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Middle management a reinforcement of change?

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Abstract
Organizations face a highly competitive and continuously evolving business environment.As a result, many companies have been looking for ways to improve their business: that is, providing better services at lower cost, improving customer satisfaction, and staying competitive, in which the successful management of change is crucial to survive and succeed. While organisations often deliberately try to plan change to make it more manageable, organizational realities tend to be more messy and noisy than can be effectively planned for. The findings arising from this essay suggest that middle managers play an important role in facilitating change in organizations. They also suggest that middle managers face major challenges in the organization-wide implementation and adoption of CI including possible resistance by middle management itself.There has, is and probably always will be discourse around middle management and its role in organizational change, where the debate generally evolves around whether middle management can be seen as a strategic asset for change or a blockage to change.

***Keywords**: middle management; organizational change; continuous improvement*

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I. Introduction

The current economic climate can be described as uncertain, competitive and rapidly changing (Al-Haddad and Kotnour 2015; Burgelman et al. 2018; Lleo et al. 2017). As such, the environment of organizations is becoming increasingly complex, dynamic and global (Hammer 2004; Lee et al. 2012; Neilson et al. 2014; Steiber and Alänge 2016) and organizations are therefore constantly trying to adapt to these ever-changing conditions (e.g. Birkinshaw et al. 2008; Saha et al. 2017; Wagner et al. 2019).

These challenges also hold for the financial services industry (Ensslin et al. 2015; Gupta et al. 2016; Zaitseva et al. 2014). To say that the financial sector is changing is an understatement, as banks, insurance companies, fund managers and pension funds continue to experience exciting times (Baker and Dellaert 2018; Riva and Pilotti 2018; Thangavelu and Findlay 2010). Banks, in particular, play a central role in the world economy (Niepmann and Schmidt-Eisenlohr 2017), since they hold the savings of the public and finance the development of business and trade. This became clear in the economic and financial crisis of 2008,(Asteriou and Spanos 2019; Kudlyak and Sanchez 2017) which underpinned the importance of good bank performance (Bijlsma et al. 2015; Fethi and Pasiouras 2010).

In addition, banks are facing increased competition from technology companies outside the traditional financial sector (Salah et al. 2019) which are offering various financial technologies (fintech) and other services (e.g. Boot 2016; Cocco et al. 2017; Giungato et al. 2017). This may make it more difficult to offer financial services profitably in the long run. Financial institutions therefore have to adjust their business models and strategies and improve their cost-income ratio (Antounet al. 2018). In this respect, the pursuit of efficiency (Assaf et al. 2019) continues to be most important for financial institutions (Duncan and Elliott 2004;Tornjanski et al. 2017).

One of the most widely adopted Continuous Improvement (CI) approaches is Lean, aimed at creating customer value and eliminating waste in operational and other processes (Alefari et al. 2017; De la Vega-Rodríguez et al 2018; Womack and Jones 2015). CI practices such as Lean have the potential to position financial institutions for long-term success (Bakri 2019; Vashishth et al. 2019). By implementing Lean, organizations have a business model that is efficient, effective and sustainable, thereby offering the potential of greater flexibility and profitability moving forward (Jenkins et al. 2011; Khan et al. 2019).

However, implementing Lean (or any other CI method) is a challenging process. Efforts to implement CI methods such as Lean are characterized by high failure rates (Holmemo and Ingvaldsen 2016; Taleghani 2010). Achieving sustainable improvement often proves to be difficult (Bateman 2005). Studies in both industrial and service-oriented organizations demonstrate that any (initial) results arising from such projects are often not sustained (Bortolotti et al. 2015; Found and Harvey 2007).

In the remainder of this essay, we conduct a broader exploration of middle managers role in change and especially in change initiatives such as CI. We conclude this essay with some reflections on middlemanagement and CI.

II. Middle managers

A broad range of studies show that middle managers are important for organizations when it comes to change management (Dawson 2019;Heyden et al 2020; Tabrizi 2014), formulating strategy (Floyd and Wooldridge 1994; Huy 2001; Tarakci et al. 2018) and driving performance (Currie and Procter 2005; Mair 2017). To investigate the role of the middle manager it is useful to briefly look at what is meant by a middle manager. We will apply the definition of Huy (2001, p. 73): “Any manager two levels below the CEO and one level above line managers”. Middle managers hold a unique position in an organization. They are close to the daily operations but far enough away to see the bigger picture (Huy 2001).

As Huy (2001) argues, middle managers play an important role in facilitating change in organizations. They have an important role in disseminating knowledge widely throughout the organization and work as mediators between day-to-day operations and strategy (Engle et al. 2017; Floyd and Wooldridge 2000; Nonaka 1994). Increasing productivity is directly related to creative and mainly innovative skills of the middle manager (Moss Kanter 1982). Middle managers do not have to be extraordinary individuals, but have to share a number of characteristics: comfortable with change, clarity on direction, thoroughness, participative management style, persistence and discretion (Tabrizi 2014; Tinline and Cooper 2016).

Yet, in recent decades, the role of the middle manager has changed (Gratton 2016; Haneberg 2010; Osterman 2008). Constant reengineering of organizations, increasing automation of work and the impact of IT have diminished the number of middle managers in many organizations dramatically (Birkenshaw 2018; Dopson and Stewart 1993; North and Kumta 2018). Downsizing has also led to reduced job security and increased work pressure, because the remaining middle managers need to work harder and longer and have a larger span of control (McCann et al. 2008; Robyn and Dunkerley 1999). Nonetheless, middle managers remain the critical interface between top management and operations (Burgelman 1994; Floyd and Wooldridge 1997; Hermkens 2020) and academic work continues to emphasize the valuable contributions they can make to organizations (Balogun and Johnson 2004; Rouleau and Balogun 2011).

It should not be underestimated that the function of middle managers is a difficult one (Hermkens and Romme 2020; Stoker and de Korte 2001). It is the key position between the shop floor and higher level management: on the one hand middle managers have to translate strategy and on the other hand they need to pay attention to the day-to-day problems on the shop floor. There is a constant struggle between the policy of the company and running the actual business and producing/selling products or services (Uyterhoeven 1989). Middle managers have an important role in disseminating knowledge widely throughout the organization and work as mediators between day-to-day operations and strategy (Birken et al. 2018; Floyd and Wooldridge 2000; Nonaka 1994). Middle managers have to be constantly alert in a world in which cutting budgets and lifecycle management are a true art form: cost cutting, more efficiency and in the end delivering the same or even more (Stoker 2006). Although some people believe that middle managers are just “passing through” on their way to top management positions, it is important to realize that most companies need middle managers who are there to stay for the long run (Anicich and Hirsh 2017).

III. Continuous improvement

Organizations today constantly need to uphold quality at low cost, reduce waste (Bhuiyan et al. 2006), maintain their competitive position and safeguard their survival (Lleo et al. 2017). Much of this can be achieved through the implementation of CI.

CI is defined here as a culture of sustained improvement of products, services or processes, aimed at reducing or even eliminating waste in all organizational systems and processes, which requires employee involvement and teamwork involving all organizational participants (e.g. Bessant and Caffyn 1997; Bessant et al. 1994;McLean et al. 2017). CI is increasingly considered to be an important component to more radical, step-change forms of innovation (Bessant et al. 2001).

Before we continue, it is good to look at what is meant by a CI culture. This is easier said than done:in the world of organizational development and operational excellence, concepts associated with a CI culture can have a wide variety of meanings and interpretations (Angelis et al. 2011). These concepts involve, for example: customer focus,employee commitment,employee engagement, value creation, waste reduction,conceptual learning, and(Lean) leadership (Bicheno 2008; Mann 2009).

Moreover, creating a CIculture is about getting everyone to see and embrace CI.This can be done bycreating your own success stories;creating awareness of the need to constantly pursue improvements;openly communicating about process inefficiencies and other CI issues; using visual management tools; and empowering people to experiment (e.g. Chandrasekaran and Toussaint 2019; Emiliani 2003; Hines 2010). As such,a good CI culture implies it is natural to solve a problem directly and structurally. Such a culture makes processes increasingly reliable and anchors the focus on process efficiency and product quality in the organization (Liker 2004).

In recent years, CI has evolved from its original focus on the application of CI in manufacturing processes, to the entire organization of manufacturing firms as well as service firms (Carlborg et al. 2013; Hasle et al. 2012; Koval et al. 2019). Moreover, as productivity in the service sector is lagging behind the productivity in the manufacturing sector to quite some extent (May 2005), a growing number of CI intiatives such as Lean has been observed in the service industry (Ahlstrom 2005; Swank 2003; Vashishth et al. 2019). Recent work shows that there is an increase in the use of Lean and other CI methods in the financial services industry (Hirzel et al. 2017; Leite and Vieira 2015; Leyer and Moormann 2014).

Despite its increasing popularity, many organizations fail to produce significant results when implementing Lean and other CI methods (Hines et al. 2018; Jasti and Kodali 2015; McLean et al. 2017). Efforts inmaking process improvements stick in the organizational culture often break down because people revert to their old ways of working (Bateman and David 2002). Moreover, it appears that the implementation of Lean is not successful because (middle) managers do not fully understand what the organization will look like after the transformation followed by the implementation of Lean principles (Bortolotti and Romano 2012; Durakovic et al. 2018; Gurumurthy and Kodali 2011). Although increasingly more attention is paid to Lean and other CI methods within financial service organizations (Delgado et al. 2010; Gupta et al. 2016), little is known about what may drive or hinder their success in this sector (Leyer and Moormann 2014).

IV. Organisational change

It can be argued that the successful management of change is crucial to any organization in order to survive and succeed in a highly competitive and continuously evolving business environment (Burnes 2011; By 2005; Gjerde and Alvesson 2019). Since the 1990s, high failure rates of organizational change attempts have been observed (Al-Haddad and Kotnour 2015; Ashkenas 2013; Beer and Nohria 2000; Burke 2011). In addition, it can be noticed that there are only few change processes that have been either a complete success or a complete failure; most change efforts are in between, though they may be perceived as unsuccessful rather than as successful (Beer and Nohria 2000; Kotter 1995; Varney 2017). Looking at these results, one can argue that organizational change is complex. Therefore, there is a strong need for studies that provide insight into the complexity of organizational change, and particularly the management and leadership of change (Higgs and Rowland 2005; Jacobs et al. 2013; Pettigrew et al. 2001).

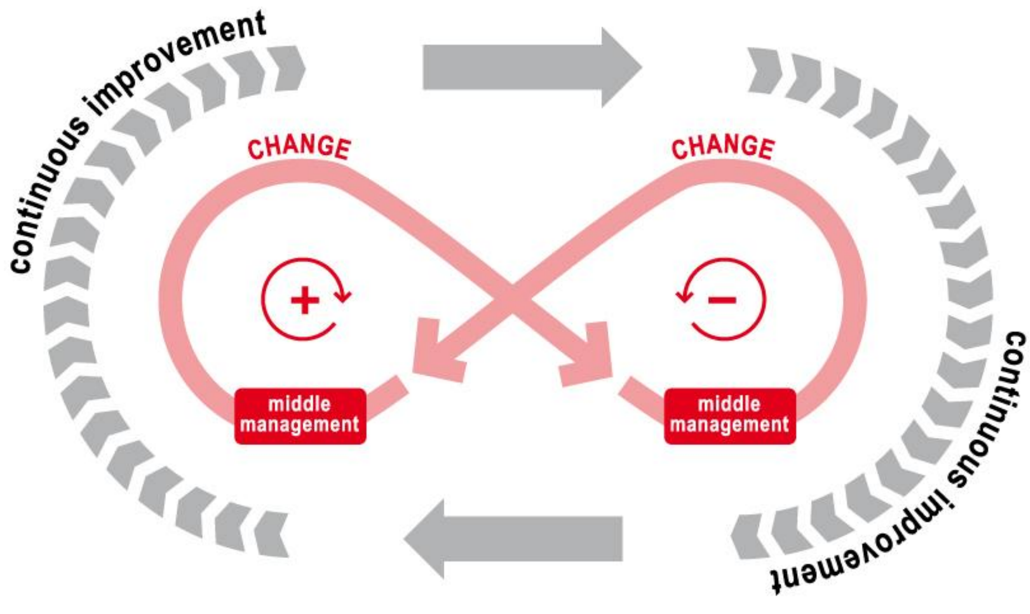

Figure 1: A positive or negative reinformcement of change

Without pretending to be complete, the above figure shows the interaction of middle management with change. Middle management can be seen as as a part of the organization that can make an important contribution (Osterman, 2008; Wooldridge et al. 2008) or as a bureaucratic barrier (Hammer andChampy 1993).

Middle managers can play an important role in facilitating change (figure 1) in organizations (Dawson 2019), through their creative and innovative skills, informal network and knowledge about what motivates employees (Huy 2002; Moss Kanter 1982; Realin and Cataldo 2011; Tabrizi 2014). They have value-adding ideas for improvement and tend to have a big informal network within the organization (Groskovs and Ulhøi 2019; Rost et al. 2019), which can help to strike a balance between continuity and change. They have an unique position representing a bridge between top managers and employees (Huy 2001) using their knowledge of the operation and their access to top management (Herzing and Jimmieson 2006). Middle managers play an important role in disseminating knowledge widely throughout the organization and work as mediators between day-to-day operations and strategy (Floyd and Wooldridge 2000; Nonaka, 1994).In the context of organizational changes, middle managers appear to be particularly important (change) agents in two phases: in the pre-implementation phase, when they can help senior management to enhance the feasibility of the intended change as well as to improve the proposed communication strategy; and in the implementation phase when they can assist employees in adapting to, and capitalizing on, the organizational change (Herzig andJimmieson 2006).

At the same time, if middle managers think negatively (figure 1) about a particular change, they may actively, though not always visibly, block and resist the change (Balogun 2003; Fenton-O'Creevy 1998; Neumann et al. 2019).It is important that middle managers understand the purpose of the change, otherwise they have the tendency to actively block change and create resistance(Guth and Maclillan 1986). Middle managers can have a negative impact and they may slow down decision-making (Fenton-O’Creevy, 1998). Stoker and de Korte (2001) argue that the position of middle managers is a difficult one: whereas middle managers are responsible for translating strategic change initiatives to daily operations they also have to attend to prevailing problems on the shop floor. Therefore, they face the constant struggle between strategy and business operations (Uyterhoeven 1989). Even in the face of constant pressure to cut costs and increase efficiency, middle managers are expected to deliver the same operational performance (Stoker 2006), which may hinder the long-term implementation of continuous improvement initiatives such as Lean (Sim and Rogers 2009).

V. Overal reflection

When CI related change initiatives such as total quality management, Lean, Six Sigma, reengineering, scorecards, downsizing, outsourcing, and "cultural renewal” are examined, it becomes evident that some companies profited from implementing these methods, whereas others experienced massive fiascos (Kotter 1996; McLean et al. 2017). Implementing CI appears to be a challenging process and demands substantial organizational changes and commitment of the people involved (Bhuiyan et al. 2006; Drew et al. 2004). The success (or failure) of CI, therefore, largely depends on the people responsible for implementing the method. This includes managers and employees at various organizational levels, including top management and middle management (Fine et al. 2008). Effective change links different types of improvement efforts, strengthens employee involvement, increases the focus on the customer and improves and manages work processes (Moran and Brightman 2000). Middle managers link the ideas from top management with those of the shop floor (Burgelman 1994; Huy and Guo 2017; Tarakci et al. 2018; Van der Weide and Wilderom 2006). They must be able to filter information properly and translate it to the right level (Elliott et al. 2019; Sethi 1999). Hence middle management must be used as a key in facilitating change (Burgelman 1983; Holmemo and Ingvaldsen 2016; Huy 2002).

Thus, to make change successful, buy-in needs to exist in the entire organization, from the highest level of management to the shop floor (Simmons et al. 2010; Boyle et al. 2011). The implementation process requires explicit support from management (Achanga et al. 2006; O’Rourke 2005; Fryer et al. 2013), suggesting that top management should not only show commitment, it should also be active in implementing and communicating the change in the entire organization (Rentes et al. 2010; Simmons et al. 2010; Näslund 2013).

The middle management echelon itself is subject to change (Anicich and Hirsh 2017; Han et al. 2014). The fact that middle managers themselves may also be subject to change is a phenomenon that has been largely neglected in the organizational change literature (Oreg et al. 2011). If a middle manager wants to be able to contribute to the change, it may also require that s/he reviews his own behavior and adjusts it. In this respect, middle managers can play a key role by showing exemplary behavior and leadership or not, in a way that helps propagate the change or not in the organization (e.g. Galbraith 2018; Lam et al. 2015; Van Assen 2018). This can result in the fact that a positive reinforcement goes over into a negative one or vise versa (figure 1). To stimulate positive reinforcement, access to adequate development and training opportunities for middle managers is important here (Abugre and Adebola 2015; Jørgensen et al. 2007), as is the individual ability to change. In practice, these conditions often appear to be missing (Griffith et al. 2019; McKinney et al. 2013; Zenger and Folkman 2014).

VI. Closing remarks

There has, is and always be discourse around middle management.For many years, there has been a discussion about the role of the middle management in implementing change (Hermkens and Romme 2020).We can see middle management as a strategic asset to change or as a blockage (e.g. Balogun, 2003; Tabrizi 2014). Middle management can be seen as part of the organization that can have an important contribution (Marichal et al 2020; Osterman, 2008; Wooldridge et al., 2008), or as a bureaucratic barrier (Hammer and Champy 1993;Neumann et al. 2019). Given that the unique role and position of middle managers may enable or hinder organizational change, it is valuable for organisations to understand how middle managers influence in the implementation and success of continuous improvement initiatives.

Middle managers play an important role in the success of an implementation and in embedding changes within the organization (Heyden et al. 2020). I also expect this discussion to continue in the coming years, about key questions such as: do we continue to need middle managers and what is their added value? By means of this essay, I seekto contribute to this discourse.

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