ROLE OF MIDDLE MANAGERS
IN
ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE

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The importance of the strategic role played by middle managers in formulation and implementation of organisational change has been acknowledged by many academics and evidenced by the findings of numerous studies undertaken over the last 40 years (see, for example, Bower, 1972; Burgleman, 1983; Guth and McMillan, 1986; Schilit, 1987; Westley, 1990, Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992, 1994 and 1997; Currie, 1999; Huy, 2002; Balogun, 2003; Sims, 2003; Balogun and Johnson 2004; Currie and Proctor, 2005; Rouleau, 2005; Rouleau and Balogun, 2008).

Those studies prove that middle managers are not just passive 'messengers' used by senior managers to spread their vision and ideas throughout the organisation. They play critical role in facilitating organisational change by providing senior managers with a unique interpretation of emerging issues, championing new initiatives, influencing senior managers' strategic thinking and ensuring the implementation of senior managers' vision and plans.

During organisational change, managers are expected not only to change the way they and their staff operate, but also to increase the effectiveness of their organisation, motivate staff to do more than they originally intended and often even more than they believed is possible. (Cheng, Petrovic-Lazarevic, 2004 and 2005; Yukl, 1998) They increase the ability of an organisation to respond to change effectively by stimulating development in others and promoting learning (Nonaka, 1988b, 1994).

In their leadership role, middle managers are also expected to activate the respective relational and collective identity of their staff to explain the underlying influence processes caused by change (Johns and Teare, 1995).

Balogun (2003) argued that, in reality, the role of middle managers as change intermediaries consists of four interrelated roles:

– *undertaking personal change* (not only in terms of their roles and responsibilities, but also in the way they thought of their roles) with its major aspect being an ongoing and gradual sensemaking;

– *helping others through change*, including helping others to make sense of things, or sensegiving as defined by Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991);

– *keeping the business going* alongside all the changes going around them, which demands constant attention to juggling priorities; and

– *implementing changes needed*.

As Balogun (2003:78) pointed out, 'the latter two roles are consistent with the traditional management and coordination role assigned to middle managers. However, the first two roles often appear to be overlooked, even though they involve an important aspect of the middle-manager's task – interpretation of the change intent into tangible actions for both themselves and their teams.' Balogun also argued that 'interpretation that occurs as part of undertaking personal change is, in fact, the *key* task for middle managers, since it *informs* all the other roles' (Ditto:79).

It is important to note that, even in relatively stable times, middle managers have to deal with numerous challenges to their identity in the workplace on a daily basis. This includes role ambiguity and pressures applied to them from positions above and below their own in the organisational hierarchy. Their position 'in the middle' forces them to continuously develop new skills in order to improve their chances of survival during the ongoing change, whether it is a small day-to-day change or a rapid transformation (McConville and Holden, 1999; Hogg and Terry, 2000; Embertson, 2006). This is particularly important because, as Walters (2005) pointed out, middle managers are often the first target of organisational downsizing.

When making sense of change, the middle managers who survived downsizing, analyse how organisational changes impact on their identity, their professional development and future career (Becker, 1997; Svenigsson and Alvesson 2003; Reissner, 2010). They are often left demoralised and de-motivated by the loss of status, traditional career and job

security and the increased intensity and demands of work (Brockner et al., 1987; Scase and Goffee, 1989; Thomas and Dunkerley, 1999, Redman and Wilkinson, 2006). Research undertaken in the late 90-s (see, for example, Dopson and Newell, 1996; Benbow, 1996; Charlesworth, 1997) found a strong link between intensified work regimes, longer hours, increased personal accountability and the breakdown in traditional career development. This results in commitment based on fear rather than loyalty to the organisation on the one hand, and deteriorating lifestyles, tensions associated with home life, and numerous stress-related problems and illnesses amongst middle managers on the other hand. A number of authors (Marshall, 1984; Dopson and Newell, 1996; Charlesworth. 1997; Woodall et al., 1997) argued, that female managers who are more likely to have greater family commitments, will possibly lose more than their male colleagues. Downsizing may therefore have a disproportionately negative impact on female managers.

It can be argued that understanding and managing senior managers' expectations regarding the role of middle managers is an important part of their sensemaking activity. Many authors (see, for example, Marginson and Bui, 2009; Kahn et al., 1964; Machin, 1979; Miles and Perreault, 1976; Kahn, 1974) warned about the potential negative consequences resulting from conflicting and/or unrealistic expectations. Those consequences may include a perceived inability to influence decision making, an unfavourable attitude towards superiors, job dissatisfaction, lower levels of performance and, in extreme cases, even serious injury to health. Those negative consequences can be, to some degree, mitigated by continuous open dialogue with senior managers to clarify and manage middle managers' role expectations during the period of change.

Although the majority of literature about the impact of change and downsizing on surviving middle managers paints a pessimistic picture, some researchers found that many surviving middle managers acquired a greater strategic role as the result of change. This could be more challenging and fulfilling. While de-layering results in having to pick up extra workload from immediately above and below, it also can enable middle managers to have a greater freedom of decision making, more chances for problem solving and innovation. This can make them feel more empowered (Millman and Hartwick, 1987; Dopson and Stewart, 1990; Frohman and Johnson, 1993). However, Wellin (2007) argued that 'job creep' which manifests itself in the employer increasingly pressurising the employee to do more and more for the same or even lesser rewards, may result in resentment and the

disengagement of the employee from the organisation. According to Thomas and Dunkerley (1999), the reported improvement in the inherent nature of the job is seen as inadequate compensation for the worsening of the key extrinsic rewards such as job security, status and hierarchical career progression which form the basis of the traditional psychological contract between the organisation and the middle manager. In their study of middle management in public and private organisations in the UK, Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) also found that for many middle-age managers, who are working in regions of relatively high unemployment and who have limited mobility due to their domestic commitment or other factors, loss of status and career progression opportunities as the result of downsizing can be particularly painful and difficult to accept. Those managers will tend to stay with their organisations until better opportunities arise or their circumstances change. However, their commitment and contribution will almost certainly decrease dramatically.

Despite the heavy personal price they pay for surviving organisational downsizing, middle managers are expected to and, indeed do, help their staff to make sense of change and deal with it for the benefit of the organisation. The 'unfreezing' and 'movement' stages of the change process create a lot of uncertainty and chaos which middle managers are expected to analyse. They are expected to make sense from an array of incoherent and disorderly events and explain what the organisation needs to do about it. In other words, middle managers' sensemaking seeks to plug the 'gap' between people's expectations and their experiences (Weick, 1995; and Weick et al., 2005). This sensemaking is action oriented as it answers the question 'What should we do next?' It turns chaotic, incoherent situations and events into understandable words that create the catalyst for action. It is constantly moving toward developing guidance and models for behaviour (Holt, 2009; and Mills, 2003).

If one accepts change as a continuous activity at local level where individuals interact and make sense of their own social reality, then involvement and dialogue, collective reflection and the construction of knowledge are crucial throughout this process. Even small changes can have significant implications due to self-reinforcing feedback loops and relationships in social networks (Ford and Ford, 1995; Boonstra, 2004; Tichy and Bennis, 2007). Rouleau and Balogun (2008) argued that 'enacting conversations' and 'enrolling networks' by middle managers are crucial for their strategic sensemaking role. They also

pointed out that those two activities are underpinned by the middle managers' practical semantic and socio-cultural knowledge, which enables them to engage people into the change as they perform their daily activities. This notion was also supported by the findings of an earlier study of organisational change in a large American utility company by Huy (2001). He discovered that those managers who spend time establishing solid networks and thus building trust and credibility, were in a better position to 'sell' change to the rest of the organisation, particularly if they did it in subtle and non-threatening ways.

In relation to the sensegiving role of middle managers, Pfeffer (1981b:4) argued that one of their key tasks is to provide explanations, rationalisations, and legitimisation for the activities undertaken in the organisation. Current research provides a significant body of evidence that justification of organisational change through effective explanation has been related positively to perception of fairness. It also shows that that employees less likely to feel powerless and threatened by the change and are more likely to accept even unfavourable and difficult decisions when given adequate and honest reasons for them (Greenhalgh, 1983; Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt, 1984; Brockner et al, 1990; Brockner and Wiesenfeld, 1993; Daly and Geyer, 1994; Shaw and Barrett-Power, 1997).

An extensive body of research proves that managers are well placed to influence their staff's perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs in order to strengthen their commitment to their organisation's goals and to help them to approach change with enthusiasm rather than resistance (see, for example, Bass, 1985; Conger and Kanungo, 1987; Awamleh and Gardner, 1999; Shamir, House and Arthur, 1993).

As Cameron and Green (2004) pointed out, the role of middle managers is to translate the purpose of change into an understandable and realistic way of doing things differently. Effective communication throughout the organisation is crucial for this process because it helps to reduce uncertainty by spreading information, co-ordinating activities, reducing conflicts in the organisation and empowering people. According to Boonstra (2004), to be effective, communication must be authentic, based on facts and shared goals, complete, consistent, reciprocal and repeated many times over. In addition, the communicators themselves must be credible, emotionally intelligent (i.e. aware of the inner state of the recipients of communications), and open to feedback (Doppler, 2004; Walton and Russell, 2004; Yukl, 2004, Emery, 2004; Hardy and Clegg, 2004).

Effective communication is of particular importance during change associated with downsizing. A number of studies confirmed that active communication - keeping surviving employees well informed of ongoing changes - seemed to be a key factor for improved employee attitudes and behaviour and had a positive impact on the perceived fairness of the downsizing process (see, for example, Feldman, 1989; Murphy, 1994; and Gopinath and Backer, 2000). Furthermore, research suggests that providing people (this equally applies to both, frontline staff and employees with supervision/management responsibilities) with frequent, timely and consistent communication about the reasons for downsizing, involving them, at all levels, in decision making, treating them with respect and dignity and using transparent procedures consistently across the whole organisation, are crucial to sustaining employees' commitment to their organisation and job performance (Brockner et al, 1995; Mishra and Spreitzer, 1998; Neihoff et al, 2001; Kernan and Hanges, 2002; Spreitzer and Mishra, 2002).

It is important to note that employees with managerial responsibilities are likely to have a different perception from non-management employees, regarding the adequacy of information during downsizing (see, for example, Shaughnessy, 1986). However, research undertaken by Tourish et al (2004) shows that while senior managers in public sector organisations are more likely to be slightly better informed about changes, the information received by middle managers on issues relevant to job and organisational changes was equivalent to that of non-management staff. Furthermore, findings from their research suggest that both middle managers (who are critical for the success of change) and non-management staff, share the same feeling of frustration when inadequately informed about what is going on. This lack of information makes sensemaking and sensegiving very difficult for middle managers and significantly reduces their effectiveness as change intermediaries.

However, one should be also mindful that, in times of uncertainty, people tend to ask for more and more information. The downsizing often produces so much uncertainty that no amount of information provided to people will be enough for them. As the result, managers in downsized organisations could be perceived as more secretive and less trustworthy about important issues than they actually are (Tourish et al., 2004:508). This should never be underestimated bearing in mind that middle managers play a crucial role in providing

explanations, rationalisation and legitimisation of the activities undertaken in the organisation through their networks and daily activities (Huy, 2001; Pfeffer, 1981b; Balogun and Johnson, 2004), which has a direct impact on the perception of fairness and acceptance of the outcomes of change, both favourable and unfavourable (Brockner et al., 1990; Daly and Geyer, 1994; Shaw and Barrett-Power, 1997).

This brief review of literature about the role of middle managers in organisational change shows that, only by providing its middle managers with the right support relevant to their key roles during the change process, can an organisation make them effective change intermediaries and potentially improve the outcomes of the top-down change.

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