



REALISE
YOUR
POWER.

ENGAGING MIDDLE MANAGERS FOR POSITIVE ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE

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Engaging Middle Managers for Positive Organisational Change

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ABSTRACT

Far from being an impediment, middle managers can play a vital role influencing the success of organisational change initiatives. Coming from a variety of backgrounds and professional accomplishments, middle managers effectively bridge senior management focus on macro issues (structure, process, strategies) and micro level implementation (knowledge, skills, experience, communication) through their teams. At the 'bleeding edge' of employee responses, middle managers require timely and detailed briefings from senior management so they can effectively address questions from their teams regarding the granular impacts. The speed of change is influenced by the speed of trust arising from the quality of communications across the organisation. Middle managers play a vital role in this 'sense making'. While resistance to change is sometimes seen negatively, it is often the product of thoughtful consideration by employees and can provide valuable feedback to fine-tune implementation. Contextually relevant training that develops soft-skill competencies around consultative leadership styles and considerate leadership behaviours

enhances the effectiveness of middle managers. Being a member of a professional body can also protect a person's sense of identity as a professional manager, connecting them to resources and support from professional colleagues, and framing organisational change by reference to national and international issues.

KEYWORDS:

organisational change; middle managers; identity; communication; resistance to change; sensitivity to change; sense-making; competencies; alignment.

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INTRODUCTION

With the popularly ascribed 70 per cent failure rate of organisational change by many consulting organisations, middle managers have been under attack for being an impediment to such strategic initiatives. This paper challenges such popular mythology with evidence-based best practice insights that upholds the role that middle managers can play as a force for positive change.

In examining how middle managers can be a positive force for organisational change, this discussion paper will explore the bridging role they play, the importance of open communication, the cognitive and affective variables that inhibit or facilitate change, and the importance of building personal competency and organisational capability through contextualised training.

THE PRIMACY OF NUMBERS

Successfully implementing strategic initiatives is identified as extremely important for organisational competitive advantage, according to 88 per cent of managerial respondents to the 2013 global study by the Economist Intelligence Unit. Sixty-one per cent of these same respondents, however, said implementing the changes was fraught with difficulties. This same study, like other recent studies report between 56% to 70% average success rates in achieving change objectives (e.g., Dr John Kotter of Harvard Business School, 2012; IBM Global CEO Study 2008 www.ibm.com/enterpriseofthefuture; Smith, 2002).

To begin with, the issue of change failure rates deserves closer examination. The histrionics of a 70 per cent failure rate of organisational change is not supported across the board (Hughes, 2011). Firstly, the rates of success vary considerably as noted above. Moreover, research shows that there are a group of organisations and managers who regularly achieve 80 per cent achievement rates – these have been referred to as the Change Masters (IBM Global Making Change Work Study, 2008). Secondly, despite the plethora of articles published in influential practitioner magazines citing 70 per cent failure rates, few if any cite the measures used to determine whether a change initiative has failed (Hughes, 2011). Unsurprisingly, almost all leading with the claim of 70 per cent change failure then proceed to offer

their proprietary methodology to solve the ‘problem’. Collectively, these issues raise the following questions:

- How is ‘change’ defined?
- Does the nature, magnitude and context make a difference?
- How are change outcomes best measured?

If it is measured against publically espoused rationales for change, then unanticipated issues, improvisation, and emergent strategy corrections will immediately arise. These are part and parcel of proceeding into unknown territory where organisational complexity abounds.

Who frames the evaluation also matters. Proponents of change are themselves at risk when unanticipated events or issues arise on the change journey. Credibility and careers are at risk. Snapshots for making sense of outcomes rarely seek to capture the fluidity and open-ended nature of change events. Apportioning blame is unhelpful. Better that people understand how organisation change is made to work; where open communication, inclusiveness, improvisation, engagement processes, and management agility are vital contributors (Yang, Sun & Eppler, 2009).

MIDDLE MANAGERS – THE CRITICAL LINCHPIN

Middle managers can be powerful facilitators of change bridging the gap between the macro level focus of change proponents (designing structures, administrative processes, missions, cultures, strategies and protocols) and micro level implementation (knowledge, needs, skills, experience, communication, learning, values, practices) that shape process changes (Becker, 2008; Kuyvenhoven & Buss, 2011; Yang, Sun & Eppler, 2009).

“A central research finding is that empowering middle managers is the key to effective change implementation (Kuyvenhoven & Buss, 2011; Raelin & Cataldo, 2011)”.

In practice this means that the cross-level ability of middle managers to influence macro and micro variables is supported by senior management which in turn facilitates shared discourse, sense-making and cascading empowerment of people in their teams.

In Pulse Research (AIM, 2014c), the perspective on empowerment was revealing. While 92.7 per cent of senior managers believe that empowering middle managers is the key to effective implementation of organisational change, middle managers are not so sure of this endorsement. Despite the perceived lack of endorsement, middle managers do not let this impact how they acknowledge the contribution by people on their teams (see the Statistics Snapshot right).

92.7%

of senior managers agree or strongly agree that empowering middle managers is key to effective implementation for organisational change.

58.9%

of middle managers agree or strongly agree that their senior managers acknowledge the key role they can play in implementing organisational change.

73.7%

of those who report to middle managers agree or strongly agree that their manager acknowledges the contribution they can make in implementing organisational change.

Source: AIM, 2014c

Change implementation is diminished when middle managers are rendered powerless through closed executive and rank-and-file systems; an outcome that manifests in measures of poor climate, disengagement, and fractious communications. Advances in

“A central research finding is that empowering middle managers is the key to effective change implementation

(Kuyvenhoven & Buss, 2011; Raelin & Cataldo, 2011)”.

technology and IT have also provided a basis for rationalising the scope, role, and number of middle managers. For those who retained

their positions, the increased span of control and bigger gaps between levels has not always been beneficial. For organisations, the oft-touted process efficiencies have not always delivered on the promise of effective outcomes. Improvisation from the deep knowledge of middle managers is often a subconscious process that creates the critical bridge.

RATE OF CHANGE ESCALATES IMPACTS

Large scale (unexpected) change creates shock. Unlike Lewin's (1947) three step model (Unfreezing/Moving/Refreezing) which seeks to stabilise the changes in a new equilibrium (Burnes, 2004), once the initial shock-wave has passed, continued aftershocks are likely to occur as the impact of change reverberates (often unevenly) across the organisation. Smaller scale, continuous change is facilitated by building fluid and more agile organisational structures, developing ongoing organisational learning, and selecting and retaining agile managers who thrive in dynamic environments.

The absence of continual adjustment is akin to a build up of tectonic pressure that will have radical uplift at some future point. How this is experienced is a function of the speed of change in the market ecosystem or other unexpected externality. The value of scenario planning is to think through potential responses to specific events rather than in predicting when an event will actually occur. Involvement of middle managers in

these processes can be beneficial on several fronts including greater input of information, more understanding of the imperatives, and wider ownership of the outcomes. Once senior management make the call, the ability of middle managers to mobilise their teams plays an important implementation role for organisational survival.

It is the absence of continual albeit small change that should be alarming to people. But change without clear purpose or substantive value just creates fatigue. High-velocity, high commitment workplaces develop a reputation for offering no ongoing relationships, no safe haven, and no personal space (Victor & Stephens, 1994).

COMMUNICATION

In times of large scale episodic change, communication is typically seen as a tool to persuade others that change is necessary for the organisation, providing information for transforming behaviours and implementing change to achieve a new equilibrium. At the other extreme, where continuous change is the norm, organisational reality becomes a constantly emerging proposition with the making of meaning for the change communicated through ongoing social interactions. In all cases, communication helps organisational stakeholders understand and embrace the 'what' and 'why' of change, which underpins achieving both a shared vision and change objectives (Kuyvenhoven & Buss, 2011).

When it comes to change management, line-of-sight to the new direction an organisation is heading must be supported by quality communication and openness to discussion at all levels of the organisation (Kuyvenhoven & Buss, 2011). Failures of communication risk change success in a number of ways. For example, change fails because talk of change often suppresses the emergence of conversations that are seen to challenge the envisaged organisational processes and practices (McClellan, 2011). Indeed raising questions about intended organisation change can be seen as dissent by those requiring the change. Frequently the change initiatives are not discussed, preferring to launch them on an unsuspecting workforce. Media coverage of large scale job losses reflect the shock that reverberates when this type of approach is taken.

When communications about change fail to establish processes for participation and support, decreases in trust and increases in change anxiety, job insecurity and change resistance tend to emerge (Paterson & Härtel, 2002). In contrast, when communications demonstrate empathy, support, trustworthiness, and open and just processes, they increase the likelihood of change acceptance and job satisfaction (Paterson & Härtel, 2002). Thus, explaining the 'why' and 'how' of implementation speaks to the cognitive and affective elements and is often more critical than the strategy itself.

Communication has a 'sense-making'

component so that employees may understand the reason and detail of change. Responsibility for this rests with senior management in organisation-wide communications. Middle managers play a vital role in this 'sense-making' by addressing questions that subordinates raise regarding the granular impact on the work they are doing. Delayed responses are likely to make subordinates think that they are ineffective or highlighting that they have been kept 'out of the loop'; diminishing the value of their leadership in the eyes of subordinates. Similarly, middle managers need to communicate in a timely fashion with senior management about any issues arising that may impact implementation effectiveness to ensure agility in managerial responsiveness.

In Pulse Research (AIM, 2014c), there are differing perspectives on the effectiveness of communication between levels of management. Over 40 per cent of middle managers are concerned with the absence of open lines of communication to senior managers. This contrasts with nearly 90 per cent of senior managers believing that middle managers are the linchpin to effectively communicating the needs of senior managers. Ensuring that there are effective lines of communication will underpin the confidence expressed by nearly 74 per cent of those who report to middle managers that their managers are effectively communicating the needs of senior managers (see the Statistics Snapshot on the following page).

89.3%

of senior managers agree or strongly agree that middle managers are the linchpin to effectively communicate the needs of senior management to their teams.

59.8%

of middle managers agree or strongly agree that their organisation has effective communication lines open between middle managers and senior managers.

73.7%

of those who report to middle managers agree or strongly agree that their manager is effective in communicating the needs of senior managers in the organisation.

Source: AIM, 2014c

In many ways, middle managers are pressured from two directions. Managing subordinates requires having timely and detailed briefing on change initiatives so that they can deal with the granular impact of change. Engaging their teams in positive change management, generally a lengthy process, requires more than the hubris and hyperbole of “going for it”. After the initial flush of enthusiasm fades, sustained progress on implementation will rely on the respect and trust that subordinate employees place in their middle managers. These are fragile resources as employees’ sensitivity to the evidence of change (as it impacts them) is magnified if sensible reasons are not advanced and support is unavailable. Employees are not unintelligent (if your organisation has

chosen to employ them). Within the frame of their understanding of the change program, decisions are made that have both immediate impact and possibly reduce the longer-term ‘degrees of freedom’ that an organisation might exercise. Their inaction can also derail change implementation.

PERFORMANCE METRICS

Middle managers are also responsible to senior managers in delivering on key performance metrics; the outcome of team effort.

They are also the eyes and ears for senior management to alert them on issues that may arise so that senior managers can respond appropriately; perhaps with more detailed communication or enhanced resourcing to deal with unanticipated issues. Speed and detail are critical. Slow response from senior management has negative impact on middle managers who are seen as the conduit; at risk is respect from subordinates evidenced by 70 per cent of non-middle managers being critical of middle managers’ ability to exert ‘strategic influence’ (AIM, 2014a).

Organisation change by definition changes the status quo in terms of processes, power, structure, and a multitude of collateral effects. Middle managers discharge an organisational role but they are people as well; with all the fears and concerns that change might have on personal identity and aspirations. Clarity around the personal impact of change and opportunities is a vital first line of questions

that may not be asked overtly but will likely influence personal responses. These flow consciously or sub-consciously to the teams they manage. To defend a change that they don't believe in has a high personal cost, evidenced in stress and health concerns (Paterson & Härtel, 2002).

RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

Resistance to change is a term commonly heard through implementation programs.

The tone or tenor is one where there is a problem with someone or people not being convinced of the need to change. Not unexpectedly, resistance is highest where there are tectonic shifts in organisation identity or culture; when the change requires fundamental changes in employee attitudes, beliefs and behaviours; when the change implementation does not give adequate time to employees for coping; and when major change occurs in job content and the way work is performed (Paterson & Härtel, 2002). At its worst, this resistance can manifest as hostility in the workplace and damage to equipment. News of these occurrences spread like wildfire and can be amplified to the status of 'urban myth', to no benefit of the organisation or people caught up in the situation.

Change agent-centric' views presume that resistance is an accurate report by unbiased observers (change agents) of an objective reality (resistance by change recipients). How self-serving or self-fulfilling are these

interpretations? Is the resistance arising through their own actions or inactions, owing to their own ignorance, incompetence, or mismanagement?

Resistance to organisation change is never portrayed as the product of rationally coherent strategies and objectives, even though resistance to persuasion has been found to be the product of thoughtful consideration (Ford et al, 2008).

Push-back is frequently seen to be a problem rather than a source of valuable feedback that can be harnessed to fine-tune the implementation of change.

Push-back is frequently seen to be a problem rather than a source of valuable feedback that can be harnessed to fine-tune the implementation of change. Such a response relies on a culture of trust that 'voice' will be heard and respectfully considered. Forcing change on people without compelling reasons for the change and infrequent and poor-quality two-way communications is fraught with danger. Indeed, organisation change efforts are often so poorly managed that they precipitate organisational crises (Probst & Raisch, 2005).

AFFECT EFFECTS CHANGE

In interviews around the success of change initiatives, broken agreements, violation of trust, inequitable treatment, and disrespect of values strike at the heart of engaging people's emotions. Emotions move people. Whether this is in a positive or negative direction is a function of management perspectives and practices; including quality communication. Misrepresentation of change to induce recipient participation is a high-cost, make or break strategy of change proponents. This may be an inadvertent outcome that arises

Employees' emotional responses to change reflect their perceptions about what change means for personally important goals and how justly they have been treated (Paterson & Härtel, 2002).

from personal optimism and enthusiasm, responding with off-the-cuff remarks that are subsequently found to be in error or it may be from the intention to mislead.

Credibility and legitimacy of change is, however, not a sufficient condition for mobilising action. Without conversations for performance, change agents may assume that understanding and acceptance will lead to action. When it doesn't, attribution may be incorrectly seen as resistance rather than a failure to use an appropriate mix of conversations around performance.

A vicious cycle can evolve when change-agent defensiveness to 'resistance' results in the issues not being talked about. This just exacerbates the resistance as people dig in to protect themselves; emotional conflict is highly contagious and has the potential to overshadow or dominate task conflict.

Employees' emotional responses to change reflect their perceptions about what change means for personally important goals and how justly they have been treated (Paterson & Härtel, 2002). Blaming employees for resistance to change is both ignorant of the research evidence and unhelpful in change implementation. Instead, middle managers taking an informed approach to change management understand that emotions are important clues to how effectively change implementation is proceeding and when adjustments are required to support employee coping (Paterson & Härtel, 2002).

Change agents can reduce the chances of such accusations by being as truthful, realistic and accurate in their depiction of change, including revealing that they may not know all of the answers (Paterson & Härtel, 2002). Such candidness is not a sign of weakness; rather, it is an opportunity to engage the deep knowledge of others to participate in the implementation of change. Trust in middle managers emerges from this authenticity and integrity, and serves to engage staff in co-creating effective solutions.

AT THE ‘BLEEDING EDGE’

In engaging middle managers for positive change management, they may be considered as change recipients or change proponents depending on how their role is viewed. Subordinates may well see them in the latter role of proponents, at the ‘bleeding-edge’ of response to the changes being proposed. They are of course individuals who privately will be seeking to reconcile the proposed change whilst portraying public support of senior management proposals. In this they wear a heavy weight if they resolve that the proposals lack logic, rationale, or are indefensible.

Organisational change has led to major shifts in both the tasks and behaviours of middle managers. With the flattening of organisation structures a view has emerged that middle managers are increasingly required to behave as risk-taking entrepreneurs, and to measure performance in terms of economy, efficiency and effectiveness (Dopson & Stewart, 2001). Core skills that middle managers are seen to lack include overseeing staff performance, managing other managers, and leadership (AIM, 2014a). Results from Stoker’s work (2006) reveals that middle managers see themselves focused more on people than process with behavioural change through the “soft” competencies of ‘co-operating’, ‘developing employees’ and ‘having empathy’. General Managers see these competencies evolving so that ‘developing employees’ is retained with new competencies in

‘propagating vision’ and being ‘performance oriented’. In Pulse Research (AIM, 2014c, the perception of the right mix of technical skills and soft skills that middle managers should possess was explored across the levels of managers. In all cases there is a reasonably uniform assessment of the gap between what mix of skills they currently have and what they should have (see exhibit on page 14).

In the AIM research (2014a) non-middle managers rated the skills of middle managers in managing supervisors and team leaders as below average (64%) compared with middle manager ratings of themselves (27%). Perception of behavioural change really is in the eye of the beholder.

‘Considerate’ leadership behaviour was found to correlate significantly with three criteria for effectiveness: employees are more committed; experience more job satisfaction; and less burnout. A ‘consultative’ leadership style also correlated significantly with organisational commitment and job satisfaction.

At the ‘bleeding edge’ of implementing organisational change, middle managers were not uniformly seen as exhibiting these competencies and behaviours by their subordinates. Interestingly both middle managers and General Managers also

Senior managers believe that the skill emphasis should have the following proportion of skills for middle managers to be effective in the context of organisational change.



Senior managers believe that currently, within their organisation, middle managers skills emphasis are proportioned as below.



Source: AIM, 2014c

Middle managers believe that the skill emphasis should have the following proportion of skills for middle managers to be effective in the context of organisational change.



Middle managers believe that currently, within their organisation, their skills emphasis are proportioned as below.



Source: AIM, 2014c

Those that report to middle managers believe that middle managers should have the following proportion of skills in the context of organisational change for middle managers to be effective.



Those reporting to middle managers believe that currently, within their organisation, the skills are proportioned as below.



Source: AIM, 2014c

underestimated the other or overestimated themselves (Stoker, 2006). In the AIM research (2014a) non-middle managers rated the skills of middle managers in managing supervisors and team leaders as below average (64%) compared with middle manager ratings of themselves (27%). Perception of behavioural change really is in the eye of the beholder.

Much like Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' five stages of loss and grief, the anthropological view helps explain human emotion to change from denial and isolation, through anger, bargaining, depression and final acceptance. Scott and Jaffe (1988) describe a four phase process from initial denial, through resistance, gradual exploration and eventual commitment. Noting that grieving is a personal process that has no time limit, and there is no one 'right way' to do it.

Initial denial may arise through the shock of the proposed change. This is where lack of communication and transparency of results bites hardest. Middle managers who have no line-of-sight to these numbers or no prior briefing will be seen in the eyes of subordinates as ineffectual, irrelevant or perhaps even duplicitous to the 'scandal' enveloping the organisation. Driving change through position power is a short-duration lever only to be used if personal integrity and respect is absent.

While some leaders of change perceive employee's emotional responses to change as one of the burdens that leaders must endure, emotions are a potential tool for securing the willingness and commitment of

employees in changes processes. Huy (2002) has suggested that middle managers' efforts to pay attention to employees' emotions contributes to successful change efforts.

EMOTIONS MOVE

Communication needs to influence both how people think and feel about change.

Engaging the emotions, and enthusiasm to improvise, can be harnessed through the power of a compelling narrative.

Stories have the ability to weave into a coherent narrative events and factors that can be described in quantitative terms, along with other factors which can be described only in qualitative terms, such as the aspirations of people and their reactions to unfolding forces. Good stories have the ability to logically combine diverse developments that will affect the outcome of a strategy. They show how the strategy may unfold, providing a good way to test its viability (Maira, 2005, p.18).

Story-selling by analogy and metaphor has its place in connecting with the emotions of hope and optimism providing the message and the messenger are authentic and trusted. A well considered narrative can make a person feel that they're part of something vital, and providing an opportunity for them to soar captivates their imagination. Emotion will then move.

In Pulse Research (AIM, 2014c), having a clear agenda provides an opportunity for improvising the proposed changes. This belief shapes the expectation of nearly 93 per cent of senior managers that their middle managers will be able to deliver on agreed objectives. Again there is a gap in perception where 58 per cent of middle managers don't believe their senior managers believe in

their ability to improvise. Notwithstanding, middle managers do not appear to let this influence how they value their team's ability to improvise to deliver on agreed objectives (see Statistics Snapshot below).

92.7%

of senior managers agree or strongly agree that guided by a clear agenda, a good middle manager should be able to improvise to deliver agreed objectives.

58.0%

of middle managers agree or strongly agree that their senior manager values how they improvise to deliver agreed objectives.

73.7%

of those who report to middle managers agree or strongly agree that their manager values how they improvise to deliver agreed objectives.

Source: AIM, 2014c

IDENTITY

Employees who strongly identify with their organisation are likely to experience emotions similar to each other when faced with changes that enhance or threaten the organisation's identity (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). Employees at lower levels of an organisational hierarchy were found to experience a stronger sense of belonging and therefore greater disruption to the identity of where they work than those at higher levels (Rooney et al., 2010). Such disruption can cause feelings of alienation, nostalgia, disorientation, and dislocation (Speller et al., 2002). Where they work

provides lower level employees with a sense of social identity, self-esteem and self-efficacy (Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996), and they tend to choose to remain in places that provide a sense of continuity. Little wonder that lower level employees' initial response may be defensive (Hogg & Terry, 2000) until they are convinced of the personal benefits that may be achieved.

Being a member of a professional body people can protect a person's sense of identity from the effects of organisational change. Specifically, people can draw resources from their communities of practice and support from their professional colleagues, framing the potential organisational change by reference to state, national, and international issues (Pretty et al., 2003).

Collective organisational emotions are also influenced by organisational culture, as culture is an influence device that informs, guides, and disciplines the emotions of employees within organisations (Van Maanen & Kunder, 1989). Effective change implementation, therefore, entails showing how the change aligns with their identity, rather than threatening it (O'Driscoll et al., 2006) and provides a positive inclusiveness within the context of a compelling superordinate identity (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000).

MAKING MEANING

Middle managers have a vital role in influencing collective readiness for change. This is a three-step process. Firstly, a middle manager needs to accept and endorse the need for change at a personal level. When they are afforded the opportunity to participate in decisions related to the change, feelings of empowerment are created, providing them with a sense of agency and control (Armenakis et al., 1993; Gagne et al., 2000). Providing opportunities for voice will potentially change negative reactions to positive support simply through questioning so that understanding is enhanced and hope for positive outcomes is ignited.

In a survey of over 1200 managers, 92 percent reported that their organisations encouraged some or all of their employees to generate innovative ideas on how to improve organisational performance and products. Disturbingly, 48 percent reported that the ideas were rarely implemented (AIM, 2014b).

As the recipient of change communications from senior management, insufficient or poor-quality information can result in a number of problems, including cynicism about change (Wanous et al., 2000) and rumours that exaggerate the negative aspects of change (Bordia et al., 2004).

Past experience of change will likely influence how potential change will be interpreted. The level of organisational support received in the past as well as perceived in/congruence of personal and organisational values will shape individual perceptions of how positive or negative proposed changes are likely to be. Trust in people who are proposing organisational change is a subjective personal evaluation that is ongoing.

Good intentions have a poor reputation. In a survey of over 1200 managers, 92 percent reported that their organisations encouraged some or all of their employees to generate innovative ideas on how to improve organisational performance and products. Disturbingly, 48 percent reported that the ideas were rarely implemented (AIM, 2014b). Assessment of trust in the message of organisational change is often derived from the evidence of past management behaviour.

Engaging people in change requires them to perceive that the change supports the meaning they find in their work (May et al., 2004). The implications of this is that senior management needs to ensure that middle managers feel their work is meaningful and have the skills to assist their employees to find meaning in their own work. Beyond meaningful work they also need to believe they have the support of senior management. Regrettably, the Australian Institute of Management (2014 a) identified that 53 per cent of middle managers do not believe their employers are fulfilling promises made to them and 58 per

cent do not believe there is a good chance to get ahead in their organisation.

SENSITIVITY

Small incremental change that forms part of an ongoing refinement of management direction and practices can be seen as a relatively stable work environment. Tectonic shifts that are possibly infrequent but reflect significant change events disrupt stability. As the scale of change increases, individual's responses to change becomes more negative (Rafferty & Griffin, 2006). Likewise, the greater the sensitivity of a change, where employees perceive it to threaten personally important goals, the more time they will require to constructively cope with changes, resulting in a protracted change process (c.f., Paterson & Härtel, 2002). The sensitivity to change as a function of the magnitude of personal impact is illustrated in the following diagram:

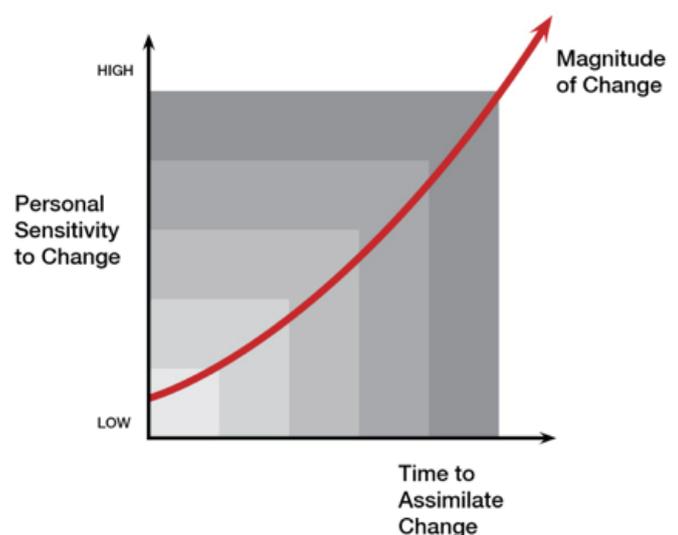


Figure 1: Personal Sensitivity and Assimilation of Change (Johnson, In Press).

Sensitivity can be assessed through incongruence in values, identity, psychological security, and degree of role ambiguity. In this regard, the engagement of middle managers for positive organisational change is critically influenced by the communications and actions of senior management.

In the second step, the discussions and sense-making of change among the cohort of middle-managers is critical. Consensus views are reached through discussion and debate among peers. How productive this is becomes a function of psychological safety characterised by the group climate of interpersonal trust and mutual respect in which people are comfortable in discussing their views.

In anticipating change, employees (may) use speculation in the form of rumours to develop an understanding of impending changes. Work group members arrive at shared beliefs regarding change events through communicating with each other using rumours in order to make sense of their changing workplace (Isabella, 1990).

Where are the foundations for the rumours to be found? In disparate information collated as 'evidence' through the joining of the dots/ infilling with inferred meaning or attributions based on prior experience of up-line managers or events.

The degree to which consensus is positive or negative to change will be evidenced by the emotional tone and subsequent reactions within the group. Active and overt

engagement may be exhausting yet it provides a more substantial foundation on which to build engagement with change. More difficult is actively covert (concealed) behaviour, the outcomes of which are largely discerned in retrospective analysis which delays positive interventions. Passive responses to change, whether overt or covert, present a heavy weight and significant investment of energy to create forward momentum (Bovey and Hede,

The engagement of middle managers for positive organisational change is critically influenced by the communications and actions of senior management.

2001). Measuring the mosaic of behavioural intentions present in a workforce approaching or undergoing change will likely shed light on the probability of successful change effort.

Middle managers, as a cohort, will develop shared perceptions about change processes including their assessment of the validity of the content of the change, why it is required, how it will impact them and their role, how it will impact their quality of work life. People who are comfortable with risk and have a positive self-concept are more likely to develop a positive attitude to change (Judge et al., 1999).

The third step in the change process is communication of change with people in the teams for which middle managers have responsibility. The ability to accurately

recognise collective emotions within their teams is a variable skill. Being able to bring into focus patterns of shared emotions as well as specific emotions held by individuals will assist tailoring a change vision for that specific team or work group and to develop their capability to deal with impending change.

Fine-tuning the comprehension of what change means at the granular level of team or work group will address the minutiae of detail that reflects the horizons of these people. It must also align with the values of the organisation such that line-of-sight and consistency of purpose is maintained from the micro to the macro perspective.

Consistency of message across teams in a dynamic change environment will rely on good quality communication across middle managers and up-line to senior management. The speed of trust creation is a function of the speed and quality of communication and the embedded assurances that people are seeking in the content of the message.

Visibility, credibility, accessibility and responsibility are necessary prerequisites of manager communication. Absent any element in communication and action will fail to materialise as planned. Visibility of managers is paramount in periods of change. Credibility of messenger impacts credibility of the message. Accessibility confers opportunity for subordinates to question and resolve matters pertaining to the change and any downstream impacts. The final component is responsibility. Specifically, are middle managers sufficiently

briefed and able to respond quickly and definitively to questions raised by their teams?

UP-SKILLING COMPETENCY AND CAPABILITY

Middle managers who maintain their self-concept by persisting in the production of services by their teams are doubly at risk during change. If their self-concept is anchored in their earlier field of expertise then their development, growth and ability to accept and introduce change may be resisted at the sub-conscious level. Conversely, middle managers who have strong self-efficacy will likely have resilience to overcome the negative effects of change. Technical changes introduce obsolescence of skill demanding that those responsible for producing maintain the currency of their skill. While middle managers were rated by 58 per cent of senior managers as having high or very high technical skills, their transition to managing a team requires a very different set of skills. Principal among these are the 'soft skills' of **people management (93%); two-way communication flow (91%); leadership (91%); team building (89%); self-management (88%); and relationship management (87%)** (AIM, 2014a).

In a very pragmatic way, the change process requires that people become self-motivated, continuous learners (Bart & Stephens, 1994) if they are to remain employees of choice. As organisational change occurs, the up-skilling of middle managers necessarily focuses more on how to mobilise and sustain the motivation

of their teams.

The Australian Institute of Management's research of management capability (AIM, 2014d) corroborates the gap of perceived management capability (based on a score out of 100) between CEOs and middle managers. How critical these are to the sustainability of an organisation is influenced by the relative position of key competitors (current and emerging) on these capabilities as well as the preparedness of an organisation to commit to a contextualised training and development program for their middle managers.

In the context of change management one might identify Visionary and Strategic Leadership, People Leadership, Performance Leadership, and Organisational Capability as key contributors to successful change. All of these measures in the table below show marked

differences such that one might question the reality of the optimism and pessimism presented by the polarity of the indices.

STRATEGIC INCLUSION

The difficulty of organic growth arises from the changes in behaviour required of many people in the organisation. Along with the

Employee reaction to change depends on the extent to which they perceive the change to threaten central facets of their self-concept (Eilam & Shamir, 2005).

implementation of new policies, changes effect the lives of people and may also hurt vested interests. In taking decisions to pursue strategic change, CEOs need to be sensitive

Australian Management Capability: Overview of Capability Gaps			
Management Capability Index	CEOs	Middle Managers	Gap
Visionary and Strategic Leadership	69.8	56.5	(14.3)
Performance Leadership	72.6	55.9	(16.7)
People Leadership	72.6	50.0	(22.6)
Organisation Capability	71.1	54.6	(16.5)
Application of Technology and Knowledge	73.6	50.3	(23.3)
Innovation	70.0	53.5	(16.5)
Integrity and Corporate Governance	87.3	72.8	(14.5)
Results and Comparative Performance	68.1	58.6	(9.5)
OVERALL	72.0	58.0	(14.0)

Source: AIM, 2014d. Definitions for each of the capabilities are provided in http://www.aim.com.au/sites/default/files/ACMI2014_SummaryReport.pdf

to the needs of principal stakeholders and the political processes by which power is exercised within the governance of the organisation (Maira, 2005).

Changing the trajectory of organisational performance requires understanding the context in which change is to be made. That context includes the abilities, aspirations, vested interests, and fears or hopes of people. Employee resistance to change has been attributed to:

- **Need for stability**
- **Fear of the unknown**
- **A sense of reduced control**
- **Anticipated difficulties in adjusting to new methods of work and working conditions, and**
- **Loss of power, status, social relations, and benefits.**

The value of any strategic change is realized only if it is fully implemented. In most situations the commitment and ‘full-hearted’ support of employees is critical. Employee reaction to change depends on the extent to which they perceive the change to threaten central facets of their self-concept (Eilam & Shamir, 2005). Further, employees are not only motivated by achievement of goals and expected rewards but also the opportunity for self-expression and maintenance or enhancement of self-consistency, self-worth, and self-esteem (Shamir, 1991). These matters are embodied in a person’s sense of personal integrity, the breach of which will not only derail individual engagement but also impact

the willingness of people to work together, to cooperate or collaborate on change initiatives.

The concept that change management is something that is done after the strategy is devised must be challenged. Change requires effort and involves personal/career risk. To allay these concerns, the ‘how’ must be considered along with the ‘why’ and ‘what’ when the strategy is being shaped.

VITAL SIGNS

Engagement, also referred to as discretionary effort (Frank et al., 2004), is the extent to which people harness themselves to their work role. While engagement measures abound, robustness evidenced through statistical validation is paramount if an organisation is relying on hard data to understand the extent to which people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally in the performance of their work roles. Where challenge and skill meet, people move from engagement to a deeper level of ‘flow’, where attention and absorption provides an intensity of focus (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008).

In contrast, disengagement occurs when people psychologically withdraw and defend themselves physically, cognitively or emotionally during performance of their work role (Kahn, 1990). Three psychological conditions are associated with engagement or disengagement at work: meaningfulness, psychological safety, and availability of resources.

Lack of support from a supervisor or

the organisation more broadly negatively impacts psychological safety. Where the organisation is perceived to value the employee's contribution, people reciprocate by caring more about what the organisation is endeavouring to achieve and becoming more engaged in how their work plays a role in these outcomes (Rhoades et al., 2001). The reality of employee engagement is that it is an ongoing process that requires continued interactions to generate obligations and a state of reciprocal interdependence over the long term (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

In Pulse Research (AIM, 2014c), there is a stark contrast in perception of support as evidenced through caring about career development. The perception of caring by senior managers is not seen by middle managers and in turn cascades negatively to their teams. Career development is a signal of preparedness by the organisation to invest in their people. The vital sign on this is action not words (see Statistical Snapshot below).

96.6%

of senior managers agree or strongly agree that they care about the career development of middle managers.

40.2%

of middle managers agree or strongly agree that their manager cares about their career development.

47.4%

of those who report to middle managers agree or strongly agree that their manager cares about their career development.

Source: AIM, 2014c

Middle managers are especially important in influencing employee perceptions of organisational support. Employees tend to view their supervisor's disposition toward them as indicative of the organisation's support. A lack of support from supervisors has been found to be an especially important factor linked to burnout (Maslach et al., 2001).

Identifying with the values of the organisation can see people tying their

“Doing whatever it takes” is a signal that a person has lost their ethical bearings and is at risk of making short-term decisions that have negative longer-term consequences for self, the organisations, and society more broadly.

sense of self, their self-identity with that of the organisation. This level of engagement is problematic on a number of levels. The ability to stand aside and look at what the organisation is doing provides an important and dispassionate perspective. Being so caught up in the prevailing organisation psyche, possibly even to the point of believing implicitly in the cult of personality is psychologically unhealthy. Where is the moral compass that enables people to retain their true north, rather than be swayed off-course by magnetic deviation? “Doing whatever it takes” is a signal that a person has lost their bearings and is at risk of making short-term decisions that may have negative longer-term

consequences for self, the organisations, and society more broadly.

Middle managers act as a barometer of culture in the sense that their actions or inaction are construed / interpreted by team members as representative of the organisation (Härtel et al., 2013). Giving voice to values takes courage but is powerfully effective 'enmasse' when value drift occurs that can be terminal to the organisation and its people. Systemic failure has damaged Commonwealth Bank through their financial planning arm, Essendon Football Club through the illegal actions of coaching staff, and been terminal to One-Tel.

A CASE IN POINT

During a downsizing at a major oil company, which on reflection seemed to occur at semi-regular cycles, a middle manager was given the responsibility of meeting people to deliver the news that they had lost their jobs. Redundancies are softened initially by the palliative financial payout. What was troubling was the enthusiasm with which this person engaged in the task. Diligence could be one lense through which the activity could be viewed. Lacking was compassion and empathy. As the project drew to its close and the middle manager reported the successful execution of responsibility, he too experienced the dispassionate execution as there was no further need for his employment to continue. Some would see this through the lense of "receiving his just desserts". Putting aside the

poor personal perspective evidenced through how he discharged his task, this person had lost his bearings, believing that corporate profits prevailed over corporate citizenship. "Doing whatever it takes" should not abrogate responsibility for ethical and moral action. It is the sum of personal actions that evidence the real culture in an organisation. Inaction when aberrant behaviour persists is tantamount to silent compliance and is toxic to people and organisations alike.

ALIGNMENT

In exploring what engages people with organisational change, alignment of personal values and organisational values contributes to individual's perceptions that the work they are doing is meaningful. In turn, meaningfulness facilitates engagement with change such that managers want to learn more about the change and opportunities for them (Johnson, in Press).

The positive aspects of being clear about their own values improves engagement only when this is matched by high organisational clarity; the organisation has to be absolutely clear in communicating an articulate vision, mission and supporting values. Of course, clarity does not imply ethics. Organisational as well as individual values can be unethical. High individual clarity around greed and egregious behaviour may see people gravitate to organisations that epitomise and validate the 'worth' of such behaviours. Major corporate collapses such as One-Tel in Australia through

to the well documented malfeasance of some financial planning institutions highlight where cadres of people lacking moral compass have had significant negative impacts.

High individual clarity in the context of low organisational clarity results in people being 'unengaged' or 'actively disengaged' in the workplace. With any organisational change initiatives it is vital that clear communication precede any action so that organisation members understand the reasons and validity for change.

Where pre-requisite communication has occurred, yet is met with low individual clarity, the organisation is essentially acting in vain when it comes to implementation of change. Structural changes might be made but positive payoff will only occur when people put their heart into the implementation program. Low organisational clarity combined with low individual clarity is a recipe for chaos and high-risk of unethical behaviours (Johnson & Härtel, in Härtel, Brundin & Johnson, in Press).

In a parallel enquiry with The Conference Board (2014), Australian CEO's were asked the extent to which they believed that high performance can be sustained by seeking to align the achievement of people's aspirations with those of the organisation. An overwhelming response from 96.5 per cent of CEO's believed this would be a more productive approach to take. Regardless of level in an organisation hierarchy, alignment of values builds a bridge between personal and organisational aspirations. As an outcome

measure, personal engagement is reflected in improvisation (innovation) in micro-level tasks that enable the macro organisational purpose (Johnson, in Press).

INTERIM CONCLUSIONS

In preparing this Discussion Paper, the Australian Institute of Management sought to examine how to engage middle managers for positive organisational change. The review of extant research confirms that middle managers are pivotal to how positively workforces will respond to organisational change initiatives.

The Institute's interim conclusions are that positively engaging middle managers requires support from senior management and those proposing an organisational change agenda. Critical among these are:

- **Including middle managers in framing implementation of the change agenda.**
- **Ensuring communications acknowledge the important leadership role middle managers play in bridging macro and micro level implementation of organisational change.**
- **Providing contextualised training and development and commensurate support to fine-tune skills as implementation proceeds.**
- **Developing communication that is timely and provides detail for middle managers and their teams to enable improvisation within the vector or scope of change.**
- **Being a member of a professional body can protect a person's sense of identity as a professional manager, connecting them to resources and support from professional colleagues, and framing organisational change by reference to national or international issues.**

MOVING FORWARD

The Institute invites your comment on this Discussion Paper and direction in which the research on middle managers as a positive force for organisational change may be extended. As a guide, do you think senior managers overlook and/or undervalue the role and contributions of middle managers? Does this extend to distrusting middle managers to effectively execute the change? Would a clear managerial identity provide a positive professional anchor in times of organisational change? Does the velocity of change in rapid growth organisations influence the priorities that middle managers should emphasise? Are there specific industry or sector issues that might be pertinent? Do shareholder dividends, government policies, or other stakeholder considerations positively or negatively impact the engagement of middle managers as a positive force for change?

In making your contribution, please email research@aim.com.au citing 'Engaging Middle Managers' in the subject line.

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