From Blaming the Middle to Harnessing its Potential: Creating Change Intermediaries*

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Middle managers have been under attack as organizational downsizing and re-engineering have reduced their number. They are also frequently portrayed as obstructive and resistant to change. However, recent research suggests that managers at middle levels in organizations may be able to make a strategic contribution. Data from research on how managers in an organization undergoing transformation experience change are used to build on this existing research to demonstrate that middle managers fulfil a complex 'change intermediary' position during implementation. The findings reveal that a key aspect of this position is the need for middle managers to engage in a range of activities to aid their interpretation of the change intent. This interpretation activity then informs the personal changes they attempt to undertake, how they help others through change, how they keep the business going during the transition and what changes they implement in their departments. The interpretation aspect of their role is often overlooked, leading to workload issues and role conflict. These findings offer an alternative perspective on perceived middle manager resistance and lead into suggestions for future research and organizational implications.

Introduction

The number of middle managers has been reduced by the downsizing and re-engineering carried out by organizations in the 1980s and 1990s (Cameron, Freeman and Mishra, 1991; Cascio, 1993; Scarborough and Burrell, 1996), although opinions vary as to the extent of reduction (Dopson and Stewart, 1999). Middle managers have also been subjected to much criticism. In particular they are considered to have a negative impact on change. However, middle managers still exist, although their roles may be changing as responsibility is delegated

downwards in the flatter organizations of today (Dopson and Stewart, 1990; Kanter, 1986, 1989; Thomas and Dunkerley, 1999). Furthermore, an alternative point of view is developing which suggests that these managers may be a strategic asset (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992, 1994, 1997).

Yet there is still little research examining what middle-managers can contribute and what can help them fulfil these roles. Most research has concentrated on the *impact* of downsizing and re-structuring on middle-manager morale, workload and responsibilities (Thomas and Dunkerley, 1999). Although a key strategic task of these managers is implementing strategy (Currie, 1999), little research has examined the *role* they take during change implementation, and what helps or hinders them in fulfilling this role. This is the focus of this research. The paper reports on a real-time, longitudinal study of the middle-manager role during the implementation of strategic change in

a privatized utility. It analyses the different role components and how this fits with the traditional conception of what middle managers contribute during organizational transitions.

The findings suggest that middle managers are best characterized as change intermediaries fulfilling four inter-related roles during change implementation – undertaking personal change, helping others through change, implementing necessary changes in their departments and keeping the business going. A key but often overlooked aspect of the change intermediary position for managers is interpretation of the change intent, which informs their actions and impacts on the implementation outcomes. These findings expand what is known about the middle-manager role during implementation, provide an explanation for perceived middle-manager resistance, and have implications for the way those leading change conceive of the middle-management challenge.

Middle managers as a blockage to change

Middle managers are traditionally seen as a linking pin (Likert, 1961) between the strategic apex and the operating core, supplying information upwards and consuming strategic decisions passed down (Thompson, 1967). Through mediation, negotiation, and interpretation activities they connect the organization's strategic and operational levels (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1997, p. 466). As such, middle managers play an important role in the change process. They are part of the implementation chain, and act as change implementors (Kanter, Stein and Jick, 1992) but can be both the target and agents of change (Fenton-O'Creevy, 1998). Their duty is to take senior manager plans and put them into place in their division to align organizational action with strategic intent (Currie, 1999; Nutt, 1987). Their role is to act out senior manager orders, but with limited discretion. They are to deploy existing resources effectively and efficiently (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1994). This view of the middle manager fits traditional top-down, directive models of change (Bourgeois and Brodwin, 1984) and also has implications for the types of skills middle managers need. It suggests that they need to be trained in techniques to do with control (Buchanan and Boddy, 1992), such as budgeting and project management.

Since middle managers have a pivotal role in change implementation, those with a negative attitude can be a genuine impediment to change. It is this potential to exercise a negative influence that is often emphasized (Dopson and Neumann, 1998; Dopson and Stewart, 1990; Fenton-O'Creevy, 1998, 2001), with both senior managers and consultants citing middle managers as resistant. They are protective of their own self-interests and reluctant implementers of changes conceived by their seniors if it is not in their interests to cooperate. They can be resistant 'foot draggers' and 'saboteurs' (Guth and MacMillan, 1986). In general, middle managers have received bad press (Huy, 2001), and are often portrayed as the cause of corporate ills (Grey, 1999). Scarbrough and Burrell (1996, p. 178) comment that the overall view of middle managers appears to be:

> 'costly, resistant to change, a block to communication both upwards and downwards. They consistently underperform; they spend their time openly politicking rather than in constructive problem solving. They are reactionary, undertrained and regularly fail to act as entrepreneurs.'

As a result, the middle-manager role has been seen as one to eliminate. Pressures on organizations in the increasingly global marketplace to be more cost conscious, adaptable and flexible have made middle managers a target because they are seen to add costs, slow down decisions and obstruct the flow of information (Dopson and Neumann, 1998; Thomas and Dunkerley, 1999). The downsized, re-engineered, flatter organization has less need for people whose primary role is to transmit senior manager orders down the organization, particularly when those individuals fail to perform this role effectively.

Middle managers as a strategic asset

Opinions vary as to the impact the restructuring has actually had on middle managers. Some research paints an optimistic view of the future and other research a more pessimistic view, identifying 'reluctant' middle managers less motivated to make sacrifices or take initiatives for their organizations (Scase and Goffee, 1989). The basic argument for the pessimistic view is that organizational restructuring has threatened the traditional

psychological contract of loyalty in return for job security and career prospects (Redman, Wilkinson and Snape, 1997). There is an increasing workload, a broader range of tasks required, and more performance pressure with fewer job and promotion opportunities as hierarchies flatten. Competitive pressures are forcing organizations to adopt flatter and more flexible structures (Kanter, 1989). Survey evidence (Wheatley, 1992) suggests that many British organizations have restructured (two-thirds of those surveyed). Fifty per cent of the managers surveyed also reported an increase in workloads and responsibilities, yet they were not pessimistic about their future prospects. In support of this, Dopson and Stewart (1990) find that middle managers have more challenging jobs with wide spans of control, more accountability, more freedom and greater strategic input. If anything, the changes occurring in organizations are giving middle managers a more important job (Dopson and Stewart, 1993). In reality there is insufficient evidence for either the pessimistic or the optimistic view – and findings may be context dependent. Studies by Newell and Dopson (1996) and Redman, Wilkinson and Snape (1997), for example, find no evidence for the more optimistic view, but both studies are of organizations undergoing transition with adverse effects for the middle managers. Alternatively, it may be that both points of view are partially true. Thomas and Dunkerley (1999) found middle managers experiencing greater job satisfaction and empowerment, but also increased pressures.

Running alongside this debate is a growing stream of research dating from the 1970s (for example, Bower, 1970; Burgelman, 1983; Dutton *et al.*, 2001; Huy, 2001; Nonaka, 1988; Schilit, 1987) that shows that although middle managers have traditionally been viewed as conduits for senior manager orders, they can also play a strategic role. Middle managers are important. In addition to playing a role in the implementation of deliberate strategy, they also (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1994):

- use their position within the organization and their contacts externally to gather and *synthesise information* for senior managers on threats and opportunities;
- encourage fledgling projects within their own department to help *facilitate adaptability* within the organization;

- use resources at their disposal to *champion* innovative ideas and business opportunities to senior managers.

It is therefore argued that if organizations continue to conceive of middle-management in purely operational terms, then they may fail to draw on the strategic potential of the middle. There is a danger that the middle-manager role could become devalued to such a degree that organizations fail to capitalize on what else these people can offer (Frohman and Johnson, 1992). If middle managers are not included in the strategic activities of the organization, and senior managers do not become more sensitive to the cynicism that exists among them, they will fail to be responsive and become paralysed instead (Spreitzer and Quinn, 1996; Westley, 1990). Furthermore, the very pressures leading to changes in middle-manager roles and numbers may also be making organizational survival more dependent on these managers (Newell and Dopson, 1996).

Middle managers – reluctant implementors or good foot soldiers?

The two opposing points of view paint different pictures of the middle. The former sees the middle manager as an impediment to progress adding little value. The latter represents the middle manager as individuals doing their best in difficult circumstances. This matches the divergence in opinion as to whether middle managers are an endangered species, or whether there is a new breed of more empowered middle manager (Currie, 1999; Dopson and Stewart, 1990; Redman *et al.*, 1997).

It is hard to reconcile the two different portraits given the limited research into the role of middle managers during change, or for that matter, the role of middle managers in general (Dopson and Stewart, 1990; Thomas and Dunkerley, 1999; Westley, 1990). We do not even know a lot about what it means to be a manager (Watson, 1994). It is also argued by critical writers that management is a socially constructed phenomenon (Grey, 1999) and that recognition of this is important if we are to comprehend how the work of managers is being altered by the changes taking place in contemporary organizations. Whilst this is an important issue, the focus of this paper is more on

understanding how middle managers experience change. Little research examines change from their perspective (Dopson and Neumann, 1998). Floyd and Wooldridge (1992, 1994, 1997) and Floyd and Lane (2000) have started to build a research agenda on the roles of middle managers, but as yet many of their hypotheses remain untested. If middle managers really do hold a pivotal role in change, given the frequency with which organizations need to undertake change to remain competitive, there is a need for a greater understanding of what middle managers can contribute. There is also evidence that middle managers' apparent resistance to change may stem from organizational constraints that prevent them adopting new required behaviours (Johnson and Frohman, 1989; Procter, Currie and Orme, 1999). Their attitudes may be as positive as those of senior managers and they should not be turned into scapegoats (Fenton-O'Creevy, 2001).

This research sets out to explore the process of change implementation through the eyes of middle managers – those managers between the highest and lower levels who connect the organization's strategic and operational levels (Currie and Procter, 2000; Floyd and Wooldridge, 1997). Through the use of a longitudinal, real-time case study, it examines:

1. how middle managers experience the implementation of strategic change;
2. the different aspects of their role as implementation progresses;
3. what helps them to fulfil their role and what obstructs them.

The study

The study examined the process of change implementation within the core division of a recently privatized UK utility undertaking planned strategic change in the mid-1990s in response to forthcoming competitive threats arising from changing industry regulation. The changes were a reorientation (Tushman and Romanelli, 1985) as opposed to more evolutionary strategic renewal (Burgelman, 1991). They involved a significant change in the structure, systems, working practices and ultimately the culture of the organization. The organization needed to become more customer oriented and drive down its cost base.

To achieve this, the old core division was split into three new divisions – a small core division responsible for the strategic development of the business and all customer service aspects, and two service divisions. The service divisions were to provide maintenance and support services to the core on a contractual basis to create internal supplier–contractor relationships. The aim was to make costs more transparent. There were also redundancies. The new structure streamlined the business (see Figure 1).

Consistent with a reorientation, the implementation followed a top-down approach. A team of consultants and senior managers prepared the rationale for, and blueprint of, the changes in terms of the proposed structure, job roles and responsibilities and staffing levels. However, the middle managers once in place in the new structure had responsibility for determining the detail of how the new structure was to work. The main implementation phase was to last about a year. In this time the three new divisions were set up, with all employees either reappointed to the new structure, or 'taking exit'. New working practices and information systems were put in place, and the contracts developed to a sufficient level of detail to be put in place and operated as ghost contracts for a year before becoming live. The culture change process was a longer-term change initiative.

The change process was launched with a major communications drive. All employees attended 'roadshows' at which they were shown a video explaining the change process, and had the opportunity to ask questions. Following this, there were a series of 'vision workshops'. These occurred early on in the implementation phase for managerial staff, and lasted for a day. Their purpose was to explain in more detail the rationale of the changes and how the new structure was to work. Middle managers were also given information about the new structure and job roles during the appointment process.

The middle managers experienced a shift in their roles and relationships during the transition year. They were used to working as colleagues of similar status, but now those in the service divisions were effectively acting as contractors supplying their ex-colleagues as customers. Previously they had fulfilled fixed job descriptions. Now they were to work out the detail and boundaries of their new roles and responsibilities in the

	Before		**After**	
Structure	One division – 3,500 staff*		3 divisions	Core – 300 staff Service division 1 – 2,200 staff Service division 2 – 550 staff
	Tall hierarchy			Flattened hierarchy
Customer services	Regional customer service centres			Centralized customer services
Coordination	Collegiate relationships. Some transfer pricing.			Contracts – customer supplier relationships
Culture	Job for life, safety, cautious, pay for seniority skill demarcation, centralized, top down management, quality			Job and pay for performance, commercially led, customer focussed, safety, total quality, skill flexibility, delegated authority/empowerment
Systems and processes	Use of central IT			New management information and business systems
	Bureaucratic			Re-engineering of processes – cost savings, efficiency, reduced bureaucracy
				Use of new technology to aid staff flexibility

Note: *Numbers of staff are approximate.

Figure 1: The planned changes

new structure. In the core division they had to set up new working practices to do with specifying and monitoring contractual work. All regional customer service centres were centralized, and improved common working practices and systems developed. In the service divisions they had to re-engineer most of their working practices, introducing new technology, greater flexibility in working practices and devolving duties, to drive down costs. They also had to implement a new management information system and new business systems to enable work to be carried out within the new contractual framework.

Methodology

The research focussed on tracking the implementation progress from the perspective of the middle managers within the divisions. The research took a real-time, processual, case-study approach (Pettigrew, 1992). Change is an emergent process, in which events ebb and flow through time (Pettigrew and Whipp, 1991) and history gets rewritten as change progresses (Kanter, 1983). Research on such complex, dynamic phenomena should be contextual, longitudinal and processual (Pettigrew, 1992; Van de Ven, 1992). Case studies

are an appropriate research method given the need to trace linkages through time, and enable a contextual investigation of the research phenomenon (Yin, 1994). The focus on the perceptions of middle managers rather than the change process itself, makes the research an interpretive study (Gioia *et al.*, 1994; Isabella, 1990), for which a processual approach is appropriate.

Monitoring of the middle-management perspective of the implementation process started once they took up their appointments in the new structure, four months into the transition phase and lasted for ten months. Diaries, a form of 'personal document' (Denzin, 1989; Taylor and Bogdan, 1984), were used as the primary data collection mechanism. Since they provide an insider's account of a situation (Burgess, 1984) they are a powerful means of data collection for interpretive studies. Twenty-six middle managers from across the three new divisions were recruited as diarists from a group of about 90 managers at this level. The change managers identified potential diarists from the new structure charts. There was no attempt to pre-select diarists by their attitude to change. The diarists were given individual diaries with separate entries for each time period with five questions – what is going well and why, what is going badly and why, what problems do

you foresee, what have been the significant events, and what rumours are circulating. At first, the diarists completed the diaries on a fortnightly basis, but as the pace of change slowed this was changed to monthly. The diarists faxed their diary entries to the researcher at the end of each time period for entry into the research database.

Frequent contact was maintained with the diarists by telephone to follow up on queries raised by the diary entries and add detail. Divisional review meetings were also held with the change managers and diarists every 6–8 weeks. One-to-one in-depth, unstructured interviews with all diarists took place at the start of the research, and towards the end. The interviews provided additional information about the change process and richer information on the different perspectives and responsibilities of the diarists. The diaries were supplemented with data from focus groups with the diarists as the research drew to an end. Documentation such as copies of briefings and workshop documents were collected, providing additional data triangulation (Denzin, 1989).

Findings

An inductive data-analysis approach was used to determine the nature of the middle-manager role during change. Since the research was longitudinal, data collection and analysis were intertwined (Miles and Huberman, 1994). NUD.IST, a software package which aids the indexing (coding), searching and theorizing of complex non-numerical and unstructured data in qualitative analysis, was used to aid the analysis process. All data from interviews were transcribed, and entered into and coded in NUD.IST, along with all diary entries and notes and observations from meetings.

Early coding was very detailed. The categories developed were on the nature of the middle-manager role during implementation and were primarily to do with the activities the managers were involved in. These included various types of communication activities, coordination, training, planning, running working parties, team building and negotiating. This stage was equivalent to open coding (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), the process of examining and categorising data (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). As coding progressed, emerging themes and patterns were looked for (Taylor and

Bogdan, 1984). It could be seen that the activities coded were part of wider categories to do with types of activities the middle managers were involved in. Broadly, the middle managers were engaging in two types of activities – sensemaking, and coordination and management.

Coordination and management activities are to do with traditional middle-management tasks such as planning, budgeting, resourcing, and overseeing change-related activities. Sensemaking can be defined as the process individuals undertake as they try to understand what is going on around them, as they try to *make sense* of events and experiences (Brown, 2000; Weick, 1995). As such, it encompasses a wide range of activities undertaken by individuals within groups to help themselves *interpret* what the events they are experiencing mean for them and the implications for the way they should behave. Existing research shows that during change, a broad range of sensemaking activities are engaged in by change recipients encompassing all types of communication, be it verbal, written or symbolic, and including gossip, stories, observation of others, metaphor and so on (Isabella, 1990; Louis, 1980; Weick, 1995). The data analysis here shows middle managers to be no different to other change recipients. They needed to communicate with their colleagues and peers, to gather information, ask questions, swap experiences, and exchange gossip and stories as they tried to interpret what was expected of them in the changed organization. The middle managers drew on the formal communication events, such as the vision workshops and business-plan launches, and manuals detailing the new structure, roles, and responsibilities, as they formed and shared their interpretations with others.

The findings also identified themes about the orientation of the activities the middle managers were engaged in. When engaged in some tasks, their main orientation was to their teams. As an example, when the managers lead a workshop or a team briefing, the focus of their activity would be to enhance understanding in their team. When engaged in other activities, the middle manager orientation was to their peers and themselves. For example, when participating in a change-related workshop to do with furthering their understanding of the change process, their primary community of interaction was their peers, with a focus on building and enhancing their own understanding.

The intersection of these activities and communities in turn leads to four main themes or middle manager change implementation roles (see Figure 2). Overall, therefore, four roles emerged from the data analysis – undertaking personal change, keeping the business going during the transition, implementing the changes needed and helping others through change. The following describes the nature of each of the four roles in more detail.

Nature of activity

Figure 2. *Middle managers as change intermediaries*

Middle managers as change intermediaries

The findings show that the middle managers were fulfilling a role better described by the term 'change intermediary' than by more commonly used terms such as change implementor or change recipient (Kanter, Stein and Jick, 1992). This is because putting in place changes in their departments was only one of the roles the managers had to fulfil. Absorbing and coping with change themselves and passing it on, also involved interpretation and translation of the change intent into implications for themselves and their teams in terms of behaviours and every day working practices.

Undertaking personal change

The planned organizational transition required an extensive personal change for the middle managers in terms of their roles and responsibilities, as described above, but also in the way they thought of their roles. This was evident in the way they reflected back on the changes as the end of the first year of implementation approached:

'the way we started out, we all had a sort of routine job to do but it appears that the vast majority of what we are expected to do is development of the section . . . you are not coming to a job now and somebody says here is the notes, this is what you do, you come to a job now, you vaguely know and then you have got to create your own job.'

One of the biggest changes for the middle managers was the development of their own job roles. This required them to not just work out what was expected of them, but also to engage in discussion and negotiation with their colleagues running other departments:

'We sort of tried to put some meat on the bone . . . reacting with other sections to say I think you ought to be doing this, I think what we must agree between us is that you do this and we will do that . . . We have taken the stuff that has been given to us from above and latched on to snippets that you could understand and actually translate into real stuff.'

A major aspect of this role is interpretation activity – the managers have to interpret the implications of the espoused change intent for themselves in terms of the way they both think about and carry out their work. This sensemaking process is ongoing and gradual, and involves interacting with others to determine expectations and 'reading signals' (Isabella, 1990). Dealing with other colleagues, for example, in turn involved dealing with differing interpretations on issues such as 'who does what', 'who is responsible for what', and where different boundaries and responsibilities lay:

'there is this constant bickering as to what's what . . . Until we know what's in the contracts . . . we don't know whose is what . . . where do we draw the line, which budget does it belong to? Whose staff should be doing it, who is responsible for that.'

The managers also had to work out the details of operating in the new structure; 'I am new to this unit and area, black holes which exist between the Divisions are only found when I fall in them.'

Formal, planned communications with more senior managers were important for giving middle managers guidance about their roles and

responsibilities. However, the middle managers engaged in a range of activities outside of this formal communication to help them interpret the implications of change for themselves. What senior managers say and do, changes to structures and systems, and behaviours and actions of others which cannot be interpreted within existing mental models, all act as sensemaking triggers. Individuals engage in a range of communication processes as they interact with others to enable them to come to some sort of shared understanding of what the changes are about (Isabella, 1990; Louis, 1980; Weick, 1995). The middle managers here made use of a variety of signs and signals in the form of behaviours, actions and words of others (particularly senior managers) to infer meaning about what the changes were really about. There were, for example, tensions between the three new divisions:

> 'As I walk through the office, on a Friday afternoon at 2.00pm, they (core division) are having their de-briefing for the week and everybody else is still flat out, still beavering away . . . it is a total in balance of work for the large majority of staff.'

> 'There is a big resentment of the Core Division . . . We are not used to being contractors, we are used to taking policy from head office . . . We were the king pins, our customer was the public. Now . . . we have an internal customer, as our first port of call.'

There were also perceived tensions between the new business units within one of the service divisions:

> 'We are having trouble with plant equipment . . . That is mine and you can't use that . . . and particularly out of hours, because they are locked up, and they move things about.'

Empowerment was another area where there was confusion:

> 'eg. decision from the top to withdraw cell phones. A manager made a decision to have them and now the big hand has come from above and taken them away.'

The managers would share these stories and discuss them;

> 'Well personally I think we had more (empowerment) before than we do now'

> 'Yeh me too . . . I didn't used to think twice about trying something out a initiative or anything, but you do now'
> 'You can't now'
> 'Right'.

Helping others through change

Sensemaking also featured as middle managers helped their teams go through change. However, here the activity was more to do with helping others to make sense of things – what Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) term sensegiving:

> 'The main problem is to make people realise that there has been a change and that changes in working practices are required.'

The managers themselves became role models, responsible for both formal and informal communication with their staff about the nature of the changes. This was an ongoing role in which the informal communication was as important as the formal:

> 'It isn't easy to do it quite honestly . . . I could easily just do the ordinary run of the mill work which puts you under enough pressure as it is and doesn't take the job forward. I could quite easily say with these meetings and seminars that instead you can spend three hours keeping your in-tray down . . . but at the end of the day you don't take the job forward . . . you have got bigger things in front of you . . . hearts and minds to convert.'

The managers were not only having to work their way through their own personal transitions as change progressed, but also help their staff through their transitions, by handling resistance, and providing coaching, training and support as needed:

> 'In the unit I've taken over, two sections have merged . . . I've got new people that don't know the job . . . so I'm having to train a lot of people . . . I find that because I'm an experienced person . . . that I'm getting involved in duties that really I shouldn't be involved in . . . but there's no-one to devolve it to.'

> 'Meetings are frequent. It is a major task to keep staff informed. Team briefings now last much

longer and more special meetings are called to discuss specific topics.'

In addition, the middle managers had a lack of time for this activity due to their coordination/ management roles:

'I used to make a point of being at each depot at least once a week, just call in one morning and see people and have a cup of coffee with them, and I've not done that in six months. Its not that I don't want to, its just that there's not been the time there . . . all of us are involved in a number of projects which are quite time consuming.'

'Managers (me) are finding it difficult to spend time with new members of staff and explain what is expected of them in their new posts, due to other time pressures.'

Their involvement in quality initiatives and working parties left them with little time to run and manage their departments (see implementing changes needed below). Some managers said they felt like 'distant figureheads' to their staff. Few managers found time to regularly run workshops for their staff on the progress of change. The situation was summed up by one diarist who did run workshops for his team:

'It is pressure of work. I am sure it is because I am obviously under the same pressure . . . it would be easy to say we won't have this briefing we will just do our normal work, but you do get the dividends, if you do one you realise just how worthwhile they are.'

Keeping the business going

Another role for the middle managers was keeping the business going alongside all the changes taking place. The phrase 'business as usual' was used to explain to staff that until the department responsible for a particular piece of work in the new structure was ready to take it on, the department that used to be responsible for it had to continue to do that work. This in itself generated problems – particularly in the service divisions. Redundancies were going ahead as planned. When target dates slipped, they were left coping with a heavier workload than they were staffed for. Also, some middle managers had been moved to departments they had not worked in before, or had new staff, so even keeping the

business going required them to learn about new things:

'Staff are expected to carry out the same amount of work (Business as Usual), in addition implement and coping with change, as well as providing information and facts on various aspects of their work. The main problem I am encountering is a major change in staff. The unit has the same amount of work but fewer staff with 25% of the staff new to the unit requiring training.'

The change process was happening very quickly, and managers were finding it difficult to continue to do business as usual, forward plan, and also spend time with new members of staff (see above) to explain what was expected of them in new posts. Finally, with the ongoing movements of staff, finding the appropriate people to ask questions, get information and get things done could be difficult:

'the main problem I've got at the moment, is not knowing where to draw that information from, because I'm so new . . . and my boss is new as well . . . he's only been there a month longer than me.'

In addition, there were differing interpretations of what the term business as usual meant among the managers and how long it was supposed to continue. Those in the core division believed it was to run as long as was necessary. Those in the service divisions thought it was only to last until the contracts were in place. The response from the service divisions to ongoing requests for business as usual was often frustration:

'The problem is that the business as usual still exists . . . there seems to be this huge ball that they (the core division) seem to be able to throw around everything to say if we can't do it Services will do it and we'll pay them through the contracts. But what they don't seem to understand is that a contractor has a limited resource as well. There is only a limited amount of work and extras that we can actually take on.'

For the middle managers this role required constant attention to juggling priorities – where should they focus their attention and effort. The need to spend time on resolving immediate problems led to what some managers described as a fire-fighting mentality. There was also the issue of balancing the present with the future.

Staff needed training to deal with new working practices, such as devolution of duties, but this reduced the number of staff available to deal with the existing work. There was a constant tension between keeping the business going and implementing the needed changes:

'We are doing the training at the moment on site and that is causing problems because again of workload, we have cut the staff down to the minimum and to pull them out and do actual devolution training has been difficult.'

Implementing changes needed

Implementing the changes needed in the organization involved a wide range of activities across the three divisions. There was a need to develop new working practices and to re-engineer existing working practices, particularly in the service divisions to help get costs down. Many initiatives to reduce costs and improve working practices were achieved through the use of quality teams, often chaired by the middle managers:

'I am involved in quite a lot of quality initiatives and it does frustrate me . . . because I am only allowed say 2 days a week to actually run the business that I am supposed to be running . . . I would like to concentrate firstly on my own section . . . rather than spending all my time driving up and down the motorways going to meetings.'

Other initiatives involved the set-up of working parties, again requiring input from the middle managers. In the service divisions as part of the drive to reduce costs, there was a rationalization of workshops and depots, devolution of duties, the introduction of greater flexibility in working. Much of the actual work fell on the middle managers:

'logistically if you can imagine closing the depot there is quite a lot to do . . . we haven't had somebody to coordinate it all, somebody to pull it all together and arbitrate and say that goes there, that is that, and that sort of thing . . . It has been very difficult.'

All middle managers had responsibility for cost reductions in their own departments. Individual managers engaged in individual initiatives, such as 'hot desking' (a desk-sharing system) to reduce accommodation space. Individuals were also working on ways to improve their departments. One manager was working with his staff to encourage them to solve more problems themselves and to resolve their workload issues:

'What I am wanting to try and do is to get them to keep a time management diary of what they are actually doing to see if we can identify why they are under so much pressure.'

Finally, all departments had to come to terms with the introduction of the contracts between the three new divisions, and developing new working practices for this. Prior to the issue of the contracts there were many grey areas that required constant discussion. Once the contracts were issued there was much greater clarity:

'The contracts have been issued . . . a lot of areas are starting to be cleared up now . . . we have always been at a disadvantage with the core division, because they are just saying business as usual and we have got nothing to refer back to in the form of a contract to say well, things have moved on.'

The impact of this range of activities on the workload of the middle managers has already been highlighted under 'helping others through change'. All middle managers found themselves working long hours:

'I wrote off 40 hours last month, so I did an additional weeks work, plus what I took home, plus I actually worked every lunchtime, but there are a lot of people like that.'

Discussion

The findings suggest that a misconception of the middle-manager contribution during implementation distorts the way they are perceived in change situations. The managers have a complex and demanding task that consists of four roles. They are simultaneously expected to undertake personal change, help their staff through change, implement changes in their part of the business and keep the business running. The latter two roles are consistent with the traditional management and coordination role assigned to middle

managers. However, the first two roles often appear to be overlooked, even though they involve an important aspect of the middle-manager task – interpretation of the change intent into tangible actions for both themselves and their teams.

Floyd and Wooldridge (1994) suggest that 'implementing deliberate strategy', the traditional middle-manager role of 'interventions that align organisational action with strategic intentions' (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992, p. 155), is conceived inappropriately. However, they do not examine the nature of this role in detail. This research provides real-time empirical data that reveals its true complexity. The role in fact consists of four interrelated roles, only two of which, the coordination roles, are consistent with the traditional view of middle-manager change responsibilities. This research also provides evidence of the sensemaking aspect of the middle manager task, in particular showing how the less visible interpretation activity influences the more visible coordination roles. Watson (1994) comments that managers need to manage themselves at the same time as managing others, but this is not encapsulated in the way we traditionally think about management. Instead managers are seen as separate from the managed. This may be why the sensemaking aspects, and the need for the middle managers to manage themselves through change whilst also helping others, has received little recognition.

Interpretation as the key middle-manager task

This research suggests that the interpretation that occurs as part of undertaking personal change is in fact the *key* task for middle managers, since it *informs* all the other roles. The interpretations middle managers arrive at as to what the changes mean affect not only the changes they try to adopt themselves, but also what changes they encourage their teams to undertake, how they keep the business running, and what changes they implement in their departments and how (see Figure 3). The differing interpretations of what 'business as usual' meant illustrates this. We should still conceive of management as involving functions such as planning and coordinating, but recognize that the activities that enable these functions are more complex than previously acknowledged – the functions are achieved by 'feeling the way in the dark' (Watson, 1994, p. 37).
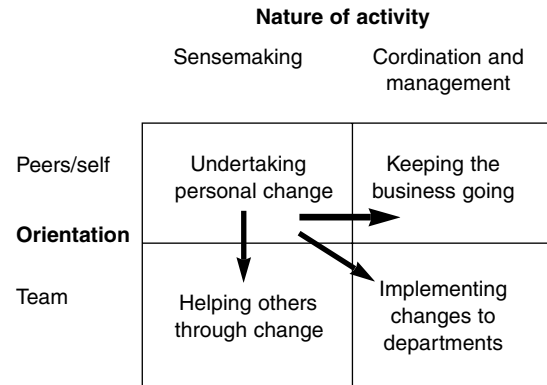

Figure 3. Interpretation as the key middle-manager task

Weick (1995) argues that sensemaking is grounded in identity construction, retrospective, enactive of sensible environments, social, ongoing, focused on extracted cues and to do with plausibility rather than accuracy. We can see all of this occurring for the middle managers, but two aspects merit particular attention. First, enactment is about an 'input-output cycle in which subjective interpretations of externally situated information become themselves objectified via behaviour', an ongoing 'objective-subjective-objective transformation' (Weick, 1995, p. 78 quoting Porac *et al.*, 1989, p. 398). In the middle-manager case, what they did when they were keeping the business going, helping others through change and implementing change, were all enactments of their interpretations. These enactments in turn created an environment which fed back into how they experienced the changes, which led to more interpretations, and so on. This gives an alternative explanation for what Floyd and Wooldridge (1994) term the implementation gap between senior-manager intent and what actually happens. Differences may be due to different interpretations by middle managers of what is required, or what is possible given the senior management spoken intent versus their behaviours. The doubts over empowerment and the tensions between the new divisions are examples of this.

Second, the sensemaking process undertaken by the middle managers is quite clearly social. This research in particular shows the importance of *informal* processes of communication, both between the middle managers themselves and between the middle managers and their seniors. Interpretations were influenced most by ongoing,

day-to-day interactions – both verbal and behavioural. The behaviours and words of others act as symbolic 'clues'. Middle managers frequently exchanged stories and gossip, often centred on the behaviour and comments of others, and in particular the behaviour and comments of senior individuals. This extends Isabella's (1990) findings. She clearly shows the impact of vertical, up-down, senior manager interactions, both formal and informal, on the sensemaking of other managers. However, her research does not show the importance of the lateral interactions between the middle managers themselves as part of the sensemaking process. This research suggests that these lateral interactions merit as much attention as the vertical interactions as they occur outside the influence of the more senior managers, yet are used to decipher senior management intent.

Organizational constraints

The lack of appreciation of the true nature of the middle-manager roles constrains the extent to which they are able to perform adequately within these roles. If the legitimacy of sensemaking activities associated with developing interpretations and sensegiving is not recognized then these activities do not receive sufficient support or attention. Senior managers will not recognize the need to facilitate the interpretation process, for example, and cannot appreciate how inconsistency in their words and actions may undermine this process. Furthermore, the sensemaking activity takes time. On top of running the business and their other implementation activities, middle managers need time to engage with their peers. They learn from each other. Given the different interpretations that can arise and different levels of understanding, which may be affected by self-interest and other political issues, they also require time for negotiation, to resolve differences of opinion with other managers, for example, and to agree who is to do what. They also need to spend time communicating the message of change to their teams.

The lack of support and time for the roles of undertaking personal change and helping others through change creates a workload overhead. The middle managers were constantly juggling the four roles. What were their priorities? Where did they focus their attention? Time pressures effectively led to role conflict (Jackson and Schuler, 1985) between the visible aspects of their work,

keeping the business going and implementing the needed changes, and the less tangible and invisible sensemaking aspects of their role. To resolve the conflict the managers had to decide where to focus their attention. A focus on coordination was at the expense of interpretation and translation tasks.

This research therefore suggests that perceived middle-manager resistance may stem more from organizational constraints, such as a lack of support and time, which prevent them carrying out the changes asked of them rather than deliberate obstruction. Other research finds something similar. Johnson and Frohman (1989) point to the constraints placed on middle-managers by the existing formal and informal organizational arrangements. Fenton-O'Creevy (2001) suggests that we need to examine possible organizational constraints such as performance management systems, or middle-manager role structure, since a lack of appropriate effort by middle managers may result from conflicting signals about priorities from senior managers rather than resistance. Again, if we refer to the doubts over empowerment, we can see this here. There is a gap between the official and unofficial cultures (Watson, 1994).

Conclusion

This research is a single-site case study of a strategic reorientation as opposed to a more evolutionary strategic renewal (Burgelman, 1991). It finds similarities with other research on the impact of downsizing and delayering. The middle managers experience a level of work intensification as their responsibilities and spans of control widen, and increasing emphasis is placed on performance and individual accountability (Newell and Dopson, 1996; Thomas and Dunkerley, 1999), although like Watson (1994) there was no evidence of reluctant middle managers. The wave of downsizing and delayering may be passing, but the findings still have pertinence for organizations undertaking change. As organizations struggle to remain competitive, they continue to face the need to undergo reorientations. Many of these organizations will already have downsized and delayered. They will be entering an additional phase of change with a cadre of middle managers who are already working long hours to keep the business going without the added burden of change. The findings

here suggest that this will limit the potentially important contribution middle managers can make.

Middle managers do have a more strategic contribution to make (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1994) – even when they are restricted to just implementing deliberate strategy. Middle managers are usually responsible for making the outline structures devised by their seniors work. The actual change outcomes depend on how middle managers interpret what is required and what they can personally do, and the actions and initiatives they take as a result of these interpretations. The sensemaking activities they engage in and the interpretations they arrive at are crucial. The very term 'implementing deliberate strategy' is misleading. It implies that middle managers are merely conduits for senior manager mandates with minimal influence on what actually changes, when in fact what they are doing is more like 'building realized strategy'. They determine by their actions what actual local outputs are achieved from the original change plans. The detail of change is created bottom-up. The implementation task has greater strategic significance than it has been credited with. The sensemaking perspective shows senior managers to influence change outcomes, but maybe have less actual control than previously envisaged. Potentially, middle managers should be conceived of more as partners.

Like other studies (Currie, 1999; Currie and Procter, 2001) this research suggests that in top-down change initiatives middle managers have few opportunities to facilitate adaptability and champion, and limited scope to synthesize information. It is possible that the Floyd and Wooldridge framework has more relevance during periods of strategic renewal. There are also other contextual factors that may have influenced the findings here. The traditional management style of the utility was top-down. The middle managers were traditionally stewards of cost with limited discretion to shape their own job roles. This influenced the management style used during implementation, as can be seen with the confusion over empowerment. The findings here, therefore, should not be taken to suggest that middle managers should not have an enhanced role in organizations. Nor do the findings preclude the possibility that middle managers could have a greater impact in organizations in which change is led in a less top-down/directive fashion, which would then enable more facilitating, synthesizing and championing activities.

The notion of middle managers as change intermediaries needs more research. What are the skills middle managers require to adequately fulfil this role? What are the implications of this for middle manager training and competencies? How does the management style of the change process, such as the recognition of the middle-manager role and the support given, affect how well middle-managers perform during change? In addition, how is the intermediary position affected by the type of change being implemented, or their involvement in change formulation as well as implementation.

An important research issue is to do with what constrains and enables middle managers from succeeding as change intermediaries. Although this research set out to identify this, it has primarily identified what obstructs managers. We can develop prescriptions for what could facilitate the middle manager task from the identified obstructions, such as how the informal vertical and lateral processes of communication could be enhanced, and how to remedy identified organizational constraints, but such prescriptions require research to validate them. Furthermore, there is evidence (Guth and Macmillan, 1986), that some middle managers do resist change, and engage in political activity to create outcomes consistent with their own agendas. There is little evidence of such behaviour here, although there could be reasons for this, such as the old culture of staff doing as they are told, or a genuine desire to see the changes work. Other research (Dopson and Neumann, 1998; Spreitzer and Quinn, 1996) has also started to examine different middle-manager responses to change and, like this research, to identify potential organizational constraints (Fenton O'Creevy, 2001). These research agendas need to be pursued.

The findings do also have implications for practice. If the middle-manager role continues to be conceived of in traditional terms, then the heavy burden they carry during change may make them appear to be resistant foot-draggers, when in reality they are struggling to cope and confused about priorities. The trend towards work intensification can only exacerbate the problems. As such, an awareness of the importance of the sensemaking role for middle managers on its own is inadequate. This needs to be combined

with changes to the ways organizations support managers during change, and the way change is resourced. This will only occur if there is a recognition of the strategic implications of downgrading the middle-manager role, and traditional views of what it means to be a manager and how managers are themselves managed are reconceived. Only then can organizations start to harness the potential that can exist in the middle and help middle managers deliver, rather than obstruct, organizational change. However, if our organizations really do contain middle managers working long hours with little perceived work/life balance or job security, mobilizing the middle may still prove difficult. Middle managers may become resistant out of resentment.

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