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Managing in the Middle: A Review of the Middle Management Experience in the 21st Century

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Abstract

Downsizing and organisational restructuring have impacted both the role and the number of middle managers in organisations. This paper provides a review of recent research on middle management to seek an understanding of the current situation for middle managers as they face the start of the 21st century. The literature review is presented in two parts – focusing on the position of middle managers as they emerge from downsizing, and drawing attention to the special circumstances for managers “in the middle”. The research points to some of the challenges middle managers’ experience as they work, live, and survive organisational life, as well as highlighting the need for ongoing investigation of their individual experiences.

Keywords: Middle management, Organisational Change, Redundancy, Downsizing

Introduction

The downsizing and organisational restructuring of the 1980s and 1990s has led to both a reduction in the number of middle managers in organisations (Staehle & Schirmer 1992; Cascio 1993), and a changed role for those who remain (Dopson & Stewart 1990; Wooldridge & Floyd 1990). As disputes are played out in the literature over exactly how the role of middle managers is changing (Brubakk & Wilkinson 1996), both positive and negative pictures are painted for the future of middle management (Thomas & Dunkerley 1999). While some authors have argued the impending demise of middle managers to remove barriers for empowerment of other employees (Kanter 1989; Peters 1992), other research suggests that middle management is ‘alive and kicking’ (Thomas & Dunkerley 1999, p. 157) as we commence the new century.

Much of the argument concerning both the role and the future of middle management centres on the issue of whether middle managers are implementers or developers of organisational strategy and change (Currie & Procter 2001). Traditionally, middle management responsibility has been seen as the interpretation, communication and implementation of strategies as directed by senior management (King et al. 2001). In contrast, Wooldridge & Floyd (1990) argue that the middle management role in new, “flatter” organisations should entail greater involvement in the development of strategy. It is, perhaps, in relation to the role of intermediary within the organisation that middle managers have received most of their “bad press”, via negative attitudes to organisational change and resistance to its implementation (Currie & Procter 2001; Huy 2001). Middle managers have often been presented as an impediment to the organisation, blocking strategies that they perceived as providing a threat to their livelihood (Denham et al. 1997). However, this contention
regarding middle management resistance or "sabotage" (Fenton-O'Creevy 2001) has begun to be questioned by researchers, both as to whether middle managers are genuinely providing barriers to change (Huy 2001) and, if they are, what the real reasons behind this may be (Denham et al. 1997; Young 2000).

This ongoing concern for understanding organisational change, and recognition of the integral role of middle managers (King et al. 2001), appears to have been responsible for much of the recent research into middle management, and an emerging emphasis on the experiences of individual managers (eg. Turnbull 2001; Thomas & Linstead 2002). The focus of this paper is to consider the current situation for middle managers as they face the start of the 21st century. What are their experiences in the workplace as they live and survive organisational life, and what more do we still need to understand? The remainder of this paper reviews recent research on middle management to seek to answer these questions, focusing on the position of middle managers as they emerge from downsizing, and highlighting the special circumstances for managers "in the middle".

**Middle Managers "As the Dust Settles"**

One of the key focus areas for recent research has been the experience for middle managers in the aftermath of downsizing, and how they view their position in the organisation as the "dust begins to settle". We focus here on three issues that serve to highlight the work, life and survival of today's middle managers -- new and ongoing organisational change initiatives, the impact on career development, and perceived enhancements to the middle management role.

**Organisational change initiatives**

Dopson and Neumann (1998) identify three key organisational changes which have served, and continue to serve, to influence the middle management experience: -- employee involvement and empowerment, total quality management, and human resource management issues (pp. 53-54). Concomitant to downsizing and other structural changes in the organisation, there has been a particularly intense focus on employee involvement and empowerment (eg. Denham et al. 1997; Honold 1997). Similar to the discussion on organisational change in general, a number of authors have pointed to the notable volume of writing on middle management resistance to empowerment (eg. Klagge 1998a; Thomas & Dunkerley 1999; Huy 2001). This resistance has been presupposed to arise from the fears of middle management with respect to a loss of control, a loss of power, and possibly even a loss of position (Klagge 1998a, p. 555). While there has been a call for empirical studies into middle managers’ attitudes to verify these results, limited research has been done to date and has reported mixed results. Fenton-O'Creevy (2001) conducted a survey of middle and senior managers in the United Kingdom on their attitudes to various organisational initiatives. He found that the attitudes of middle managers were as positive as those of senior managers with respect to empowerment, and indicated that other factors should be considered when determining why empowerment may not succeed past initial implementation. Klagge (1998a) conducted focus groups with middle managers and argued that, contrary to fear surrounding empowerment, these managers’ greatest concern was with
time constraints, believing that ‘much of the organisational time and energy that would be required to successfully implement empowerment would be theirs’ (p. 556).

Restructuring has also resulted in human resource management responsibilities being devolved to middle managers in many organisations (McConville & Holden 1999; Currie & Procter 2001). As well as supervising staff in operational issues, the “people management” aspect of their role is now greatly increased (Staehle & Schirmer 1992). This involves middle managers not only providing coaching and training for their staff (Balogun 2003), but practical and emotional support through transition phases, often with limited or no training in these areas (McConville & Holden 1999). These concerns, and other operational issues, have led to longer working hours and intensified working regimes (Thomas & Dunkerley 1999). The experience of middle managers as they conduct their working life is one of increased demands on both their time and skills.

Career progression
One concern identified by researchers in the newly “flattened” organisation is the impact on career progression for middle managers. The psychological contract (Newell & Dopson 1996; Dopson & Neumann 1998) between employers and employees is argued to involve employees providing effort and contribution in exchange for pay and other benefits. For middle managers, benefits espoused often included job security and career progression, but these have now disappeared for many (Newell & Dopson 1996; Ebadan & Winstanley 1997). It is argued that this is particularly true for the public sector where ‘an informal job-for-life culture and career progression had always been seen as compensation for relatively low salaries’ (Thomas & Dunkerley 1999, p. 167). With these possibilities removed, many middle managers face the prospect of stagnation within the organisation, or taking only lateral moves (Ebada & Winstanley 1997). In response to this, a brighter picture has been painted by some writers of the “boundaryless career” (Thomas & Dunkerley 1999) where middle managers can undertake their own self-development and move on regularly to new opportunities and challenges in other organisations. However, this is not a viable option for all individuals, particularly those who are ‘middle-aged, working in regions of relatively-high unemployment [or] with limited mobility due to domestic commitments’ (Thomas & Dunkerley 1999, p. 167). The impact for the “survivors” of the fallout from downsizing (Ebada & Winstanley 1997; Snizek & Kestel 1999) is often a considerably altered expectation of their life in the new century as they deal with the financial and emotional implications of a potentially premature plateau in their careers.

Role enhancements
While noting the increased demands on middle managers indicated above, it would be remiss to not also consider the changes that many middle managers have reported as positive. Flatter organisational structures have led to wider spans of control (Klagge 1998b) and enlarged roles (Balogun 2003) for middle managers. Despite the longer hours and intensified working regimes (Thomas & Dunkerley 1999), a number of studies involving middle managers have indicated positive responses to the increased responsibility and variety in their roles (Dopson & Neumann 1998). Middle managers have reported feeling more fulfilled by the increased challenges (Dopson & Stewart 1990), more in control with respect to decision-making and problem-solving (Thomas & Dunkerley 1999), and finding the greater job
responsibility more rewarding (Brubakk & Wilkinson 1996). However, the question remains as to the impact of these increased demands long-term. Indeed, writers have argued that these reported improvements in the intrinsic nature of the job are insufficient compensation for the deterioration of extrinsic rewards such as job security and career progression (Thomas & Dunkerley 1999). Middle managers may be surviving in organisations as the 21st century begins, but how long can this be sustained and what will be the impact on their wellbeing?

The “Middle” Management Experience

While academic and popular literature abounds on management and leadership, we identify with the arguments of other writers that a distinction needs to be made between middle and senior management (Denham et al. 1997), as the experiences involved are different in nature (Turnbull 2001). Managing in the middle levels of the organisation brings with it certain issues and circumstance, which do not have relevance for senior or corporate management. The essence of being in middle management has been variously described as being “squeezed” (Gabel 2002), the “piggy in the middle” (McConville & Holden 1999), and “the meat in the sandwich” (Turnbull 2001). All these expressions are intended to convey an experience of conflict for middle managers; of having to deal with and address often opposing needs and demands.

Middle managers, as the implementers of strategic goals, must function as intermediaries between senior management and their staff, aiming to understand the viewpoints of both (Brubakk & Wilkinson 1996; Thomas & Dunkerley 1999; Gabel 2002). Individuals in both the levels above and below have their own agendas, goals and personalities (Gabel 2002). The middle manager needs to incorporate, address or otherwise pacify each of these. Recognition of this issue is not new. Indeed the concept of the juggling act often required is reflected in the following quotation: ‘The need to communicate with both management and workers ... encourages them [middle managers] to talk out of both sides of their mouths at the same time – to become masters of double talk’ (Roethlisberger 1945, p. 288; cited in Denham et al. 1997, p. 150). In the rapid momentum of today’s business environment, the skills to deal with these issues are imperative for the middle manager.

There is, however, more to this juggling act than merely the “double talk” required in dealing with two (or more) different expectations. A number of writers have moved beyond consideration of these conflicting demands to also draw attention to the internal experiences for middle managers. As Ogbonna and Wilkinson (2003, p. 115) argue, too often middle managers are presented simply as the agents of organisational change rather than its targets. In reality, they are both “change masters” and recipients of change, having to implement the initiatives that are thrust upon them (Staehle & Schirmer 1992). Middle managers must devise ways to sensitively and successfully implement change within their teams while, at the same time, deal with their own reactions to and thoughts on these introductions. As Dopson and Neumann (1998) argue:

By virtue of their position located between the top and the line, middle managers find themselves being expected to lead and/or implement changes regardless of their individual reactions. Indeed, executives and senior managers express
surprise when middle managers feel negative about strategic change as if being positive is, itself, part of a middle manager’s psychological contract. (p. 53)

A “positive spin” must be presented to staff, even if the middle manager does not themselves believe the message (Klein 1984). Denham et al (1997) liken the cognitive processes that middle managers must go through to those described by Hochschild (1983) as emotional labour, where managers must either convince themselves of the merits of the policy to such a point as their whole set of values are altered, or act in such a way as their attitudes appear in line with those of the organisation (Denham et al. 1997, p. 115). What are the emotional consequences for middle managers in this situation? And how does this potential “role dissonance” (McConville & Holden 1999) affect the ultimate change process? Until very recently, there has been little research considering these issues (Dopson & Neumann 1998; Turnbull 2001).

In studying how middle managers deal with the situation of personally handling change, Currie and Proctor (2001) speak of the need to “synthesise” the information - for middle managers to be able to internalise the changes and strategies they have been presented with. Balogun (2003) uses Weick’s (1995) discussion on sensemaking to further describe the process experienced by middle managers. The study revealed that, in order to absorb and cope with change themselves and then pass this on to their staff, middle managers needed to interpret and translate the change intent ‘into implications for themselves and their teams in terms of behaviours and every day working processes’ (Balogun 2003, p. 75). Balogun argues that this process shows that middle managers are more than implementers of deliberate strategy. Instead, a better term to describe their role would be that of ‘building realised strategy’ (Balogun 2003, p. 81). It is in this process of synthesising and translating strategic directives that the middle manager role reaches its raison d’être. If these processes continue to be ignored, and middle managers are viewed as merely slow to implement change, the implications include further demotivation and disillusionment for these individuals.

Conclusion

The middle management experience entering the 21st century can be characterised as one of ongoing, but not insurmountable, challenges and demands. Middle managers are endeavouring to deal with the constant change in their organisations, and provide assistance for their staff in the same process, while drawing on what they see are the positive aspects of their roles. For organisations to best utilise their skills and abilities, the initial research into the experience of the individual middle manager must continue. This research requires expansion to also consider middle managers’ lives outside the workplace, investigating any issues of the work/life balance of specific relevance. It can be hoped that this continuing understanding may enable middle managers not only to survive but thrive in organisations in the 21st century.

References


