Involving Middle Managers in Strategy Making

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Taking the historical past as the starting point, this study, based on responses from 31 medium-sized manufacturing firms and 56 of their top and 198 middle managers, examines when and how the middle managers were actually involved in strategy-making and when and how they should ideally be involved. The discrepancies between the actual and the ideal involvement provides the basis for developing a contextual framework for involvement.

THE ROLE OF MIDDLE MANAGEMENT in the strategic management process has gone through four broad revolutionary phases since strategic planning began to be adopted in the early 1950s.[1–3] Each of these phases assigned different roles to middle managers. The first phase was characterized by the CEOs and senior management formulating strategies and all their sub-parts in a top-down fashion. To control the implementation process, top echelons assigned budgets and keeping within the budget was the criterion used to measure performance.

In the second phase, the diversification wave of the 1960s triggered a more decentralized planning approach leading many organizations toward a divisional structure. At the same time, the information required to make strategic decisions was becoming so extensive that top management found it unavoidable to delegate some strategic functions to the lower levels. Control still remained quantitative in nature bounded by the divisional level rate of return and market share. The third phase, starting in the 1970 and lasting till the very end of the 1980s, provided increased attention to each of the business unit's contributions and its relative position against the products of its competition. In the fourth phase, starting from the 1990s, and continuing today, organizations are following a set of generic restructuring strategies—reduce debt, cut costs, sell off non-strategic assets, get focused. These strategies have become the global mantra as the corporations approach the coming millennium.

The restructuring efforts have not only eliminated two million jobs of middle managers between 1990–1993 in the U.S. but have also added to their existing portfolio the imperative of thinking strategically. Interestingly, this added demand has shifted the debate from why the middle managers should be involved or whether they are able and willing to be involved in strategic matters to the development of a contextual framework which facilitates involvement in strategy-making.[4–10] Citing the 1989 study by Hansen and Wernerfelt, Ghoshal and Bartlett state that a relevant framework can be a source of inimitable resource and it can explain ''about twice as much variance in profit rates of firms compared to the combined effect of all economic factors'' (1994: 108).

The relevancy of a framework should meet the test of social acceptability and technical defensibility in the context of the firm's past strategic practices. Taking the historical past as the starting point, this study examined (1) when and how the mid-level managers were actually involved in strategy-making processes, and (2) when and how should they be ideally involved. The discrepancies between the actual and

✠It was with much regret that we learned that Dr. Manab Thakur died in Fresno, California on 10 December 1997. This was his last article, and it is published with the kind permission of his widow, Mrs. Ruby Thakur, to whom we extend our heartfelt sympathy.

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the ideal involvement provided the basis for linking a number of disparate variables in building the framework.

The report is divided into two parts. In the first part, the sample, procedures and results of 'when and how of involvement' are discussed. The second part describes the process of developing the framework and presents a framework.

The When and How of Involvement

The Managers in the Middle

About thirty years ago, Pugh, Hickson, Hinings, and Turner[11] defined the role of a middle manager as one who links the activities of vertically related groups and is responsible for at least sub-functional work flow but not the work flow of the firm as a whole. In a similar vein, Wooldridge and Floyd[10] postulate that a manager in the middle resides at the intermediate level of a corporate hierarchy. Although these definitions permit comparison across organizations, in practice, the definition varies with the market value of the company, the number of people employed and the prevailing structural arrangements of the industry leaders.

Dutton and Ashford[12] caution that middle managers have the power to: (a) provide or conceal information about issues, (b) frame an issue in a particular fashion, (c) direct top management attention to certain issues by mobilizing appropriate resources, and (d) link actions and ideas between the technical and the institutional levels in the organization. The authors suggest "issue selling" as the middle management's critical activity since it epitomizes the self-esteem need for attention and recognition from the bosses. Thus, while these managers are in the middle, they are far from being typically 'stuck in the middle.' By having the intimate knowledge of the firm's competitive position and the resource allocation processes, they can make any framework 'dead on arrival' and erect enough detours to question its efficacy.

The Strategy Seminar and the Study Design

The genesis of this research was a two-day strategy seminar that I conducted with 56 top executives from U.S.-based medium-sized manufacturing firms. Although the seminar was about managing strategically in the coming decade, the role of middle managers consumed a large amount of time. In directing the discussion, I asked the participants to specify behaviors of their middle management which were indicative of 'inadequate' involvement. The inadequacies experienced were:

(a) repeated attempts by the middle management to redefine the corporate and functional/divisional strategies;
(b) posed tactical issues as strategic concerns;
(c) used policies, not strategies, as refuge for missing deadlines,
(d) attempted to resuscitate rejected funding proposals, and
(e) requested additional resources to do their ongoing tasks.

Undaunted by the dysfunctional behavior that they experienced, the executives iterated that their most pressing problem was to implement the firm's strategic direction, and without the assistance from their middle managers, implementation remained a persistent problem. "Most of our strategic struggle is implementation of our strategies, and if we can address this, then . . . ", so claimed the exacerbated executives.

The claim implicitly viewed strategy-making in distinct categories: identification, followed by formulation, then implementation and strategy evaluation. Analytical ease for which they are thus categorized in textbooks and elsewhere neither reflect the reality of strategy-making nor are they intended to be so. The unintended consequence of this categorization is to view strategy-making as 'one-shot' exercise as if it were to be completed within a certain date and time. Another consequence is it presupposes that inputs from lower level managers is useful for strategy implementation but not so much for identification, formulation or evaluation.

Although these assumptions are seriously challenged by strategy scholars,[7,13] the belief with which they were held by the participating executives was quite puzzling to me. After a great deal of exchange within the group, the executives came to realize that:

(a) each strategic event warrants distinct strategic inputs;
(b) such inputs will be coming from the middle managers heading the specific functional area/s;
(c) in managerial jobs, individuals and their functions are largely inseparable;
(d) specific managers will be involved at each subpart of an event and their involvement will be primarily based on their manifested expertise in their functional areas and the knowledge of the industry, and
(e) the glue that will hold the distinct events into a cohesive whole is the strategy at the corporate level. The responsibility of the firm's top echelons is to monitor the linkage between the corporate, business and functional level strategies.

This realization helped to address the fallacy of aggregating the ranks of middle managers and perceiving strategy-making as an activity to be completed away from the daily hoopla. The participating executives realized that inadequate involvement of their middle managers might not lead to overt resistance but they did create a void at the business level. This void, they agreed, might have debilitated the sustenance of the firm's competitiveness like canaries in the coal mine, where the bird's tendency is to suffer first from poison gasses which hit others later.

Sample

Immediately following the seminar, I contacted the executives reminding them of their agreement to participate in a study of 'when and how to involve middle managers in strategy-making.' I spelt out in my letter that their participation would include providing (a) data on the company's performance for the past three years, (b) names and job titles of mid-level managers and their participation in completing an open-ended questionnaire, and (c) time for group discussions. A total of 31 firms out of a possible 56 responded positively which generated a list of 67 and 219 names of top and middle managers, respectively.

Each manager was then contacted individually stating the purpose of the study and guaranteeing confidentiality of their organizational and individual identities in the final report. Fifty six top and 198 middle managers responded to the questionnaire. The primary reason for this unusually high response rate of 83.6 and 90.4 percent from top and middle managers, respectively, was due to the executives' prior congruence with the study objectives.

Procedures

Consistent with the definition of Standard & Poor's MidCap Index, an organization with a total market value between $200 million and $5 billion was called a medium-sized firm. In accordance with the parameters discussed earlier, a middle manager was defined as one step below the vice president and two steps above the first-line supervisor. Involvement (of middle management) was defined as a composite of: (1) attending meetings when a functionally-related strategic event is discussed; (2) providing inputs on lateral strategic events; (3) rewarding for cross-functional experience; (3) articulating industry transformation and its possible impact on the firm, and (4) analyzing the cluster of stakeholders and their shifting demands (for support of these dimensions.[14,15]

I asked the person in the top management team who responded to my initial inquiry to mark against each middle management function/name, the potential of the function's involvement in his/her firm's strategy-making processes. I requested the top manager to signify the potentials of involvement of each function by following a scale of 5 (high) and 1 (low) involvement for each element of the composite. Out of a possible 20 points, the responses ranged from 14–18. In the end, I decided to retain all the names of middle managers provided by the firms.

Earlier discussions with the executives determined the strategic events and the sub-parts. The events selected were acquisition, outsourcing, divestiture, and alliance. The reasons for their selection were: (a) each event is strategic in nature and accepted to be so by the strategy scholars,[3,16–20] (b) over 90 percent of the participating companies dealt with these strategic events, or some variations of them in the past three years, therefore, (c) the respondents would likely to have the power to recall a particular event easily.

I went into great length in the seminar discussing the strategic component of each event and how they could be divided into sub-parts or sub-events. Following the discussion, I decided to limit the sub-parts to a minimum keeping in mind that the participating companies were medium-sized and were likely to have a smaller bureaucracy and time frame to work on a particular strategic event. The sub-parts of each event were:

Acquisition—planning for acquisition, target firm's attractiveness, pricing for acquisition, and structural accommodation; *Outsourcing*—component selection, and selection of suppliers; *Divestiture*—selection of a buyer, and structural accommodation; *Alliance*—integration of process and content of the arrangement, specification of transaction-specific variables, and locational logistics.

The questionnaire was divided into two columns. In the first column, the participants, both top and middle managers, were asked to provide the functions *actually* involved in each sub-part of the strategic event. In the second column, they were requested to write their ideal selection against the actual involvement for each sub-part. I then asked them to write the reasons for discrepancy, in detail, between the ideal and actual mix of functions for each strategic event and its sub-parts. Despite the differences in demographics, both groups of managers recalled actual involvement in the same way. Though this similarity does not explain the complexity of a strategic event, it helps to discern a dominant disposition of the responding firms. For example, both groups mentioned 9 and 3 times indicating involvement of the finance/ accounting and the planning functions, respectively. This raises the question whether budget was dictating the parameters of strategic management. Table 1 provides the combined responses of both top and middle managers for each sub-event.[a]

Striking differences were found between the top and middle managers in terms of ideal involvement. The top managers wanted to retain the same level of involvement of their finance/accounting function, increase involvement of the information system and

[a] Responses were combined when there was over 80 percent agreement within the group and the standard deviations supported such combination.

TABLE 1. The actual involvement of functions for each strategic event and sub-event (top and middle managers combined)

Event	sub-event	actual
Acquistion	A. Planning for acquisition	Finance Marketing Corporate planning
	B. Target firm's attractiveness	Finance Legal Production
	C. Pricing for acquisition	Finance
	D. Structural accommodation	Finance Marketing HRM
Outsourcing	A. Component selection	Production Marketing Finance
	B. Selection of suppliers	Finance Production Marketing
Divestiture of product/division	A. Selection of a buyer	Finance Legal
	B. Structural accomodation	Finance HRM
Alliance Management	A. Integration of process/content	Finance Corporate planning Marketing
	B. Transaction-specific variables	Finance Marketing
	C. Location logistics	Production Marketing Corporate planning

the planning functions and use outside consultants significantly more than before.

The middle managers, on the other hand, wanted more exposure of the planning and human resource functions and substantially less involvement of the finance and accounting function. Many of them thought that since quality should be a concern of every manager, localizing it for certain sub-parts could be interpreted as abdication of responsibility for other parts or events.

The written comments of the middle managers indicate that they were not placing their individual functions at every sub-event just for self-aggrandizement. This finding refutes the apprehension that the lower level managers cannot see the 'big picture' or their parochialism is not conducive to strategic thinking. Almost all comments regarding the role of an outside consultant centered on the fact that the firms were using most of their previously laid-off managers as consultants but paying them much more than what they used to get as salary before they were laid off. A marketing manager, echoing many of his counterparts, commented that ''the presence of these consultants is ominous, these are the managers laid off earlier and now they are back in the saddle with a different but expensive hat...letting them in is one way to make sure that some of us will be shown the door tomorrow. But no one has the guts to say that this is a sign of unplanned downsizing and you better not downsize again without thinking through the consequences.'' The middle managers agreed that speed, quality and cost must be in sync with each other, and they opined that synchronization was easier when the firm's top echelons were: (a) of younger age (less than 50 years old), (b) willing to learn from and interpret for others the why's and the how's of the future product-market mix and the firm's competitive positioning, (c) courageous enough to reveal the cognitive biases, and (d) with a short tenure. In line with previous studies, these characteristics recognize the criticality of top echelons' psycho-social attributes which shape the outline of the framework and have impact on the firm's strategic persistence.[20,22–24]

Compared to middle managers, the comments from the top management were short but poignant. They cited that mid-level managers often looked through

TABLE 2. The ideal involvement of functions for each strategic event and sub-event for top and middle managers (in order of importance)

		ideal	
Event	**sub-event**	**Top manager**	**Middle manager**
Acquisition	A. Planning for Acquisition	Consultant Corporate planning Marketing	Corporate planning Marketing HRM
	B. Target firm's attractiveness	Finance Production Corporate planning	Corporate planning Finance Quality control
	C. Pricing for acquisition	Finance Consultant Legal	Finance HRM Legal
	D. Structural accommodation	Consultant Production HRM	HRM Corporate planning Marketing
Outsourcing	A. Component selection	Production Quality control Finance	Production Corporate planning Marketing
	B. Selection of suppliers	Production Consultant Marketing	Quality control Marketing Production
Divestiture of product/division	A. Selection of a buyer	Production Finance Quality control	Production Marketing Finance
	B. Structural accomodation	Consultant Legal Finance	Corporate planning HRM Production
Alliance Management	A. Integration of process/content	Consultant Corporate planning Legal	Consultant Corporate planning HRM
	B. Transaction-specific variables	Finance Corporate planning Consultant	Corporate planning HRM Quality control
	C. Location logistics	Corporate planning Legal Quality control	Corporate planning Marketing HRM

the prism of their own functional area and that many of them were trapped in routine activities ignoring the interconnectedness of activities and their impacts between and within the firm, the industry, and the macro environmental demands. Several of them cited that many strategic decisions had to be made quickly and there was hardly any time to have extended discussions. Some comments alluded to 'should have but couldn't ' (somehow it did not happen but should have happened) for some 'unknown reasons.' Some also admitted a failure on their part to inculcate strategic thinking in the managerial ranks. The top echelons wished to see from their middle managers which could be euphemistically called ''organizational citizenship behavior''.[25,26] The citizenship behavior includes interpersonal facilitation and job dedication, but as the top echelons surmised, it should also embrace the dual imperatives of creating resources in novel ways and allocating them discriminately in the face of competing demands. Many of them suggested that their mid-level managers were too much pre-occupied with the allocation process, and ''seem to freeze when asked to think about increasing the shape of pie.''

Developing a Contextual Framework

The contextually favorable factors identified by Dutton et al[5] included: (a) top management's willingness to listen (b) a supportive culture (c) moderate competitive pressures, and (d) change from a bureaucracy to a cost-plus based bureaucracy. The unfavorable context, according to the authors, was contributed primarily by the firm's downsizing and cultural conservativeness. The authors propose that ''middle managers' reading of the organizational context is a major determinant of whether or not and when they will engage in issue selling'' (1997: 421). Reading of the context is, to a degree, determined by the experience of similar transaction in the past. A contextually relevant framework, therefore, should begin by taking the past experience as an anchor-point and then directing the future to a singular emphasis on changing the 'dominant logic'.[27] Doing things with the same recipes is addictive. In order to get out of the addiction, and to form new logic in advance of competition, organizations need to institutionalize a forum for conversation within the superior-subordinate dyads.[28] Focusing on strategic concerns, the dyads should assist the managers to reflexively monitor what ''they are doing both while they are doing it and after introspection''.[29] Ghoshal and Bartlett[8] argue that behavior-framing attributes contribute to the convergence of choices and actions of individual managers. The authors suggest four such attributes:

1. *Discipline*—clear standards and expectations, a system of open and fast- cycle feedback, and consistency in the application of sanctions;
2. *Stretch*—voluntarily striving for ambitious objectives, development of collective identity, and ability to attach personal meaning;
3. *Trust*—fairness and equity in the decision processes, recognition of expertise in matters that individually affect managers, staffing with capable people, and reliance with each other, and
4. *Support*—lending assistance to each other, access to resources without undue hassle, freedom to communicate beyond and above the hierarchical boundary, guidance and assistance in exercising authority, manifesting self-generated initiatives aligned with the organizational objectives and interests.

These attributes were translated into 47 statements and top and middle managers were asked: ''To what extent the statements contribute to developing a framework for middle managers to get involved in the firm's strategy-making processes?'' The scale for each statement ranged from (1) does not contribute at all to (5) makes substantial contribution. The mean values ranged from 4.1 to 4.8 and 3.2 to 3.9 for top and middle managers, respectively. In order to investigate further the apparent group cohesiveness, I analyzed each participating organization's market share (MS) and return on investment (ROI) for the past three years. The reason for selecting MS and ROI was based on the PIMS database which indicate that ''for most businesses in most industries, ROI is generally proportional to market share''.[30] I classified the participating firms into above average (consistent improvement in MS and ROI for the past 3 years), average (sustained MS and ROI), and below average (lost both MS and ROI).[b]

Seventy-two and 81 percent of the top and middle managers, respectively, from the above average performing organizations ($n = 19$) agreed the importance of all four attributes (modal values 4.6 and 4.2 for top and middle managers, respectively). Eighty-four percent of the top managers in average performing firms ($n = 8$) considered discipline as the most important attribute for the framework (mean 4.3) followed by stretch (mean 3.9). The mean values of other attributes ranged from 2.4 to 3.1.

The exclusive emphasis by the average and the below average performing firms on discipline, in isolation of other attributes, suggest that the top managers possibly meant discipline to be a compliance-driven behavior and a proxy for continuing the organizational routines but with more rigidity. Trust was the most striking attribute for the middle managers in both average and below average firms ($n = 4$) with a mean value of 4.6. Irrespective of their firms' performance, the top managers with post-graduate education and a short tenure regarded stretch, support and trust as the most important attributes in shaping the framework (mean was 4.2 on all attributes). The mid-level managers, below 40 years of age, and those in non-financial functions (e.g., marketing, planning, HRM) regarded trust as the most important attribute (mean 4.7) followed by support and stretch. Discipline was found to be important particularly by those in finance/accounting and planning functions (mean 4.6).

The proposed framework, which is presented in Figure 1 graphically, could be summarized in the following way:

- The thrust is to change the dominant logic—the way managers are conditioned to think and make organizational decisions.
- The way to change the logic is to institute a forum for conversation where managers could reflexively monitor the strategic events on an on-going basis.
- The four attributes—discipline, stretch, trust, and support—form the core of the framework and they are interrelated.

[b] Before performing regression analysis, variance inflation factors (VIF) were computed for each independent variables in the regression equations. The computations indicated the highest VIF score 4.67 which was well below 10 as Churchill suggested.[31] The relatively low score indicates that multi-collinearity was not a problem. The predictor variables accounted for the variation in the outcome variable by 56 and 44 percent for the top and middle managers, respectively. The regression results indicate that the attributes and the MS and ROI have significant relationship almost on all dimensions and confirms the hypothesized direction. I maintained the distinction between the categories by a margin of 0.2 increase of MS and 0.1 for ROI for each year.

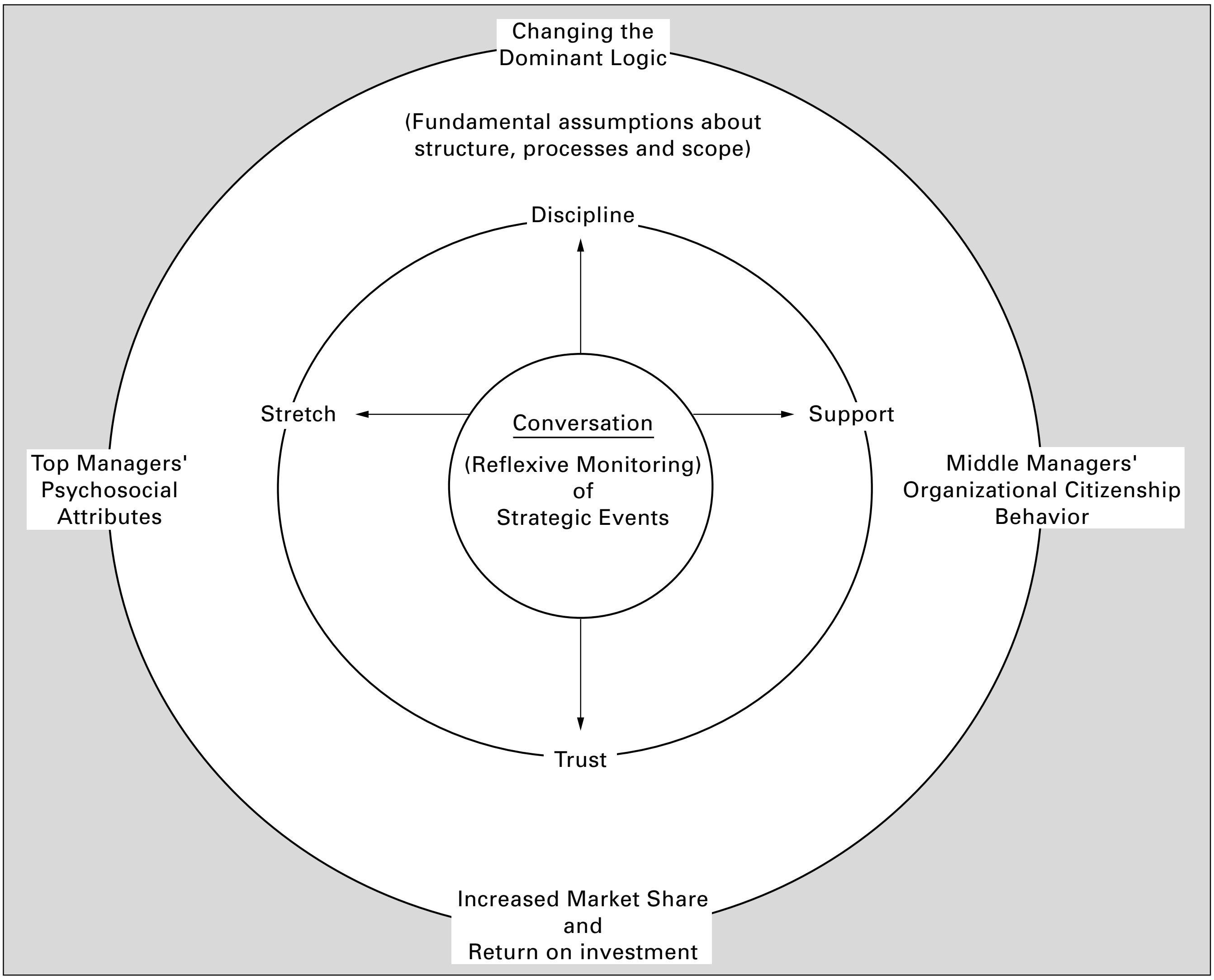

FIGURE 1. Framework for involvement of middle managers in strategy-making.

- The core is strengthened by the existing psychosocial attributes of the firm's top echelons and reciprocated by the middle managers' organizational citizenship behavior which includes finding new ways of creating resources and allocating them discriminately.
- The outcome of the framework is to sustain the firm's competitive advantage by increasing its MS and ROI.

Concluding Remarks

As stated at the outset, the genesis of this research was in response to an expressed concern of a group of executives. The study proceeded with two assumptions:

(a) Organizations have to be selective in democratizing their strategy-making processes with the knowledge that more is not necessarily merrier. This is not to suggest that strategy-making should be the job of an elitist group or be exclusionary. On the contrary, the top echelons, in involving their middle managers need to develop a forum for conversation where reflexive monitoring of strategic events is possible.

(b) Organizations have to learn how to set each strategic choice as a distinct event, break the event into sub-events, and glue them back for strategic cohesiveness.

Downsizing, in recent years, has hit hard on the managers in the middle. The quest for organizational efficiency has not only stripped down the numbers of mid-level managers but it also robs them from a powerful source of renewal, i.e., aimless but useful time spent with colleagues for perspective and support. Furthermore, as the Wall Street Journal reported, ''the cutbacks in the ranks of middle managers has meant a loss of career development opportunities and the emergence of very flat career-growth patterns for employees. Because there are fewer rungs on the career ladder, 45-year olds are basically doing the same thing they were at 30'' (June 26, 1997: 1).[33]

The top echelons must acknowledge that the role of a middle manager has unalterably changed from a technocrat to a knowledge-based individual who is asked to do more with less. His or her unbridled attention to a whole array of strategic and operational problems is critical along with job security. A meaningful framework provides an opportunity to discuss and balance the twin imperatives of job dedication and job security. If involvement is to be more than cosmetic, the managers in the middle have to reciprocate with their good citizenship behavior. As their bosses interpreted, the behavioral dimensions include dedication, working with ambiguity, investment in self-education, building and nurturing the external and internal networks. The dimensions, however, must target the essentials of creating new resources and allocating them discriminately.

The 'beauty' of citizenship behavior is that it is hardly stated in the job description or formally explained but managers are nevertheless rewarded for being a good citizen. The mid-level managers need to comprehend that for upward influence they have to move beyond the stylized view that ''strategy is the result of an analytical process [and] execution of strategy is an organizational process''.[14] This is a false dichotomy and seeking a balance between the two processes is the challenge for many organizations. While middle managers have to manifest their cognitive skills as well as their 'motivated creativity or care why',[32] the top echelons have to address the quandary of measuring strategic thinking directly.

Strategic thinking might be imagined as the strand of rope on a string of pearls. The strand holds all the beads without being visible itself. Should some of the beads be removed to measure the breadth of the chain, the beauty of the necklace would be destroyed. Strategic thinking, thus, represents the conceptual glue that bonds the strategy-making in its pursuit of value creation. The glue is the contextual framework which allows time for conversation in linking ideas to action.

There are several limitations of the study. First was the failure to articulate a more refined definition of involvement capturing the uniqueness of the participating firm's strategic past. Even a composite of factors, as assumed in this study, could not quite embrace the plurality of involvement, and most particularly, it did not take into account the inseparability of the person from the function. Second was the failure to address the thorny issue of corporate politics and power. They play a critical role in deciding who gets invited or is left out. The moderating effects of politics, power and likeability of an individual manager should be examined. Third was the industry characteristics and their influence in defining the competitive boundary of the firm. With disintegration of industries, fusion of distinct industries is also taking place. What has not been explored is the extent to which a framework could be industry-specific or it might cross over the industry boundary and retain relevancy.

Constrained by these limitations, the research confirms that a framework could be contextually relevant when strategy-making is preceded by specificity (of strategic events) and selectivity (of managers). Involving the middle management in framing the rules of engagement not only helps managing the environmental vagaries of today but they also empower the firm and its managers to influence their causation tomorrow.

Appendix

Characteristics of the Sample

The responding organizations ranged in size from 435 to 910 employees with market values between $210 million to $680 million. Over 60 percent of the participating firms increased their market share (MS) and return on investment (ROI) above their industry average. The number of industries (manufacturing sector) represented was: Heavy Machine ($n=6$), Software ($n=5$), Printing and Publishing ($n=6$), Construction ($n=7$), Consumer Electronics ($n=4$), and Apparel ($n=3$).

The median age of top and middle managers was 52 and 43, respectively. While 18 percent of top managers had post-graduate education (MBA or equivalent), the figure for the middle managers was 34 percent. Additionally, 21 percent of top managers had law degrees whereas only 2 percent of the mid-level managers had legal qualification and 19 percent of them had CPA/CMA diplomas.

Forty-nine percent of top managers came from outside the firm and their average tenure in the present firm was 11 years. The corresponding figure for middle managers was 64 percent with an average tenure of 7 years. Ninety-one percent of the middle managers were male. There were no females in the top management team. About 7 percent of top managers (mostly in Apparel and Construction industries) had no formal degrees and they had a tenure of over 20 years in the company. Between 1993–1996, the mid-level managers spent an average of 42 total contact hours on various training and development programs while their bosses had an average of 10 hours in the same period. The distribution of middle managers according to their functional areas was: production/engineering (21 percent), finance/accounting (16 percent), marketing and sales (15 percent), human resource accounting (15 percent), planning and legal (14 percent), quality control (10 percent), and information system (9 percent). Sixty-two percent of the firms had divisional structures and 24 percent were operating under a mix of divisional and functional structures.

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