

## **What about the Middle Man? The Impact of Middle Level Managers on Organizational Learning**

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### **Abstract**

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Researchers have explored the relationship between upper echelon leadership and organizational learning in certain settings, namely growth and consistency (Reese, 2006). Researchers continue to explore the various relationships between upper echelon leaders or top management teams (TMT) and organizational learning because the TMT are the people responsible for the allocation of resources and creating a culture that promotes employee training, employee development, teambuilding, and employee advancement. This research proposes a qualitative study in the health care and transportation fields of mid-level managers. The authors seek to understand what was communicated to mid-level managers during a time of change, how that impacted their attitudes, and in turn, what if any individual learning they gained during the time of change. We also seek to identify specific learning that the individual was able to share with their teams within the non-top management teams, and whether they observed those learning being put into policy by upper management. We conclude the perception of middle managers on improving organizational learning is vital to the overall concept

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### **Introduction and Literature Review**

Scholars and practitioners continue to argue that organizational learning is the only sustainable competitive advantage that a firm possesses. Researchers have explored the relationship between upper echelon leadership and organizational learning in certain settings, namely growth and consistency (Reese, 2006). Researchers continue to explore the various relationships between upper echelon leaders or top management teams (TMT) and organizational learning because the TMT are the people responsible for the allocation of resources and creating a culture that promotes employee training, employee development, teambuilding, and employee advancement. Further, researchers have examined the process by which strategic decisions are made (Papadakis & Barwise, 1998). These researchers assume that strategic leadership is comprised of top management or upper echelon leaders. Scholars suggest that organizational learning is a key component for firms hoping to create a sustainable competitive advantage.

However, many fail to understand the role they play in setting the standard for the organization (Hambrick, Humphrey, & Gupta, 2013). Prior to Crossan and Hulland. (Bontis, Crossan, & Hullund, 2002) TMT and organizational learning were disconnected fields of inquiry. Following their research, an opportunity still exists to understand how strategy actively manages learning to make adjustments moving forward (Crossan & Berdrow, 2003), further demonstrating how strategic management theory and organizational learning remain disconnected. Given that strategic management involves deploying strategies that enable a firm to remain competitive (Porter, 1998; Teece, 2000), it would be interesting to know how strategic management theory could use the outcomes of organizational learning concepts to actively make adjustments when defining and redefining a firm's position, specifically how these interactions take place below the TMT (Tsoukas, 1996).

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Some studies have focused on the impact of TMT composition and related resource deployment on firm performance (Carpenter, Geletkancz, & Sanders, 2004), while others have explored individual learning impact on organizational learning (García-Morales, Lloréns-Montes, & Verdú-Jover, 2007) and made loose connections to how negative learning that can stifle strategic implementation (Bednall, Sanders, & Runhaar, 2014; Elenkov, Judge, & Wright, 2005; Narayanan, Zane, & Kemmerer, 2011). What appears to be a gap, and has been called out by other researchers, is exploring the link between the individual aspects related to organizational learning, and how those interplay as both antecedent and result of strategic management (Hutzschenreuter, 2006). All this research builds on the well-established concept that organizational learning occurs at three distinct organizational levels, the individual level, the workgroup level, and the overall organization level, that there are seven dimensions to organizational learning, and that organizational learning can be measured (V J Marsick & Watkins, 1996; V. J. Marsick, 2013; Watkins & Marsick, 1993a, 1993b). In all that contextualization, how middle management interacts with strategic change is absent.

Other research establishes the link between how leadership creates a climate that can foster individual and organizational learning (Berson, Nemanich, Waldman, Galvin, & Keller, 2006), and how that learning can evolve over a period of time in both positive and negative ways (Berends & Lammers, 2010). The link to how firms can use external knowledge to renew strategies, and that internal organizational learning is important to long-range planning has also been established (Jones & Macpherson, 2006), but related research shows that during times where innovation demands requires flexibility between exploration and exploitation, the application of organizational learning to strategic management is inconsistent (Rosing, Frese, & Bausch, 2011).

Studies to understand the nature of changing demands on organizational learning and strategic management are largely focused on external pressures like changes in business climate or merger and acquisition (Narayanan et al., 2011; O'Reilly, 2013; Shi, Sun, & Prescott, 2012). Research that has worked to understand how individual and team level learning translates into organizational learning have identified what conditions make that translation possible (Hülshager, Anderson, & Salgado, 2009), but where efforts have been made to understand how that is in turn translated into actionable strategy it has been focused on team-level perceptions that prevent implementation (Huy, 2011). Much of this research points to the same opportunity. Changes in leadership behavior can cause changes in learning climate, but do internal changes in strategy trigger changes in leadership behavior, and how does individual level and organizational learning flow among non TMT team members to impact future strategy (Jansen, Vera, & Crossan, 2009).

## **Conceptualization**

To sum up prior research, the notion that TMT strategic implementation creates an environment, which can be either positive or negative for individual and organizational learning, is undisputed. What hasn't been explored is how a changing management strategy impacts organizational learning during that time of transition. In the perception of middle management, what constitutes transition, and how does that impact their learning and whether that flows into organizational learning. Strategic management is certainly an antecedent to organizational learning, but how does it affect middle management during times of change? How do those perceptions positively or negatively impact using learning during times of change to adjust TMT strategy?

The authors seek to understand that while the TMT may allocate resources and sponsor an organizational environment that promotes organizational learning, does that commitment flow to lower levels of the organization in time of uncertainty or great change? Are employees more concerned about their own personal well being rather than the well being of the firm? If so, how, and why? If the research were extended, could we predict use of individual learning on long range planning (King, 1983), predicting innovation climate (George, Mcgahan, & Prabhu, 2012) or a host of strategic concepts (Porter, 1980, 1996, 2008). Further, the authors seek to understand whether organizational learning occurs, or why it does not occur, as perceived by non-top management team members in these organizations in time of uncertainty.

The researchers explore the questions, if organizational learning does occur, at what level and to what degree? It is important the firms understand the impact on employees during times of uncertainty or change in order to develop a better understanding of potential strategies to employee to continue organizational learning.

We are proposing a qualitative study in the health care and transportation fields of mid-level managers. The research seeks to understand what was communicated to mid-level managers during a time of change, how that impacted their attitudes, and in turn what if any individual learning they gained during the time of change. It also seeks to identify specific learning that the individual was able to share with their teams within the non-top management teams, and whether they observed those learning being put into policy by upper management. Further, it seeks to understand whether the mid-level managers saw learning during a time of change implemented in any quantifiable way. Could they see specific feedback used by the TMT to implement specific policies or processes that improved the organization?

## **Research Methods**

The population for this study will consist of small and medium firms, which carry a high percentage of turnovers. Focusing on the healthcare industry and transportation specifically due to high levels of turnover caused by frequently changing environment. Much of this change takes place at the hands of technological advancements, government regulation, and fiduciary budget constraints. Choosing a sample of firms located across the southeastern region of the United States with a similar cultural, legal and political structure allows us to analyze and identify trends while controlling for variables that may be present within other geographic areas.

Drawing upon our current knowledge of the theory of learning, we can build upon the current model of Top Management Teams creates the strategic plan which creates learning climate, which foster individual learning. We will be focusing on middle managers as our informants, since they carry the responsibility of receiving directive from the TMT as organizational transitions occur. Mid level, managers are also charged with the task disseminating new knowledge to groups and provide supervision that facilitates individual learning. With this hands on interaction mid level can accurately assess organizational learning during periods of uncertainty better than any other level of management.

To probe into middle management view of learning we designed a semi-structured questionnaire to investigate how change initiated by the TMT is received and validated by mid-level manager who must then implement the process to subordinates. If middle management perceives the change as "valid change" versus "invalid forced change" are they able utilize previous individual learning? If middle management perceives the change as "invalid forced change" does the state of uncertainty and pushed effect of TMT create a state of flux, which suppresses organizational learning?

Face-to-Face interviews were conducted with mid level managers. Managers were asked to participate in the study voluntarily. All responses were kept completely confidential and our analysis was a representative of the entire sample not individualistic. We conducted six (6) mid level managers as our sample to explore organizational learning. The interview consisted of structured and open-ended questions. The interviews took approximately thirty to forty-five minutes. At the completion of the interview/ data gathering stage, we analyzed the information for trends and use statistical data if needed. The sample interview guide is outlined below in Table 1. The introductory questions focused on the six major areas identified above are part of our study in Organizational Learning which includes: the following areas; 1) Communication; 2) Learning; 3) Organizational Support; 4) Access; 5) Change Process and 6) Current business environment. The current business environment is the catalyst of the study given that the study is centered on an uncertain business environment.

## Interview Question Guide

### Introductory Questions:

1. How long have you been with the company?
2. How long have you been a mid level manager?
3. Where you promoted from within or hired outside the company to become a manager?
4. How is your relationship with the TMT?
5. How do you feel about the stability of the company?

### Organizational learning:

1. Has the company made changes to leverage technology and implement systems that are more efficient?
2. Do you feel the company has enhanced the skill set of its employees?
3. Does this new knowledge make employees better equipped to thrive during periods of change and uncertainty
4. Would you classify the company as a learning company; constantly continuing education for development?
5. When faced with situations where you struggle to make a decision, who do consult or seek advice from.
6. Do you rely more heavily upon peer support or TMT members when implementing changes?

### *During the last 3 years:*

- a. During a period of uncertainty or drastic change, do you feel you acquired new knowledge to increase individual learning? How so?
- b. Do you think you are better equipped to implement what you've learned during future periods of uncertainty? If yes, even during periods of forced change by the TMT that one may feel is pointless?
- c. Did learning as you went through uncertainty reduce future uncertainty for you?

**Table 1:** *Sample Interview Guide*

The researchers promoted the participants to go into greater detail beyond the sample questions. This allowed the participants to elaborate on their responses, allowing the researchers to gain a better understanding of their perceptions as part of this study. Further, this process of facilitating this discussion allowed the researchers to better triangulate the data and gain a deeper understanding of what drives the phenomena discovered as part of the study.

### Data Analysis

As part of the analysis of qualitative research, the issues of validity and must be addressed. In order to improve the validity, the researchers used multiple data sources as part of the project. The idea this that by using the multiple data sources, we would be able to address research weakness involved in using a single method, thus having different researchers and different participants would ensure a more robust and comprehensive study.

A number of the themes raised as part of this study were consistent with what the researchers expected. The most common themes and responses centered on the different avenues and opportunities to learn during time of uncertainty. The results suggest that there is guided learning for middle manager, both actively, and informal communications that occur on a day-to-day basis during the course of the change and uncertainty. The basic concept is that more learning occurred in the paradigm of coaching and soft learning opportunities.

The concept of coaching or soft learning was the primary method of learning and dialogue during a state of uncertainty. The researchers were able to identify that middle managers that this form of learning was more important and more effective than formal structured learning given by the company. Additionally, the perception was that the TMT was able to get a better understanding of the middle managers' concerns and priorities in moving the organization forward. Further, the middle managers were motivated to learn more and take on additional ownership during times of uncertainty. *"I'm going to personally learn to do this thing because that change recently hurt. And I'm going to try to make it better the next time."*

The researchers also identified the phenomena of proactive learning that occurred among the middle managers, although it was a little less common of a response. One individual stated *"... I sense something strange on the horizon; therefore I'm personally going to go equip myself to handle it..."* And typically those respondents were the ones who were able to vocalize *personal learning* more specifically. The participants who were able to recognize uncertainty change on the horizon were better equipped for the change. The researchers identified this as important and separated in the answers for more probing and insight to distinguish between the phenomena of proactive personal learning and reactive personal learning. What remains outstanding is the understanding of relationship that middle managers have of TMT based upon whether they can be classified as proactive or reactive learners.

Formal or structured training tended to favor middle manager in certain positions or who were recent promotions and recent hires compared to tenured manager that preferred coaching or soft learning. The researchers failed to correlate formal training based on need, but to the availability of training being offered. Thus, the managers tended to take the training because it was being offered in lieu of understanding the current business environment. Therefore, the four learning modes tended to cluster together in terms of guided learning, learning company, personal learning, and pro-active learning as identified in Figure 1 below.

**Table 1: Mid-Level Manager Effect**

MANAGEMENT Culture	<b>Learning Modes</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Guided Learning.</b> Mid-level management actively and informally identifies opportunities to improve skills and performance during day-to-day performance of duties.</li> <li>• <b>Learning Company.</b> Ideal Positive &amp; Gap Negative. Employees identifying their ideal situation for an improved company, and the gap that exists referring to mid-level manager activity.</li> <li>• <b>Personal Learning.</b> How mid-level management helps employees learn following periods of change or challenge.</li> <li>• <b>Pro-Active Learning.</b> Employees who see challenge coming, and self-improve to meet those challenges.</li> <li>• <b>Company – Skills &amp; Training.</b> Structured skills programs that are policy based, not needs based. Focused on team-based learning, and level-based learning (entry, mid-level, more advanced).</li> </ul>

**Figure 1: Mid-level Manager Effect**

Communication as identified in Figure 2 tended to group into one or two categories. The two categories were either access to the top management team and limited or access to the top management team. The negative aspect of communication very rarely had anything to do with communication was wrong, it simply had to do with communication is absent - either it existed or was non-existent. In some cases top management teams did not grant access or were not visible to mid level managers. In these cases, it was not an instance where learning did not occur rather the mid-level manager's created learning opportunities. However, how closely correlated the relationship of this training was to overall organizational strategy was not explored. In the case the mid-level managers provide direction and learning opportunities to front line employees without good transparency to the top management teams.

<b>Transparency</b>	<p><b>Communication</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Negative.</b> Lack of communication channels, denial of access. Wall of confusion perceived by employees as being caused by ineffective mid-level managers.</li> <li>• <b>Positive.</b> Open channels of information flowing through middle managers to members to individual contributors, also perceived by workers as flowing upward to top management.</li> </ul>
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**Figure 2: Communications**

The next area we explored was that of stability and change management. The responses suggest that there was a great deal of TMT support during times of change and uncertainty. The participants suggest that the TMT became actively involved in how their job became more complicated, and advanced the idea that did middle managers begin to take proactive steps only to create support for the change.

<b>Security</b>	<p><b>Stability and Change Management</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Supporting Change.</b> The positive role mid-level management plays in communicating and listening during times of challenge and change.</li> <li>• <b>Stability.</b> Steps mid-level management takes to not only create, but drive communication to support a perception of, overall company stability.</li> </ul>
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**Figure 3: Stability and Change Management**

These researchers were able to connect and get a perception of support in addition to reality of support as well as access to TMT. While this may seem redundant to the communication aspect but it implies a couple of other issues such as an "open door policy" and "trust" within the company. Mid-level managers had created such a communication channel that lower level would have permission to bypass their lead supervisor if necessary in order to gain clarity.

<b>Trust Culture</b>	<p><b>Access</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Open Door Policy.</b> Perception by employees that they can approach their middle managers with any need, and they perceive middle managers can approach the top management team as well.</li> <li>• <b>Top Management Team – Positive.</b> Employees feel that if warranted it is okay to access top management directly. Similarly, employees feel that top management listens to all levels of feedback without filters.</li> <li>• <b>Top Management Team – Negative.</b> Because of insecure mid-level management access across layers is guarded or heavily filtered.</li> </ul>
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**Figure 4: Access**

As indicated in above the concept of the "open door" policy was introduced. It relates directly to the next theme we discovered as indicated in Figure 4 above, access to TMT. Access is was also defined as a degree of transparency, top management team positive is the idea that employees felt like the things that were being told by mid management were from somewhere, not simply being created in the middle. Conversely, as indicated previously, TMT's that denied access or were absent were categorized as negative. Therefore, if there was access and presence, it was deemed as a positive, by contract, limited access and absence was perceived as a negative. It is important that it was not characterized as good or bad, just a positive or negative perception of TMT.

## Summary and Next Steps

The theory of organizational learning is that there are various dimensions involved the area of organizational learning. Organizational learning takes place at an individual level, it takes place at a group level and it takes place at a system organizational level. There is a great deal of theoretical research that suggests that the organizations are built to learn, and is directly correlated to their creating a sustainable advantage in the business environment. Organizational learning primarily has two outcomes - increase in knowledge performance and increase in financial performance. Increase in financial performance is tied to your short-term plan. Knowledge performance assumes a more long-term approach in terms of creating, a sustainable advantage. Thus, organizational learning helps fill those two voids.

The researchers looked why his concept is important and in relations to top management teams and how top management teams have influence over organizational learning. Given that TMT has control over resources, set the modes and strategies for an organization to perception of how they are perceived is important. We looked at it from the context of the middle management team and their perception of the top management team in terms of allocation of resources, creating environment, creating the structure, creating the culture that will promote organizational learning. We looked at it in terms of the transfer ability. So we looked at multiple organizations and we also looked at it across industries.

There are a number of themes that occurred during the context of this study including while the research showed some promising results. Greater research is required in this area. The researchers work individually to advance the field and theory of organizational learning at the macro and micro level of organizational studies. One of the emerging trends was in the area of trustworthiness. As a result, future researchers should continue the dialogue and discussion of trustworthiness among middle managers and TMT during periods of uncertainty. Specifically, they should seek to address the central question of, what role does mid levels and the individual play in task master during periods of uncertainty. The ability to address this question would be a vital component to both scholars and practitioners, first to add to the theoretical foundation, secondly, it would provide insight to practitioners to consider when seeking addressing the issue of competitiveness in times of uncertainty.

Additionally, future researchers should look to build upon this study to address the issue the issue of middle management trustworthiness and how it may dictate the employee's willingness to learn during uncertainty. This question will seek to provide insight on the employee's concern during periods of uncertainty, specifically, whether they are more concerned about their own well being compared to the well being of the organization. Further, the role of organizational learning during this process. If organizations seek to use organizational learning, as a competitive advantage, even during times of uncertainty, is the relationship between organizational learning and competitive advantage somehow mediated or moderated by uncertainty? The researcher would argue that under certain conditions, the relationship between the two variables would be adversely affected.

Finally, future researchers should explore a greater understanding from a macro level of research in organizational studies. The perception of middle managers on what they believe the TMT should do to improve organizational learning is vital to the overall concept of organizational learning. Assuming that as employees acquire new knowledge, what measures could increase transferability for the purpose of improving or gaining a sustainable competitive advantage. Thus, the perception of middle manager on improving organizational learning is vital for an organization's future success in terms of financial performance and knowledge performance.

While the current study has concluded, the timeline for furthering the study would be a three-to-four month process. Given that, a base has been established in the transportation and healthcare industry. The researchers would bifurcate the study and focus more in-depth in to one industry. Following the initial study, the researcher would work to improve the validity of the study by focusing primarily on issues of transferability between various industries to devising a conceptual model that would undergo greater test. Thus, a mixed methods system of research, first qualitative to develop the theory or understanding of the theory.

The next step would allow for a larger scale quantitative study. This would allow the researchers to increase the number of participants to understand the relationships generated during the qualitative analysis.

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