The Role of Middle Management in Continuous Improvement: The Bermuda Triangle of Leadership, Implementation and Behavioral Change

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Abstract

The role of middle management in continuous improvement and similar organizational changes is a very challenging one. In this essay, we identify three different ways of looking at middle management: (a) middle managers are no longer needed; (b) middle managers have insufficient potential; and (c) middle managers occupy a unique position that connects the top management and operational levels. Subsequently, we look at the roles of middle managers in organizational change initiatives such as CI. The conclusion is that middle managers often find themselves in a Bermuda-like triangle, in which they are expected to lead change, implement change and change their own behavior. We conclude by exploring the future of the middle manager in the context of the rise of new organizational forms and the digitalization of work processes.

Keywords: middle management; organizational change; continuous improvement; implementation; agility; digitalization

1 Introduction

Since the beginning of the 21st century, many companies have been exposed to growing competition and increasing cost pressure (Cruz and Wang 2018; Dombrowski and Karl 2017; Mora 2014). Thus, the environment of these organizations is becoming increasingly complex, dynamic and global (Hammer 2004; Lee et al. 2012; Neilson et al. 2014; Steiber and Alänge 2016; Van Olffen et al. 2019). These companies are looking for ways to improve their business, that is, provide better services against lower cost, improve customer satisfaction, and stay competitive (Bhuiyan et al. 2006; Nyhuis et al. 2010; Snee 2010). Many managers have implemented a strategy of Continuous Improvement (CI) to adapt to this ever-changing environment (Bhuiyan et al. 2006; Collis 2016; Madhani 2017; Saha et al. 2017). Successful implementation of CI programs serves to install a continuous improvement viewpoint and initiate cultural change throughout the entire organization (Bhasin and Burcher 2006). As mentioned by Emiliani (2006) and Liker (2004), implementing CI requires a long-term commitment, especially from top management.

However, organizational changes toward CI are complex and highly context dependent. CI programs are often said to involve 'sustained improvements', 'cultural change' and similar terms, but often end up as a quick fix without a deliberate effort to create and maintain the conditions required for CI (Bhuiyan et al. 2006; Snee 2010). Here, studies in both industrial and service-oriented organizations demonstrate that (initial) results arising from CI projects are often not sustained over time (Found and Harvey 2006).

Middle managers often play an important role in facilitating this type of organizational change (Dawson 2019), through their informal network, creative and innovative skills, and knowledge about what motivates employees (Huy 2001; Moss Kanter 1982; Realin and Cataldo 2011; Tabrizi 2014). They tend to have value-adding ideas for improvement and often 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. At the same time, if middle managers think negatively about a particular change, they may actively – though not always visibly – block and resist the change (Balogun 2003; Fenton-O'Creevy 1998; Guth and MacMillan 1986; Neumann et al. 2019).

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In this essay, we explore the role of middle managers in the dynamic playing field of CI (Heyden et al. 2018; McCann et al. 2008; Theodore et al. 2017), to establish whether this is a pivotal role or not (Holmemo and Ingvaldsen 2016; Tabrizi 2014; Tarakci et al. 2018). In the remainder of this essay, we conduct a broader exploration of middle managers' roles in CI by looking at it from different angles. Firstly, we provide an overview of three different ways of looking at middle management. Subsequently, we look at middle managers' role enactment during organizational change initiatives such as CI. We conclude by exploring the future of the middle manager.

2 Toward a Broader View: Three Views of Middle Management

In this section, we develop a broader perspective on the discourse on middle management. The role and added value of middle managers have been debated for a long time (Cândido and Santos 2019; Dopson and Stewart 1990, 1993; Harding et al. 2014; Tabrizi 2014). The constant re-engineering of many organizations appears to have diminished the number of middle managers in many organizations dramatically (Bernstein et al. 2016; Clarke 1998; Dopson and Stewart 1993; Hayes 2008), but may not have made them less important (Balogun and Johnson 2004; Floyd and Lane 2000; Livijn 2019).

Middle management can be considered to be one of the most important human agents in creating conditions for achieving CI in an organization (Alefari et al. 2017; Holmemo and Ingvaldsen 2016; Lodgaard et al. 2016). Especially the practical experience of many middle managers may be an important asset in implementing CI within the organization (Harrington and Williams 2004). However, in the face of organizational change, middle managers' pivotal position between operations and strategy also makes the implementation of change difficult (Bryant and Stensaker 2011). The position of middle managers is therefore a difficult one: whereas on the one hand they are responsible for translating strategic change initiatives to daily operations, on the other hand they also have to attend to problems prevailing on the shop floor on a daily basis (e.g. Hermkens et al. 2017; Stoker and de Korte 2001; Uyterhoeven 1989). The constant pressure to cut costs as well as sustain or grow their unit's performance (e.g. productivity or customer satisfaction) may undermine middle management's efforts and commitment to implement CI (Sim and Rogers 2009; Stoker 2006). Thus, a major challenge arises from the two different roles that top management typically expects middle managers to play: the role of change leader and the role of loyal executer. Drawing on an analogy with baseball, Uyterhoeven (1989) therefore observed that middle managers are typically expected to be able to hit, field and pitch at the same time.

These reflections can be captured in three different views on middle management (see Figure 1), which we will elaborate on hereafter. One view is that middle managers are no longer needed, due to changing ways of working in organizations, increased automation of various work processes and higher levels of employee independence and autonomy (Balogun 2003; Cameron et al. 1991; Gratton 2011; Hamel 2011). Another view on the role of middle managers is that they have insufficient potential. If top management adopts this viewpoint, middle managers can become demotivated because they do not feel heard and because they face many organizational changes (Zenger and Folkman 2014). A third view is that middle managers have great potential, because they occupy a unique position in the organization (Lawrence and Lorsch 1967; Mintzberg 1989; Tinline and Cooper 2016) and can ensure the connection between the shop floor and top management as well as translate the ideas from the top to operational activities (Nonaka 1994).

Figure 1: Three views of middle management

2.1 Middle managers are not needed

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 2018a; Clarke 1998; Dopson and Stewart 1993; Hayes 2008; Herzing and Jimmieson 2006; North and Kumta 2018; Stoker 2006). Middle managers thus find themselves in a struggle to survive (Gjerde and Alvesson 2020; Spreitzer and Quinn 1996; Townsend and Dundon 2015), particularly when they perceive the empowering of their subordinates as beneficial to the organization, but not beneficial to themselves (Denham et al. 1997). Middle managers have been observed to actively block empowerment in order to preserve the power and status they felt was being reduced or lost (e.g. Denham et al. 1997; Fenton-O'Creevy 2001). The key assumption in this viewpoint is that organizations are increasingly looking for coaches and mentors, not middle managers (Foster et al. 2019; Gilley et al. 2009; Munteanu and Raţiu 2018; Stoker 2006). Supporters of this view may argue that middle managers have become dinosaurs that do not add value (Sims 2003) or a bureaucratic barrier that needs to be overcome (Guth and MacMillan 1986; Hammer and Champy 1993). If this view on middle management prevails in the organization, it may result in middle managers becoming afraid of change and feeling insecure about their position (Conway and Monks 2011; Keyser et al. 2016; Wagner et al. 2019). It may also lead to middle managers experiencing parallel hierarchies, as a result of more empowerment of operational employees by higher management (Holden and Roberts 2004; Psychogios et al. 2009). In such situations, middle managers may feel as if their role is being dismantled by placing more responsibilities at the workplace level (Guth and MacMillan 1986).

2.2 Middle managers lack sufficient potential

Looking at middle managers as if they have insufficient potential may result in demotivated middle managers, who do not feel heard and face many organizational changes (Zenger and Folkman 2014). Supporters of this view may feel that middle managers cannot deal with the changing role that is expected of them. This may result in insufficient attention for the development of middle managers, despite the fact that their role is constantly changing (Griffith et al. 2019; Stoker and De Korte 2001). Middle managers are then likely to stick to their existing patterns (Hout 1999), thereby effectively blocking changes and innovations, although they could play a constructive role in these changes (Koene 2017). Another reason may be that middle managers are promoted until they reach a level that they can no longer cope with what is expected of them (Griffith et al. 2019), the so-called "Peter principle" (Benson et al. 2018; Lazear 2004). This can be harmful to organizations, especially if professionals are first appointed at supervisory positions and subsequently promoted to a (middle management) level that is just too high for them. In such situations, the organization loses a good professional, whilst at the same time getting a manager who performs a role for which s/he does not have the skills (Benson et al. 2018; Griffith et al. 2019).

2.3 Middle managers have great potential

A third view is that middle managers remain the critical interface between top management and operations (Burgelman 1994; Floyd and Wooldridge 1997; Hermkens et al. 2019). This view resonates with academic work that emphasizes the valuable contributions middle managers can make to organizations (Balogun and Johnson 2004; Rouleau and Balogun 2011). Middle managers especially play a significant role during change (Balogun 2003; Balogun and Johnson 2004, Floyd and Wooldridge 1992, 1997) by implementing top management's intended strategies (Balogun 2003; Currie and Procter 2005; Glaser et al. 2016; Koene 2017; Van der Voet et al. 2016).

The role of (remaining) middle management has apparently become more important in efforts to delayer organizations (McKinney et al. 2013). Middle management has thus been assumed to play an important role in linking layers and different groups in the organization, by safeguarding coordination and helping employees prioritize projects as well as by facilitating collaboration and ensuring that everyone is heard (Garvin 2013; Livijn 2019; Whitehurst 2015). Middle management can have a big role in this, through their creative and innovative skills, informal network and knowledge about what motivates employees (Huy 2001; Moss Kanter 1982).In this respect, CI is about continuously achieving small changes in the work processes (Jørgensen et al. 2003) and middle managers are highly critical in accomplishing these changes (Al-Najem et al. 2012; Holmemo and Ingvaldsen 2016; Lleo et al. 2017).

3 Bermuda Triangle

As mentioned before, organizations face a highly competitive and continuously evolving business environment (Burnes 2011; By 2005; Gjerde and Alvesson 2020), in which the successful management of change is crucial to survive and succeed. Since the 1990s, high failure rates of organizational change attempts have been observed (Al-Haddad and Kotnour 2015; Ashkenas 2013; Beer and Nohria 2000; Hammer and Champy 1993).

Accordingly, the complexity of organizational change makes a middle manager face a triangle of roles and challenges: leading change, implementing change, and behavioral change – together forming a so-called Bermuda triangle (see Figure 2). The combination of these roles may give rise to major tensions and possibly the tendency to actively block change and create resistance. We will elaborate on these three roles and their impact on the middle manager.

3.1 Leading Change

When it comes to leading change, middle managers may at the same time be leaders, who ensure things get done and changes are implemented in the organization, and followers that implement the assignments of top management (Bryant and Stensaker 2011; Neumann et al. 2019). Middle managers have the crucial task to translate new strategies to the operational level and to implement the desired change (Belasen and Luber 2017). This may also seem paradoxical, as many changes also concern middle managers themselves: managing change thus often requires that middle managers change their own behavior (Eddy and Amey 2018; Heyden et al. 2018; Stoker 2005). As a result, they are facing a constant struggle (Gjerde and Alvesson 2020; Uyterhoeven 1989).

3.2 Implementing Change

Middle managers are often caught between translating top management strategy to the workplace on the one hand and representing the workplace toward top management on the other hand (Nonaka 1994; Stoker and De Korte 2001). The interests of the top and operational layer are often not well aligned (Guth and MacMillan 1986; Radaelli and Sitton-Kent 2016). From their position as a connecting link, middle managers can then play an important role in the success of a CI effort (e.g. Emiliani 2006; Kuyvenhoven and Buss 2011; Lleo et al. 2017 McCann et al. 2008). However, a more servant style of leadership may be required here, one in which the middle manager shows that the result of the change is more important than his or her own position (Gandolfi and Stone 2018). Middle managers can thus be expected to perform a downward influencing role, by implementing a deliberate strategy through the translation of top management objectives into effective operational plans (Floyd and Wooldridge 1997; Tarakci et al. 2018; Van Rensburg et al. 2014).

3.3 Behavioral Change

The multiple roles and contributions expected from middle management are particularly problematic when (part of) the middle management echelon itself is subject to change (Anicich and Hirsh 2017b; 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, in a way that helps propagate the change in the organization (e.g. Galbraith 2018; Lam et al. 2015; Van Assen 2018).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).

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). They do not have to have extraordinary skills, but need to share a number of characteristics: comfortable with change, clarity on direction, thoroughness, participative management style, persistence and discretion (Moss Kanter 1982; Tabrizi 2014; Tinline and Cooper 2016).

If middle managers have to engage in all three roles discussed, a highly vulnerable situation emerges – one we call the "Bermuda" triangle of middle management (see Figure 2). In many corporate settings, top managers often expect their middle managers to engage in the triangle of leading change, implementing change *and* changing their own behavior, which gives rise to many tensions and possibly results in these middle managers actively blocking and resisting change (Blom 2018; Cândido and Santos 2019).
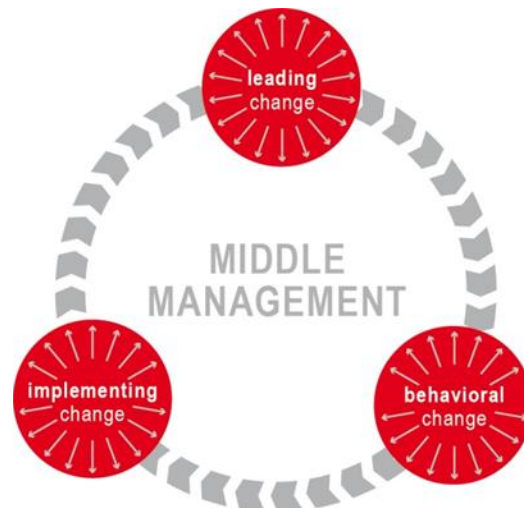
Figure 2 : The Bermuda triangle of middle management

Overall, middle managers appear to play multiple pivotal roles in organizational change and transformation (Balogun 2003; Buick et al. 2018; Kuyvenhoven and Buss 2011; McKinney et al. 2013). To support middle managers in handling this triangle of roles and challenges, top managers would need to lead by example (Alhaqbani et al. 2016; Birken et al. 2015; Näslund 2013). This is a major challenge in itself, given the volatility at top management positions as well as shareholder pressure (e.g. toward cost-cutting) in many companies.

4 The Future of the Middle Manager

Organizations are undergoing major changes, including the roles of all types of managers. The positions of middle managers may be renamed (De Man et al. 2019), but the need for this type of coordination work will remain. Therefore, the problem in many organizations is not that management is inefficient or redundant, but that the role and purpose of a 'manager' does not keep pace with what is needed (Pistrui and Dimov 2018). The remainder of this section highlights two important developments that will likely influence the role of the middle manager: new organizational forms and further digitalization.

4.1 Redefining middle management in new organizational forms

The debate about the middle manager is far from over and will very likely be continued in the coming years (e.g. Gjerde and Alvesson 2020; Heyden et al. 2017; Jacobs 2015; Nicula and Ghimişi 2019). One current discussion involves the impact of new forms of organizing like organizational agility, self-management and holacracy on the role of middle management (De Man et al. 2019; Lee and Edmondson 2017; Rigby et al. 2016; Romme 2015, 2017; Velinov et al. 2018). In several firms in the financial service sector, these new forms of organizing are being adopted (Barton et al. 2018; Birkinshaw 2018a). These new organizational forms require a changing role and potentially different competences from the middle manager. This especially means that middle managers need to engage more in coaching and mentoring (De Man et al. 2019; Gilley et al. 2009; Munteanu and Raţiu 2018). In this respect, middle managers increasingly have to lead by raising questions rather than giving orders, and thus need to let go of their command-and-control management style (Denning 2016; Netland et al. 2019).

On the other hand, various organizations already distance themselves from 'self-management' practices (Kumar and Mukherjee 2018), because self-managing teams seem to take away people's professional identities and the organization's effectiveness appears to diminish, unless it is actively managed (Hout 1999; Whitehurst 2015). The notion of self-management and the resulting claim that layers of middle managers need to be reduced is therefore highly disputed (Burton et al. 2017; De Man et al. 2019; Garvin 2013). In this respect, there appears to be no clarity about the central concepts of many new organizational forms (Anderson and Brown 2010; Bernstein et al. 2016; Lee and Edmondson 2017; Tarakci et al. 2016), which provides interesting opportunities for future research.

4.2 Redefining middle management in a digital world

Technology plays an increasingly important role within organizations (Heavin and Power 2018; Hirte and Sieger 2018; Lobo et al. 2019; North and Kumta 2018). Especially digital technology can be assumed to have a major impact on the role and number of middle managers in organizations (Applegate et al. 1988; Birkinshaw 2018b; Gratton 2011, 2016; Hirt and Willmott 2014). For example, Mims (2015) claims that data is the new middle manager.

In addition, operational work by human workers is in many organizations being substituted or facilitated by robotic process automation (Kumar and Balaramachandran 2018; Madakam et al. 2019) and artificial intelligence (Duan et al. 2019; Jarrahi 2018; Kolbjørnsrud et al. 2017). This means that a more digital workforce (Colbert et al. 2016; Wesche and Sonderegger 2019) will impact the role and activities of management (North and Kumta 2018; Stone et al. 2015), for instance, in terms of digital ways of working together (Lilian 2014; Marlow et al. 2017).

These two developments require adaptive organizations that can and want to change (Carter et al. 2013). Technology, automation and digitization are all causing the world and therefore the working environment of the middle manager to change faster and faster (Colbert et al. 2016; Kolbjørnsrud et al. 2017). This requires agile middle managers (De Smet 2018; North and Kumta 2018). It is thus important to further investigate these developments and their future impact on the role of middle management (e.g. Hermkens et al. 2020).

5 Closing Remarks

There has been a lot of discussion about the role of middle management, between those that believe and those that do not believe in a valuable contribution from the middle layer of the organization. One can conceive of middle management as an obstacle to change (Hammer and Champy 1993), as a strategic asset (Balogun 2003), or as an organizational actor that can make an important contribution (Osterman 2008; Wooldridge et al. 2008). We have argued that the middle manager is often positioned in a Bermuda-like setting, but nonetheless will continue to have a pivotal role in many organizations.

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 for the long run (Anicich and Hirsh 2017a; Tabrizi 2014).

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