stakeholders</li> </ul>
Subject 6, Female, Profit, Intl .Electronics 40,000 emp.'s	Cost reduction: lean and mean	Driver, initiator, coordinator “Fisher-man”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Balance change-business</li> <li>- Motivating team</li> <li>- Supplier’s management</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Clear target</li> <li>- Share information</li> <li>- Close gap between management and team</li> <li>- Constant monitoring/feedback</li> <li>- Take time</li> <li>- Appreciation from top management</li> </ul>

*In all cases, the interviewed middle managers made clear that they played different roles during the change project. These roles can be related to the internal and external relationships they have to manage: upwards, downwards and across boundaries. In their relationship with top management, they have an implementer or co-designer role. In their relationship with their team, they call themselves initiator, team developer, motivator or driver. In the horizontal relationships, middle managers play a boundary spanner role.*

Middle managers perceive their role and their focus on the different relationships as illustrated by the metaphors they chose. Subject 1, who sees himself as the implementer, uses the metaphor of mountain climbing. “The summit is not clear yet, but I can prepare for the journey in my own way and I can determine my own route. I am also invited to share my ideas to directors and colleagues.” This metaphor clarifies both the success factors (freedom to implement the change and being seen as a serious partner in the project) as well as the obstacles (the roadmap is not well defined). Subject 2 uses the metaphor of the cricket bat and the saying “it’s just not cricket” to express the main obstacle he is meeting in his relationship with top management: lack of communication from top management and not being able to be fully part of the game. Subject 3 compares himself to a soccer coach, focusing on the relationship to his team. “I empower my team to perform, to come up with ideas. If necessary, I teach them how to act. My role is to get everyone in place, to get the best out of every member of the team so that we can score.” Subject 6 also has a primary focus on her team when she uses the metaphor of the fisherman: “I give my team juicy bait: a good environment of freedom and openness. The team was already very driven, internal competition is very strong in our company. I saw it as my role to show them their own achievements and coach them.” Subject 5 is focused on the relationship with external stakeholders. One of the hurdles he meets is the complex political context he has to deal with. He expresses this by the metaphor of “walking on eggs: “I am pretty much struggling with the tension between ‘being right’ and ‘getting right.’ Given the capricious political context we have to deal with, I have the feeling that I walk on eggs.”

## RESULTS

The objective of this exploratory study was to test two hypotheses. Both were tested by analyzing the content of the responses from the 6 subjects.

H1. The roles middle managers have in strategic changes can be clustered into three types: the implementer, the networker and the sense-maker,

All three types of the middle-management role were mentioned by several or all of the respondents with the sense-maker role (interpreter of the change objectives, procedures and requirements) mentioned most frequently. No response needed to be placed in a new category. This confirms hypothesis 1. The in-depth interviews show that middle managers do not see themselves acting in one single role. They can play different roles, depending on the relationship they are focusing on, the type of strategic change and the phase of the strategic change. First, middle managers manage multiple relationships. In interactions with top management, middle managers have an implementer/co-designer role. In interactions with subordinates, middle managers have one or more roles as coordinator, motivator, coach or team developer. In horizontal relationships with stakeholders, middle managers act as boundary spanners. Second, the type of the strategic change had an impact on the role performed. In projects with a clear target and a well-defined time frame (like the team reorganization of Subject 4), middle manager’s role is implementer and coach/motivator. In projects where the strategic change is defined on a high level and with an open timeline (like Subject 5’s example of the performance system and Subject 3’s case of the team restructuring), middle managers can flourish in a role as co-designer. Finally, the phase of the strategic change affects the roles performed. In the definition phase, middle management can play a role as networker and sense-maker. This phase is an opportunity to participate in defining the strategy. In the implementation phase, focus is more on the implementer role and the sense-making roles. The second hypothesis was related to the completeness of the existing theory base, and the resultant typology developed in this paper in covering the middle management role in strategy implementation.

H2. The role typology - implementer, networker and sense-maker - covers the role set performed by middle managers.

None of the respondents mentioned an activity or metaphor that was not included within the middle-management role typology outlined in the background section. No role description obtained from the respondents in this study mentioned a role or a metaphor that does not fit within the typology. The responses did indicate a broad complexity of role performance and role implementation. Hypothesis 2 is also confirmed by this sample with the caveat that it is a small sample and the possibility remains that a larger sample may uncover an extension to this typology.

Researchers must keep in mind the practical function that middle managers perform while driving successful strategic programs. As the research view of the middle-management role set evolves, it will need to take into account the realities that face middle managers. A short list includes the following normative implications drawn from the work in this study. Middle managers should 1) invest in understanding the urgency and the rationale of the new strategy. If middle managers do not buy it, they cannot sell it to the team. 2) They need to realize that implementing strategic changes takes a lot of energy and time. Middle managers must find ways to make this time such as advising top management on the timing and timeline of the strategy implementation or by delegating operational tasks to others. 3) Middle managers should recognize that change implementation is a complex and demanding task that requires adaptation to company strengths and weaknesses. If they need support or coaching, they must make this explicit to superiors and they must organize it. 4) Middle managers must build on the relationship with the team and involve them actively in the change process. 5) Middle managers must keep communicating about the how and why of the strategic change process, reserve time to deal with questions and resistance, be present and provide frequent, useful feedback to subordinates and superiors.

Attributes of the change process itself will also have an effect on the role set of the middle-management cadre. This means researchers should look for and analyze the drivers of the strategic change that come from within the change process itself. 1) Attributes of the objectives driving the strategic change process will affect the role-set of middle managers. If the strategic change has to be implemented quickly from the top down with lay-offs and reorganizations, the role set will differ from strategic changes with longer time horizons. 2) Middle management roles may adjust based upon the presence or absence of clear targets with a roadmap that explains the goals, timeline, responsibilities, and mandates. 3) Middle manager involvement in planning during the strategy development phase adds a critical component to the role set. 4) The importance, time and effort given to the communication process will affect the role of middle managers. If middle managers are to execute the strategic change, the roles they perform will depend on how well they share top management's vision and how they understand the 'why' and 'what' of the change program. 5) Top management expectations about the function of middle management in communicating information back up the hierarchy during change also affects the role set. Middle managers can serve as the ears and eyes of the organization, they can provide senior management with crucial information about internal and external implementation issues. Senior management may or may not want or expect this behavior. There are cross-cultural research opportunities in this area. 6) Because change implementation is a complex task that requires a lot of time and energy, middle management can put more or less effort in less-visible things such as internalizing the strategic change themselves, dealing with emotions and resistance of employees, and so on. The analysis of these hidden effects are a rich vein which can be mined by researchers involved in understanding the role-set of middle managers in strategic change.



## CONCLUSION

The goal of this paper was to test two hypotheses about the role set performed by middle managers in the implementation of strategic change initiatives. These hypotheses were: 1) The roles middle managers have in strategic changes can be clustered into three types: the implementer, the networker and the sense-maker, and 2) The role typology - implementer, networker and sense-maker - covers the role set performed by middle managers. These hypotheses if confirmed allow us to conclude that the domain of the strategic role set of middle managers is as described in hypothesis 1. From this, further research within this domain is justified. We gathered data through in-depth personal interviews from a small convenience sample of European middle managers from different industries, company sizes, cultural groups, and genders. Results from these interviews did not reveal any role, role set descriptor or other role-relevant variable that did not fit within the domain of hypothesis 1. The sample size is small, and specific statistically relevant observations are not possible from this data set. However, the results of this exploratory study can be used to design more detailed studies with statistically testable hypotheses.

We are able to generate some specific recommendations for researchers interested in participating in the development of the understanding of the role set of middle managers in strategic change. Some key considerations include 1) researchers should be aware of the different types of strategic changes and the implications for the roles of top management and middle management and account for these differences in planning research projects. 2) While the content of the strategic change is important, much of the success is driven by creativity used by middle managers to make the change happen. This process leads to the idea that strategy is not so much planned as it is implemented. Therefore, the role set is often evolving during the change process and some roles are performed and participants may not realize they are performing this function. This means researchers must use multi-faceted research procedures to define the richness that underlies the role performance of middle managers. 3) Since strategic change operates through a variety of social and operational networks, researchers must consider the structure and the function of the middle manager in building, maintaining and using these networks in strategic change. The whole question of the roles performed by middle management was described at its most general level in this paper within the “networking” role, but there is a wealth of opportunity for further research here, and the theory of these networks is less well defined than the role set of middle managers in strategic change is. 4) There is a diverse set of roles that middle managers can play in strategic-change initiatives. Researchers can provide normative advice and develop more effective tools to support middle managers in these roles. Possibilities include tools and theory to support in areas such as project management, leadership practices, behavioral issues, change inertia, passive-aggressive subordinate behavior are a few ideas that deserve development by the research community.

The results of this project show that middle managers have a crucial role in a successful implementation of strategic changes. Due to their interaction with customers, suppliers and other stakeholders they can provide top management with useful insights related to strategy definition. Their knowledge of the organization and business processes is helpful in defining the right planning of strategic changes. Moreover, middle managers are the key drivers in motivating their teams and translating the strategic direction into practices that make strategy happen. Based on the literature and this research, we conclude that middle management’s role in strategic changes can vary depending on the organizational context, the relational focus and the phase of the strategic change. Middle managers can play different roles, but all of them can be categorized in one of the three main role types abstracted from the literature: the Implementer, the Networker or the Sense-maker. If we look at the development of middle management’s role in strategic changes we can conclude that it follows the development of the strategic process. Normative and theoretical research opportunities remain to be developed by researchers who should take

into account the attributes of the situation, factors driven by management, and topics and approaches not yet fully explored by the research community.

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