

Rethinking ‘Top-Down’ and ‘Bottom-Up’ Roles of Top and Middle Managers in Organizational Change: Implications for Employee Support

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ABSTRACT In this study we integrate insights from ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ traditions in organizational change research to understand employees’ varying dispositions to support change. We distinguish between change initiation and change execution roles and identify four possible role configurations in which top managers (TMs) and middle managers (MMs) can feature in change. We contend that both TMs and MMs can play change initiation and/or change execution roles, TMs and MMs have different strengths and limitations for taking on different change roles, and their relative strengths and limitations are compounded or attenuated based on the specific configuration of change roles. We subsequently hypothesize employee support for change in relation to different TM-MM change role configurations. Our findings show that change initiated by TMs does not engender above-average level of employee support. However, change initiated by MMs engenders above-average level of employee support, and even more so, if TMs handle the change execution.

Keywords: change execution, change initiation, change roles, employee support, middle managers, top managers

INTRODUCTION

Top managers (TMs) and middle managers (MMs) rely on employee support to realize planned organizational change (Coch and French, 1948; Huy et al., 2014). Organizational change entails ‘directing (and redirecting) resources according to a policy or plan of action, and possibly also reshaping organizational structures and systems so that they

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create and address technological opportunities and competitive threats' (Teece, 2012, p. 1398). Fostering employee support is crucial for avoiding costly delays, deviations, or even failures of intended change (Mantere et al., 2012; Niehoff et al., 1990; Yang et al., 2010). Yet, generating support from the workforce remains an elusive target for managers involved in organizational change (Van Riel et al., 2009; Wooldridge and Floyd, 1990). This raises lingering questions about how TMs and MMs foster employee support through the roles they are expected to play in organizational change.

Change initiation and change execution are key roles of TMs and MMs in organizational change (Hales, 1986; Herrmann and Nadkarni, 2014; Pinto and Prescott, 1990). *Change initiation* entails the 'spark' for change through activities such as identifying, articulating, and outlining an opportunity for change, formulating the initial business case, emphasizing its urgency, and securing key budgetary and resource commitments. *Change execution* in turn is about realizing change plans through activities such as day-to-day adjustments, rolling out initiatives, aligning activities with stated objectives, translating overarching goals into periodic milestones, and giving sense and direction to change recipients. Despite the inherent interplay between these change roles, the literature is still divided along 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' assumptions about 'who does what.'

Change can be conceptualized as 'top-down' or 'bottom-up' based on the roles played by managers across the hierarchy^[1] (Burgelman, 1983; Raes et al., 2011). Top-down perspectives view TMs as initiators of change (Carpenter et al., 2004), traditionally portraying MMs as reluctant executors (Balogun and Johnson, 2005; Guth and MacMillan, 1986). In turn, bottom-up perspectives (Wooldridge et al., 2008) emphasize the pivotal role of MMs in initiating change (Burgelman, 1983; Glaser et al., 2016; Huy, 2001), but assume that TMs are not always receptive to initiatives emanating from below (Day, 1994; Dutton et al., 1997; Friesl and Kwon, 2016; Rouleau, 2005). Although both top-down and bottom-up streams have been illustrative, they have largely developed in parallel and have each reinforced a restricted range of change roles that TMs and MMs can play—with little cross-fertilization. As a result, 'alternative' ways in which TMs and MMs may feature in organizational change remain undertheorized.

In this study we integrate role assumptions from top-down and bottom-up perspectives in organizational change to explain employees' dispositions towards change. We argue that it matters who plays what role (i.e., TMs and/or MMs) and hypothesize how employees' dispositions towards supporting change may vary in relation to four possible TM-MM change role configurations: Change initiated and executed by TMs (Hypothesis 1), change initiated by TMs and executed by MMs (Hypothesis 2), change initiated by MMs and executed by TMs (Hypothesis 3), and change initiated and executed by MMs (Hypothesis 4). Our approach challenges stereotypical assumptions about change roles in top-down and bottom-up perspectives and encourages a more comprehensive understanding of possible ways TMs and MMs can feature in organizational change. Taking into account the relative strengths and limitations of TMs and MMs for taking on different roles in organizational change further elucidates why employees may vary in their receptiveness to change.

Our approach allows us to contribute to the literature on organizational change by (1) suggesting that change initiation and execution is not endemic to TMs and MMs

respectively, but that both TMs and/or MMs can play change initiation and/or execution roles, (2) specifying the differing strengths and limitations of TMs and MMs in taking on different roles, (3) theorizing how TMs' and MMs' strengths and limitations may be compounded or attenuated through different ways in which TMs and MMs can feature in organizational change, and (4) explaining varying dispositions of employees in relation to different change role configurations of TMs and MMs. As 'successful organizational adaptation is increasingly reliant on generating employee support and enthusiasm for proposed changes' (Piderit, 2000, p. 783), our approach provides insights into how change characterized by different TM-MM role configurations is received by non-managerial members of the workforce (Fedor et al., 2006; Fenton-O'Creevy, 1998; Rouleau, 2005).

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

Cross-Echelon Roles in Organizational Change

TMs and MMs are expected to be centrally involved in initiating and executing change (Balogun, 2007; Heyden et al., 2015b; Knight and Paroutis, 2016). The theoretical origins of top-down approaches to studying organizational change can be traced back to Chandler (1962) who interpreted change as a TM activity (see also Child, 1972). The associated assumptions have been exemplified in traditions such as Upper Echelons Theory (Hambrick and Mason, 1984), where emphasis is on the roles of managerial actors at the organization's apex (Wiersema and Bantel, 1992). Scholars in the top-down tradition tend to ascribe unique role expectations to TMs, such as driving 'turn-arounds' (Chen and Hambrick, 2012). However, theorization in this tradition tends to ignore the complementary roles of MMs (Carpenter et al., 2004), even treating MMs as obstacles (Fenton-O'Creevy, 2001), while sometimes scapegoating MMs for unfavourable outcomes (Balogun, 2003).

In response to the dominance of top-down perspectives, bottom-up interpretations received mainstream acclaim with the work of Kanter (1981) who praised MMs' role in challenging the status quo. Burgelman (1983) followed up by documenting how bottom-up initiatives from MMs can form the basis for organization-wide change. Contemporary thinking on bottom-up approaches is often captured in what has become known as the Middle Management Perspective (Wooldridge et al., 2008), which advocates and documents the pivotal roles of MMs in driving change from the organization's core (Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Huy, 2002; Wooldridge and Floyd, 1990). Scholars advocating the bottom-up approach, however, often neglect the importance of TMs filtering through competing priorities (Friesl and Kwon, 2016), attending to multiple stakeholders (Agle et al., 1999), and contextualizing the paradoxical demands of change (Knight and Paroutis, 2016).

Collectively, top-down and bottom-up interpretations highlight that (1) change ultimately rests on the interplay between *both* change initiation and change execution roles and (2) change roles are *not* endemic to either TMs or MMs. Yet, research on organizational change remains divided along stereotypical, and perhaps even errant, assumptions about who does what in organizational change (Hamel and Zanini, 2014). Most

commonly, the expectation that change is initiated by TMs and executed by MMs is rarely challenged (Kotter, 1995). Yet, these assumptions unnecessarily constrain our overall understanding of change, as top-down models tend to omit the possibility of ‘MMs as change initiators’ and bottom-up perspectives neglect the potential role of ‘TMs as change executors.’

MMs as Initiators of Change

MMs are often presented as impediments to change (Balogun, 2003; Rouleau and Balogun, 2011). However, there is evidence indicating that MMs can, and *do*, initiate change (e.g., Glaser et al., 2016; Huy, 2001; Mantere, 2008). In particular, MMs more directly confront technological and market developments (Fourné et al., 2014; Taylor and Helfat, 2009). This intimate exposure motivates them to advance ideas (Dutton and Ashford, 1993) that can lead to rethinking the strategic priorities of their own units (Galunic and Eisenhardt, 2001) and eventually of the whole organization (Burgelman, 1983). By taking the lead in initiating organization-wide change MMs capitalize on synergies across units (Taylor and Helfat, 2009) and showcase their willingness and ability to exercise strategic leadership – which can be crucial for career advancement, reputation development, and mobility (Mom et al., 2015; Ren and Guo, 2011).

TMs as Executors of Change

TMs have also been known to execute change. As TMs have a ‘big picture’ overview of how different sub-units interlink throughout the organization’s value chain, they can interpret performance-feedback from rollout activities holistically and adjust the execution swiftly as information becomes available (Lee and Puranam, 2015). Whereas MMs are often expected to represent sub-unit interests and have more blind spots regarding distant organizational units (Reitzig and Sorenson, 2013; Ren and Guo, 2011), TMs’ formal authority, access to resources, and external networks may help legitimize execution by rolling out change from an organizational-wide perspective, reducing concerns of unit-specific favouritism (Day, 1994).

The aforementioned juxtaposition highlights that change initiation and change execution are co-dependent roles, but not exclusive to a particular managerial echelon. Carrying this premise forward, we propose that a useful vantage point to conceptualize change is through the specific configuration of TM and MM change roles (i.e., who initiates and who executes). We argue that TMs and MMs have relative strengths and weaknesses for taking on change initiation and change execution roles. In turn, these strengths and limitations may be compounded or attenuated based on the specific way in which TMs and MMs feature in organizational change. As a result, change may be differentially received by non-managerial members of the workforce in relation to the specific roles played by TMs and/or MMs in organizational change (Fedor et al., 2006; Rouleau, 2005).

Employee Responses to Change Role Configurations of TMs-MMs

Employees are not passive recipients of change (Bartunek et al., 2006; Iverson, 1996). Fedor et al. (2006, p. 2) note that ‘attitudinal reactions to change are thought to be

driven, in part, by feelings of uncertainty, loss of control, and fear of failure engendered by the change events' (e.g., Ashford et al., 1989; Coch and French, 1948; Oreg, 2003). To counteract these factors and foster support, we can expect that employees will tend to be more supportive of change when they have accurate information to reduce uncertainty (Sharma and Good, 2013), feel empowered and in control of their contribution to the bigger picture (Greenberger and Strasser, 1986), and confident in their beliefs about the organization's ability to handle the change (Griffin et al., 2007). However, TMs and MMs differ in the informational specificity of their communications, which affects uncertainty experienced by employees (Raes et al., 2011; Taylor and Helfat, 2009); bases of authority through which they 'get things done', which could affect the sense of control experienced by employees (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1997; Westley, 1990); and the nature and frequency of interaction with employees, which can appease or accentuate their fear of failure (Fenton-O'Creevy, 1998, 2001).

Building on the aforementioned, we argue that the strengths and weaknesses of TMs and MMs may be reinforced or counterbalanced depending on the role configuration through which they feature in an organizational change. Accordingly, we proceed to hypothesize how employees' attitudes towards change may vary based on the net-effects of four different role configurations: Change initiated and executed by TMs (Hypothesis 1), change initiated by TMs and executed by MMs (Hypothesis 2), change initiated by MMs and executed by TMs (Hypothesis 3), and change initiated and executed by MMs (Hypothesis 4).

Change Initiated and Executed by TMs

Some evidence suggests that centralizing the handling of change at the top, when both change initiation and execution are in the hands of TMs, is associated with lack of engagement and participation from organizational members, resistance to change (Pardo del Val and Martínez Fuentes, 2003), foot dragging (MacMillan and Guth, 1985), and lack of trust (Lines et al., 2005). Employees perceive TM-driven change initiation as coercive (Ford et al., 2008), or even unfair (Kellermanns et al., 2005), accentuating their feelings of powerlessness (Ashforth, 1989). Ahearne et al. (2014, p. 10) note that TMs are seldom fully informed when initiating change. As a consequence, TMs 'might prefer communicating nothing to communicating information that later turns out to be incorrect' (Schweiger and Denisi, 1991, p. 111) and thus may provide employees with less information about the rationale of changes and focus more on the outcomes to be achieved. In doing so, TMs often assume lower levels of employees to be less strategically aware (Armenakis and Harris, 2002) and that '[w]hen followers have little information, they have little reason to act differently from what the leader prescribes' (Bolton et al., 2013, p. 514). Thus, TMs may fail to translate the rationale for desired future states in digestible bits that employees can make sense of to reduce uncertainty (Armenakis et al., 1993).

TMs also tend to articulate change plans in a broad, sometimes visionary (Hamel and Prahalad, 2005) manner, with less detail and in ways that are aimed at an undifferentiated stakeholder audience (Vuori and Huy, 2016). The lack of detail, due to TM taking on change initiation, will be compounded by the fact that when TMs execute change,

change plans are less likely to be translated into concrete and actionable projects. This may further cultivate fear of failure, as employees may not feel sufficiently informed about what change means for their subunit and their personal interests (Armenakis and Harris, 2002). As such, employees may feel that the general organizational benefits overshadow their own concerns for job security, training, and personal development. Thus, personal valence of the change is likely to be low and may contribute to feelings of uncertainty and low confidence in their own and organizational ability to successfully realize the change. Thus, as the net-effect we expect that:

Hypothesis 1: Change initiated and executed by top managers will be negatively related to employee support for change.

Change Initiated by TMs and Executed by MMs

In this configuration the challenges of TMs' initiation in eliciting employee support discussed in the previous hypothesis are expected to be counterbalanced by MMs' proximity to the workforce. While TMs elucidate the change in broad, visionary ways, MMs translate these general output-oriented plans into concrete everyday activities that employees can understand (Balogun, 2007; Nonaka, 1988). Due to MMs' unique position as a 'linking pin' between TMs and the workforce, they are at the nexus of key knowledge flows (Mom et al., 2007) and have access to information from both TMs and day-to-day operations (Hutzschenreuter and Kleindienst, 2006; Nonaka, 1994).

Being closer to employees in terms of more frequent interactions, MMs are in a better position to identify and resolve employee concerns and to frame the true implications of executing the change at hand for them (Ellerup Nielsen and Thomsen, 2009). MMs are better equipped to articulate solutions for unforeseen problems and for addressing inconsistencies between the 'ideal' and the 'real' by using more relatable language. Given their position in the organization, MMs translate strategic objectives into concrete operational changes that lead to more positive evaluations of the potential change outcomes and more active employee support for the change process (Floyd and Wooldrige, 1997). MMs' informational specificity may increase granularity of process milestones and evoke a sense of participation among employees as the changes are discussed. This may elicit more supportive attitudes among employees as they can see appropriateness and feasibility of changes more clearly (Armenakis and Harris, 2002). Thus, we propose that as a net-effect:

Hypothesis 2: Change initiated by top managers and executed by middle managers will be positively related to employee support for change.

Change Initiated by MMs and Executed by TMs

When MMs initiate change they may be better positioned than TMs to create a strong conviction among employees that change is needed and to engender trust in individual and organizational capacities to undertake it (Armenakis et al., 1993). As MMs tend to

be more directly affected by change themselves, given that they incur sunk and learning costs (Heyden et al., 2015b), employees may believe that change initiated by MMs must be truly necessary. This may suggest fairness of the change and fairness of how employees will be treated during or after the change (Rodell and Colquitt, 2009). In addition, MMs' knowledge of operations and employee concerns helps in devising fit-for-purpose communication, which can improve clarity in change initiation processes that may be favourably received by employees (Van Riel et al., 2009).

However, MMs may be prone to position bias and favouring their unit's goals over organization-wide goals (Huy, 2011; Reitzig and Maciejovsky, 2014). TMs can counter-balance this possible bias through their organization-wide focus that allows them to translate MMs' change initiatives to fit into organization-wide strategic thrusts (Collier et al., 2004). Moreover, MMs usually lack the authority or legitimacy to introduce organization-wide changes (Day, 1994). As TMs have a more comprehensive view of the value chain, they can more swiftly pre-empt and react to bottlenecks during execution. Hence, the involvement of TMs might be crucial for efficient allocation of supporting resources (Raes et al., 2011). Thus, when TMs execute change initiated by MMs, employees may perceive that the concerns and ideas developed at other levels within the organization are taken seriously by TMs given the upward flow of ideas and TMs' willingness to adopt them (Burgelman, 1984). This perceived participation may increase receptivity to change by signalling principal support and sponsorship of the change (Noda and Bower, 1996). Thus, as the net-effect we expect that:

Hypothesis 3: Change initiated by middle managers and executed by top managers will be positively related to employee support for change.

Change Initiated and Executed by MMs

The configuration where MMs initiate and then execute the initiatives is characterized by high autonomy of those who are closest to the employees. Arguably, MMs have a better understanding of employees' perspectives and are better placed to gain their support for change and its integration into work processes (King and Zeithaml, 2001). In fact, employees may expect that if those who are closer to them are driving change and are executing it, employee concerns will be accommodated in the change initiative throughout its realization (Huy, 2002). As such, when MMs are highly involved in change, there is less chance of misinterpretation of ideas or confusion arising from translation losses across organizational levels (Balogun, 2007; Ouakouak et al., 2014). Consistency in communication will be high and likely trigger favourable attitudes (Beer and Eisenstat, 1996). Also, the messages regarding the change will be easier to understand and relatable because there is less information and power asymmetry between MMs and employees than between TMs and employees (Armenakis and Harris, 2002).

MMs often adopt a process-orientation when executing planned change due to their intra-organizational focus (Reitzig and Sorenson, 2013; Vuori and Huy, 2016). Because of the proximity, employees will more likely feel that they are in a position to provide input and thus increase their sense of participation, which has been linked to favourable

attitudes (Van Dyne and LePine, 1998). MMs as facilitators may be in a better position to absorb what additional information and skill-upgrades are needed by employees for them to feel empowered and have confidence in their ability to successfully realize the change (Balogun, 2003; Caldwell et al., 2004). Initiation by MMs may offer opportunities for proactive involvement in strategy processes for employees (Van Dyne and LePine, 1998), which usually entails positive attitudinal responses (Gopinath and Becker, 2000). It is worth noting that despite the favourable response expected, this configuration might make the change somewhat slower from an organizational perspective, and thus the overall effect may not be as pronounced as when TMs execute the change. However, employees might receive this moderate pace favourably, as it gives them the opportunity to make sense of the change gradually. Thus, in this role configuration we expect that:

Hypothesis 4: Change initiated and executed by middle managers will be positively related to employee support for change.

DATA AND METHODS

Research Design and Sample

We collected multi-respondent data from organizations undergoing substantive planned organizational change using networks of three Dutch management-training institutes. These organizations had enrolled several of their members as participants in change management modules provided through the network of management training institutes. The organizations represented were all rolling out a change plan of sufficient significance to warrant resources to be committed to upgrading the knowledge, skills, and tools of key organization members at different hierarchical levels (i.e., formal training of personnel was also a component of their change plans). Participants in the module were managers, frontline supervisors, or internal consultants/support staff; thus, participants reflected the varied internal stakeholder groups of the organization undergoing change. Participants were instructed to fill out one questionnaire themselves and encouraged to distribute several questionnaires among members of their organization they considered generally knowledgeable about the change. Over 3200 questionnaires were completed and returned in usable form, corresponding to 602 different organizations (average 5.29/organization; sd 3.75). Inter-rater scores (rw_g) for the variables used in the multivariate analyses ranged between 0.75 and 0.87 (James et al., 1993). These scores provide us with confidence in the inter-rater reliability of the research design.

Measures and Operationalizations

Our measures are based on two existing questionnaires on organizational change that have been extensively used and validated both for survey feedback in change processes in individual organizations and for large-scale survey research on organizational change (Bennebroek Gravenhorst, 2002; Bennebroek Gravenhorst et al., 2003).

Independent Variables

We used two questions to capture who took the initiative for change and who was involved in change execution. *Change initiation* relates to impetus for change, so who the respondent believed was primarily responsible for triggering the change initiative. *Change execution* relates to who the respondent believed was primarily responsible for driving day-to-day choices during the change process. Respondents could select corresponding actors for both these items from a non-exclusive list that included, top managers, middle managers, staff members, consultants, employees, regulators, boards of directors, and 'other'. To further clean the data, and in line with our theory, we also excluded cases that were not primarily executed by either TMs and/or MMs (e.g., external consultants; Heyden et al., 2013).

We also excluded cases where respondents may have indicated both TMs and MMs as initiators or executors, as this could introduce noise to the data. To further mitigate unobserved heterogeneity due to changes driven by different motives, we focused on responses that indicated they were undergoing extensive discretionary change (i.e., change processes that can be initiated within the latitude of action of both TMs and MMs; Finkelstein and Hambrick, 1990), excluding questionnaires from organizations that were undergoing mergers and acquisitions, crises, or mandated regulatory changes. This reduced the sample to around 2000 responses to be included in our subsequent analyses. Finally, we computed four categories corresponding to the TM-MM role configurations hypothesized. In our final sample analysed, 47.55 per cent were initiated and executed by TMs (Hypothesis 1), 28.14 per cent initiated by TMs and executed by MMs (Hypothesis 2), 3.14 per cent initiated by MMs and executed by TMs (Hypothesis 3), and 21.18 per cent initiated and executed by MMs (Hypothesis 4). This approach, next to non-systematic missing data that were excluded, further reduced the valid sample to 1795 observations within 468 organizations. Although these criteria are strict and reduced the usable sample from the larger dataset, it allowed us to test our hypotheses on the most applicable empirical domain corresponding to our theory based on a specific subset of our dataset. This approach, however, carries with it a note of caution that our findings are not intended to be generalized beyond the scope of these types of changes.

Dependent Variable

Our dependent variable 'employee support for change' was measured based on four items rated on a five-point Likert scale regarding perceived necessity of changes, contribution and pro-activeness of employees, the extent to which employees are willing to effectuate change, and employees' degree of enthusiasm for the change (Bennebroek Gravenhorst et al., 2003). Confirmatory factor analysis showed that these items loaded on a single dimension and average variance extracted was 63.82 per cent based on a principal component extraction (Ford et al., 1986). Cronbach's alpha indicated satisfactory reliability (0.81) and the scale was constructed based on the mean of the items.

Control Variables

We controlled for several key variables. First, *organizational size* in terms of employees (log transformed), given that larger organizations tend to have a different organizational

structure, more asymmetries of information, and fewer opportunities to interact than smaller organizations and may thus experience change differently (Raes et al., 2011). We also included dummies to control for unobserved industry effects (i.e., business, manufacturing, services, utilities and other regulated, and government units and NGOs) as well as the focus of the change, as changes aimed at market improvements or changes aimed at internal functions disrupt different capabilities and could elicit different attitudes from employees (Wilden and Gudergan, 2015). Respondents could select multiple applicable motives for change processes in question. As multiple responses were possible, we distinguished between the scope of *internally-focused changes* (i.e., implementing new technology, improving efficiency, increasing flexibility, restructuring business processes, and cost-cutting) and *market-focused changes* (i.e., improving innovativeness, competitive positioning, and increasing customer-orientation). This variable was calculated as the sum of items pertaining to each category as indicated by the respondent.

We also included scales that captured *goal clarity* to capture clarity of, and agreement about, the change goals and the realization of change goals. Four items on a five-point multi-item Likert scale posited, for instance, 'it is clear where the organization is going with the change,' with an average variance extracted 61.25 per cent on the respective factor and Cronbach's alpha of 0.79. We included two scales that capture the perceived management style during the change: *directive change style* to measure the extent to which the change process was being carried out with very little or no involvement of employees; and *participative change style* to measure the extent to which the change process was characterized by space for different opinions and employee input. Three items, each on a five-point Likert scale, posited, for instance, 'employees have little or no say in what happens during the change' and 'there is plenty of room for ideas from employee', respectively, for directive and participative change approaches. CFA corroborated the factor structure and Cronbach's alphas were 0.64 and 0.76 for directive and participative approach, respectively. All multi-item scales were computed based on the mean of the items.

As we are measuring perceptions, we also controlled for several potential respondent effects. We included *expected chance of success* of the change as those with low expectations have been shown to be more cynical in their evaluation of change-related variables (Reichers et al., 1997). We did so by asking respondents to indicate how they would estimate the percentage chance of success of the change initiative: (1) 0–10 per cent, (2) 11–20 per cent, (3) 21–30 per cent, (4) 31–40 per cent, (5) 41–50 per cent, (6) 51–60 per cent, (7) 61–70 per cent, (8) 71–80 per cent, (9) 81–90 per cent, or (10) 91–100 per cent. We controlled for whether the respondent was a *member of the change reference group* (i.e., respondents who were enrolled in the course and whom we viewed as potentially being more 'actively' involved in the change process) and further controlled for the *consequences for a respondent's position* to gauge the extent to which they felt their current position would be affected by the change, ranging from 1 = very negative to 5 = very positive, as anticipated harm and benefits constitute psychological reasons organizational members may have a priori attitudes supporting or resisting a particular change initiative (Cunningham et al., 2002). Finally, we included respondent *age* (interval scaled) as perceptions and attitudes towards change have been shown to vary with age (Bal et al., 2012).

Common Method Variance

We adopted two complementary approaches for diagnosing whether common method variance (CMV) was biasing our results (Podsakoff et al., 2003). First, we adopted the classical Harman single factor model to see whether there was a first ‘general’ factor that explains more than half of the total variance extracted. Factor analysis results indicate that the first factor did not capture the majority of the variance and each factor accounted for at least 62 per cent of the average variance extracted. Then, we adopted the approach advocated by Podsakoff et al. (2003) by modelling an unmeasured latent construct on all items, next to letting them load on their respective theoretical constructs. An unmeasured latent construct did not account for more than 1.89 per cent of average variance in the latent constructs. Therefore, we conclude that CMV does not appear to be biasing our results.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

We analyse our data using Generalized Estimating Equations (GEE) – which is an extension of the Generalized Linear Model that allows for non-independence of observations caused by nesting, clustering, repeated measures, and/or longitudinal observations (Ballinger, 2004; Echambadi et al., 2006). Recent applications with non-independent observations have attested to its versatility and robustness (Bogaert et al., 2012; Paeleman and Vanacker, 2015). We accounted for potentially correlated error terms (i.e., multiple respondents from the same organization) by specifying the GEE as a two-level model with individual observations nested within the organization. We assess the adequacy of our models based on Wald’s chi square (Zheng, 2000).

RESULTS

Table I shows the bivariate correlations for the variables considered in this study. As no anomalies were diagnosed from our correlation table, we proceeded to conduct our multivariate analyses in several stages (Table II). We first estimated a model with control variables only (Model 1), then corresponding models with control variables plus the specific parameter corresponding to each of our hypotheses, treating the remaining categories collectively as the reference group (Models 2–5). Although this approach is informative, to provide a more robust validation of our model given that the general reference group captures the remaining three role configurations without differentiation, we sought to estimate a model with the categories for the four TM-MM role configurations simultaneously. In order to draw conclusions about the four TM-MM role configurations hypothesized, we estimated the model without an intercept and include all categories (i.e., no reference category) in the model. Excluding the intercept and including all categories is one way of avoiding the ‘dummy variable trap’ while allowing for simultaneous inclusion of all categories.^[2] Inclusion of all variables in the final model did not change the pattern of results displayed in previous stages, and we base our interpretation on this model (Model 6).

Table I. Correlations^a

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)	(15)	(16)	(17)	(18)
(1) Employee support for change																		
(2) CI TM - CE TM	-0.08																	
(3) CI TM - CE MM	0.01	-0.08																
(4) CI MM - CE TM	0.02	-0.03	-0.01															
(5) CI MM - CE MM	0.08	-0.09	-0.03	-0.01														
(6) Market-focused change	0.09	0.04	0.02	-0.04	0.01													
(7) Internally-focused change	-0.08	0.04	0.02	0.05	0.00	0.14												
(8) Respondent age	0.03	0.00	0.04	0.00	0.01	0.03	0.08											
(9) Goal clarity	0.40	0.00	0.05	0.00	0.06	0.05	0.08	0.10										
(10) Directive change style	-0.35	0.05	-0.01	-0.01	-0.12	-0.07	0.06	-0.04	-0.30									
(11) Participative change style	0.43	-0.07	0.03	0.00	0.10	0.09	0.00	0.07	0.39	-0.62								
(12) Organization size	-0.10	-0.06	-0.02	0.01	-0.07	0.02	0.14	0.00	0.00	0.17	-0.20							
(13) Consequences for respondent	0.04	-0.07	-0.02	-0.03	-0.04	0.03	0.02	-0.06	-0.03	0.05	-0.06	0.02						
(14) Expected chance of success	0.31	-0.01	0.02	-0.07	0.03	0.04	0.01	-0.02	0.36	-0.25	0.26	-0.04	0.04					
(15) Member Chg. reference group	0.07	0.08	0.08	0.03	0.10	0.06	0.12	0.15	0.25	-0.17	0.18	0.08	-0.09	0.12				
(16) Business manufacturing	0.01	-0.02	0.00	0.05	0.00	0.00	0.03	0.01	0.05	-0.03	0.01	0.04	-0.02	0.05	-0.03			
(17) Services	0.04	0.03	0.01	-0.02	-0.01	0.05	-0.06	-0.15	-0.04	0.06	-0.10	-0.09	0.07	0.03	-0.10	-0.10		
(18) Utilities and regulated	0.02	-0.07	0.03	-0.01	0.03	0.08	-0.01	0.07	0.05	-0.03	0.04	0.08	-0.04	0.03	0.09	-0.06	-0.47	
(19) Government and NGO	-0.09	0.03	-0.04	0.03	-0.02	-0.11	0.02	0.09	-0.05	-0.02	0.05	0.04	-0.05	-0.10	0.06	-0.07	-0.53	-0.31

^aFor correlations: > |.04| p < .05; > |.05| p < .01; > |.07| p < .001.

Table II. GEE results for employee support for change^a

	(1)		(2)		(3)		(4)		(5)		(6)	
	<i>b</i>	(s.e.)	<i>b</i>	(s.e.)	<i>b</i>	(s.e.)	<i>b</i>	(s.e.)	<i>b</i>	(s.e.)	<i>b</i>	(s.e.)
Intercept	1.80	(0.21)***	1.81	(0.21)***	1.80	(0.21)***	1.77	(0.21)***	1.76	(0.20)***		
Government & NGO											0.12	(0.08)
Utilities and regulated											0.19	(0.08)*
Services	0.07	(0.05)	0.07	(0.05)	0.07	(0.05)	0.07	(0.05)	0.07	(0.05)	0.28	(0.08)***
Business manufacturing	0.15	(0.04)***	0.15	(0.04)***	0.15	(0.04)***	0.15	(0.04)***	0.15	(0.04)***	0.04	(0.11)
Member Chg. reference group	-0.03	(0.08)	-0.03	(0.08)	-0.03	(0.08)	-0.05	(0.08)	-0.03	(0.08)	-0.05	(0.04)
Expected chance of success	-0.04	(0.04)	-0.04	(0.04)	-0.04	(0.04)	-0.04	(0.04)	-0.04	(0.04)	0.10	(0.01)***
Consequences for respondent	0.06	(0.01)***	0.06	(0.01)***	0.06	(0.01)***	0.06	(0.01)***	0.06	(0.01)***	0.06	(0.01)***
Organization size	0.03	(0.01)**	0.03	(0.01)**	0.03	(0.01)**	0.04	(0.01)**	0.04	(0.01)**	0.10	(0.06) [†]
Participative change style	0.03	(0.06)	0.03	(0.06)	0.03	(0.06)	0.03	(0.06)	0.04	(0.06)	0.28	(0.02)***
Directive change style	0.17	(0.02)***	0.17	(0.02)***	0.17	(0.02)***	0.17	(0.02)***	0.17	(0.02)***	0.02	(0.02)
Goal clarity	-0.18	(0.03)***	-0.18	(0.03)***	-0.18	(0.03)***	-0.18	(0.03)***	-0.17	(0.03)***	0.31	(0.03)***
Respondent age	0.27	(0.03)***	0.27	(0.03)***	0.27	(0.03)***	0.27	(0.03)***	0.27	(0.02)***	0.02	(0.01)**
Market-focused change	0.00	(0.01)	0.00	(0.01)	0.00	(0.01)	0.00	(0.01)	0.00	(0.01)	0.05	(0.02)**
Internally-focused change	0.04	(0.02)*	0.04	(0.02)*	0.04	(0.02)*	0.04	(0.02)*	0.04	(0.02)*	-0.04	(0.02)***
Hypothesis 1: CI TM - CE TM	-0.05	(0.02)**	-0.05	(0.02)**	-0.05	(0.02)**	-0.05	(0.02)**	-0.05	(0.02)**	0.04	(0.04)
Hypothesis 2: CI TM - CE MM			-0.02	(0.03)	0.00	(0.08)					0.01	(0.08)
Hypothesis 3: CI MM - CE TM							0.45	(0.22)*			0.59	(0.23)**
Hypothesis 4: CI MM - CE MM									0.18	(0.08)*	0.25	(0.08)***
Wald's	333.48	***	331.94	***	333.25	***	337.57	***	336.04	***	479.02	***

^a N = 1, 795; Subject effects: 468. Model 1 is model with control variables only. Models 2-5 estimated with alternating reference groups for parameters corresponding to Hypothesis 1-Hypothesis 4 and 'Government and NGO' used as reference category for industry controls. Model 6 is estimated without intercept to allow for simultaneous inclusion of all categories for the parameters corresponding to Hypothesis 1-Hypothesis 4 and is used for final interpretation.

For our first hypothesis (Hypothesis 1), we expected that change initiated and executed by TMs would be negatively related to employee support for change. Findings reported in Model 6 in Table II indicate a non-significant coefficient ($b = 0.04$), thus not providing support for this hypothesis. For Hypothesis 2, we expected a positive relation between change initiated by TMs and executed by MMs, however, although in the predicted direction, this coefficient was not significant ($b = 0.01$). We found statistical support for Hypothesis 3, in which we expected that change initiated by MMs and executed by TMs would be positively related to support for change ($b = 0.59$; $p < .01$). Our final hypothesis (Hypothesis 4) was also supported, where we expected a positive relation between change initiated and executed by MMs and employee support for change ($b = 0.25$; $p < .001$).

DISCUSSION

In this study we have examined how employee support for change varies in relation to different ways TMs and MMs can feature in organizational change. We have advanced a role-configurational approach to propose that although change initiation and change execution are key roles in the orchestration of change, both TM and MM can initiate or execute change – albeit with different approaches to how they enact these roles. We have shown that these TM-MM role configurations (i.e., the specific pairing of who initiates and who executes) are a useful vantage point for integrating key insights from top-down and bottom-up perspectives on change. Our findings based on survey data from 1795 respondents in 468 organizations undergoing change show that top-down change does not engender above-average level of employee support, regardless of whether the change is executed by TMs or MMs. However, employee support for change is boosted when change is initiated by MMs and executed by either TMs or MMs, with the strongest positive attitudes being evoked when MMs take on the initiation and TMs take on the execution – although this is the rarest configuration observed in our sample. Our theorizing and findings have important implications and contributions.

Implications and Contributions

Rethinking managerial change roles. Although people's roles represent expectations associated with social positions (Fondas and Stewart, 1994; Hales, 1986), and therefore facilitate continuity of behaviours (Biddle, 1986; Floyd and Lane, 2000), they can also be loosely and dynamically structured (Mantere, 2008). Our main findings reveal that change characterized by MMs initiating change tends to receive the highest support among the workforce, especially when change is executed by TMs. This finding implies that TMs and MMs have distinctive role-taking strengths and weaknesses that are most valuable in particular configurations. For instance, capitalizing on MMs strengths for initiating change (e.g., proximity to employees, deep knowledge of core technologies) with the strengths of TMs for contextualization, and for efficient and legitimate allocation and redistribution of resources, seems to engender the strongest support for change from employees.

Our theory and findings accentuate a blurring distinction between ‘thinking’ and ‘doing’ often proliferated in scholarship and management education through dichotomized labels like ‘strategy formulation’ versus ‘tactical implementation’ (Hales, 1986; Herrmann and Nadkarni, 2014; Pinto and Prescott, 1990). Conventional thinking is still dominated by models of change assuming that TMs initiate change and either assume delegation of its execution to MMs (Balogun and Johnson, 2005; Huy et al., 2014; Lüscher and Lewis, 2008) or do not explain how the theorized change comes about (Westley, 1990). We nuance TMs’ and MMs’ differential agency in taking on various change roles (Mantere, 2008). Our findings show that when these roles are enacted in direct contrast with ‘traditional’ views on TMs’ and MMs’ roles (Fondas and Stewart, 1994), the likelihood of generating support throughout the organization is the highest. We especially underscore that there might be relative pros and cons inherent in the distinctive features of TMs and MMs that need to be theorized for understanding how they enact different change roles. By distinguishing between change initiation and execution as conceptually distinct roles, arguing that both TMs and MMs can take on either role, and embracing the core strengths and weaknesses of TMs and MMs in enacting these roles, we offer one way of clarifying the debate on how managers across hierarchical levels influence organizational change.

Effectiveness of top-down and bottom-up perspectives. Our theory and findings support the view that change agents can be found at many levels in organizations (Denis et al., 2001; Plowman et al., 2007). Although studies focusing on TMs have made commendable calls for inclusion of MMs (Carpenter et al., 2004; Menz, 2012), even recent efforts embracing these calls by co-theorizing the roles of both TM and MMs tend to assume that change initiation cascades *downwards* (see Heyden et al., 2015b; Knight and Paroutis, 2016; Thomas et al., 2011) with less emphasis on how change may also spring *upwards*. We have introduced the notion of TM-MM change role configurations as one vantage point for interpreting and consolidating these complementary streams of thought, embracing insights from both. Our findings suggest that there is value in simultaneously theorizing about the different roles of TMs and MMs and acknowledging how their differences can be configured for synergistic advantage, instead of focusing just on TMs or MMs or even blaming each other for being unenthusiastic (MMs) or unwilling to listen (TMs). As a conceptual lens, our role configurational approach resonates with role based approaches to complex organizational phenomena (e.g., Järventie-Thesleff and Tienari, 2016; Matta et al., 2014; Vandenberghe et al., 2014) and more specifically, role agency (Floyd and Lane, 2000; Mantere, 2008), as well as configurational theorizing (Busenbark et al., 2015; Meyer et al., 1993) to develop novel insights that add to understanding the role of different managerial echelons in organizational change.

Our findings also indicate that the most supported configuration is the *least* common one (MM initiation, TM execution) in our sample. This attests to the inherently counter-intuitive nature of implementing this role configuration in practice. Given the high failure rate of change processes (Hickson et al., 2003), often attributed to a lack of support and understanding at lower levels (Huy et al., 2014), our study underscores the need to further develop and empirically validate emergent theory on the interplaying and dynamic roles of TMs and MMs in organizational change. Developing an

understanding of the strengths and weaknesses that TMs and MMs bring to the table, without being overly constrained by traditional beliefs and expectations about these actors' roles, is an important step in this area.

Cultivating employee support for change. Our cross-echelon insights into organizational change are valuable for contemporary organizations given the increasing pressure for change and need for involvement of the whole workforce (Kotter, 2014) amid rising uncertainty and accelerated pace of development in many industries (Teece, 2014). A main focus of our study – eliciting employee support and enthusiasm for change – is a key responsibility for TMs and MMs to realize change plans (Huy, 2002; Huy et al., 2014; Rafferty et al., 2013). Our multi-echelon perspective (i.e., including TMs and MMs and employees) offers insights into how employees respond to 'who does what' in organizational change. As a result, we provide insights into why change may unfold as planned and why some change initiatives fail (i.e., failure to foster employee support). Our findings provide a platform for further work on examining the contingencies that may shape such cascading effects (Yang et al., 2010). It is surely worthwhile for organizations to mobilize support for change among employees and to motivate them to pursue organization-wide interests. Employees are not resistant to change by default; but they may vary in their responses to roles played by TMs and MMs in organizational change. Overstepping this conceptual hurdle allows us more latitude for understanding how we can better tap into the non-managerial workforce to realize organization-wide change (Ford et al., 2008; Oreg, 2003; Piderit, 2000).

Managerial implications. Our theory and results bear important implications for directing the attention of future research on change management. Our managerial implications speak to both TMs and MMs. We find that when change is characterized by traditional views (i.e., change initiated and executed from the top), it has no significant effect on employee support for change. This seems to turn the change premises of traditional top-down perspectives (e.g., lack of employee understanding and engagement) into self-fulfilling prophecies. MMs may feel forced to execute and do strictly what is expected of them. As a result, MMs may fail to engage in extra role behaviours necessary to actively 'think along' and inspire employees (Heyden et al., 2015b). This may translate into a more 'clinical' interpretation of the change process at lower levels and reduce support among employees.

Our study's results imply that planned organizational change needs to be understood from a multi-echelon perspective – leveraging complementarities between TMs and MMs. In contrast to existing research portraying the 'other' group as a barrier (Dutton et al., 1997; Guth and MacMillan, 1986; Huy et al., 2014), we advocate more open-minded approaches to rolling out planned change that turn differences between TMs and MMs into fruitful opportunities. The good news is that it is possible to mobilize support among employees and to motivate them to pursue organization-wide interests (Glaser et al., 2015). However, TMs and MMs need to be mindful of their co-dependence, the change roles they embrace, and how they embrace these roles. Failing to embrace this opportunity can impair, deviate, or retard the realization of change plans. Considering our findings, it may be worthwhile for TMs to encourage MMs to

initiate change that eventually could permeate the whole organization (De Clercq et al., 2011). TMs can help MMs make sense of the initiative at hand from an organizational perspective, and can reframe and selectively stimulate activities during the change process, for instance, through validation or provision of resources (Fourné et al., 2014) and by promoting the development of change platforms to allow MMs to initiate change (Hamel and Zanini, 2014). Organizations can also nurture the requisite skills through targeted management development programs that focus on MMs' idea selection, framing, and upward communication as well as TMs' execution abilities.

Future research avenues and limitations. We offer several promising research avenues towards developing a comprehensive theory of how TMs and MMs combine to drive organizational change. First, our findings beg for further investigation of the performance outcomes resulting from the different role configurations. A fruitful avenue would be to examine and consolidate the micro-processes through which TMs and MMs can actually make different role configurations work. Indeed, research in this area is gaining significant momentum, albeit in diverse niches, such as quality of change communications (Boselie and Koene, 2010; Vuori and Huy, 2016), shared professional identities to stimulate extra-role behaviours (Heyden et al., 2015a), regulatory foci of middle managers and their search behaviors (Ahmadi et al., 2017), a shared interpretative context to cope with the paradoxical change demands (Knight and Paroutis, 2016), strategic consensus involving different management levels (Tarakci et al., 2014), and integrative bargaining between TMs and MMs (Raes et al., 2011). Our study on TM-MM role configurations adds an important conceptual frame that allows us to organize, develop, and critically evaluate this nascent literature and question extant assumptions regarding the roles that TMs and MMs play in organizational change.

Second, we encourage the need for understanding antecedent factors that may influence why TMs and MMs take on different roles (e.g., underperformance, career aspirations, environmental conditions) as well as how different properties of change (e.g., type of change) moderate the relation between ensuing role configurations and other possible outcomes (e.g., change success, actual employee behaviours). We thus recommend expanding our understanding of organization, group, and individual level factors – which can include factors such as values (Gentry et al., 2013), behaviours (Tuncdogan et al., 2016), personality (Furnham, 2016), succession (Georgakakis and Ruigrok, 2016), intra-echelon role differentiation (Buyl et al., 2011; Heyden et al., 2015c), and rules (Simons, 2013) – moderate the relationships between different role configurations and employee support for organizational change. This could reveal complementarities, but also substitution effects and further enrich our understanding of the various pathways to planned organizational change (Birkinshaw and Ansari, 2015). In addition, enriching our model with deeper insights about leadership styles and leadership behaviours across echelons could be informative (Deichmann and Stam, 2015; O'Reilly et al., 2010).

Third, taking a temporal perspective would allow for disentangling the dynamic nature of exchanges between TMs and MMs. This could be related to goal clarity for different units and the organization as a whole and allow for developing a more comprehensive understanding of why some change projects are able to better leverage the allocated resources across business units. We welcome more research on how these actor

groups can interact effectively to enable adaptability at both the organization and local unit levels (Glaser et al., 2015; Van Doorn et al., 2015). We suggest tracing direct sources of variation in actors' behaviours and empirical assessment over time of the effectiveness of interpersonal and information exchange processes, that link TMs and MMs in change initiatives. Such perspectives may inform how TMs and MMs enact the roles they undertake. Future research may uncover what TMs may be able to learn from MMs and vice versa in enacting change roles. This should also be reflected in the (perhaps joint) training and development of these key actors.

Fourth, MMs' change initiation can lead to the convergence of MMs' and organizational goals (Tannenbaum and Massarik, 1950) given that MMs are known to care about their subordinates (Huy, 2002). This creates a fascinating linkage between strategy process research and agency theory in terms of providing a mechanism for aligning interests. This linkage has been ignored as far as agency theorists tend to assume self-interest of managers (Eisenhardt, 1989). Thus, future research could benefit from more in-depth studies about how goals and incentives converge when organizational change emerges at lower levels and the management control mechanisms required (Reimer et al., 2016a,b). This research could explain convergence among organizational, unit-level, and personal goals.

Our study has several limitations. Our empirical investigation is set in the context of firms undergoing substantive planned organizational change. Although we control for the locus of change, future studies could benefit from refining not only the intra-, but also extra-organizational contingencies that may shape the roles of TMs and MMs in organizational change – and that may provide further insights into when top-down and when bottom-up approaches have their limits. Our analyses are based on planned organizational change in Dutch organizations. While these findings may resonate with other European contexts, they may be less relevant in other contexts that merit further investigation.

In addition, despite having multiple respondents per organization, which is widely encouraged as a best practice in survey research (e.g., Eddleston et al., 2008), we relied on the judgement of the members of the change reference group to determine who were knowledgeable about the change process in question. As we have established the relevance of different hierarchical levels, future studies could consider a stratified sampling approach to ensure insights are proportionally obtained from predefined expectations about different organizational levels or functions. Future work based on longitudinal research designs can draw on objective indicators to supplement self-reported data for a clearer picture of focal change processes and their consequences. Another avenue to add important boundary conditions to our work on the implications of different role configurations is looking at how different role configurations are moderated by different specific properties of change processes, for instance, by making distinctions between exploratory and exploitative processes (e.g., Kwee et al., 2011). The role of environmental moderators could also help refine our baseline theory, as well as expand the theoretical focus beyond TMs and MMs by considering, for instance, the roles of boards (Heyden et al., 2015a), regulators and competitors (Ansari et al., 2016), and/or external consultants (Heyden et al., 2013), and their approaches to enacting different change roles. We believe all of these are exciting and fruitful areas for further research into how

TMs and MM's collectively matter for our understanding of organizational change processes and their outcomes.

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NOTES

- [1] TMs comprise the managers highest up in the hierarchy (Carpenter et al., 2004), whereas MM's are situated below TMs, but above supervisory levels (Wooldridge et al., 2008).
- [2] The most common approach to avoid the 'dummy variable trap' is to drop one of the categories and interpret the marginal effect of the other categories *relative* to the reference (dropped) category. Another equally viable approach would be to drop the intercept and estimate all the categories in the model (see e.g., Baltagi, 2011, p. 81). The preference is typically based on the more theoretically meaningful interpretation, but should produce the same pattern of results and overall conclusion (see Hu et al., 2016 for a recent application). This approach is not new and has been used, for instance, by Fombrun and Zajac (1987, p. 41) who note in their study where they test three categories '... the use of three dummy variables rather than two dummy variables and an intercept term – presents no problems. As Maddala (1977, p. 34) noted: "If we do not introduce a constant term in the regression equation, we can define a dummy for each group". The typical procedure of dropping one of the dummy variables is simply "more convenient", according to Judge et al. (1982, p. 484)'. As our aim at this stage in the literature is not to say whether one configuration is 'better', but rather highlight that change characterized by each of the four TM-MM role configurations may elicit different levels of employee support for change, we believe that showing all categories in one model (i.e., Model 6 in Table II) is most intuitive to interpret. We thank an anonymous senior editor for encouraging us to clarify this approach.

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