

## **A normative view of the role of middle management in the implementation of strategic change**

Rosalie Kuyvenhoven  
Turner Consulting

W. Christian Buss  
State University of New York/University at Albany

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper investigates the drivers of middle management success in strategy execution through a review and analysis of three models of its role in the implementation of strategic change initiatives. Middle managers have been viewed as 1) implementers of top-management defined strategic changes (e.g. O'Shannassy, 2003), 2) relationship managers in strategic change management (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1994, 1997) and 3) key strategic actors in the emergence of the strategic change (Balogun 2003, 2008). The paper explores the development of these three views of the strategic implementation role of middle management. This paper develops 1) insights into the middle management role in strategic changes; 2) identifies success factors needed to fulfill these roles; 3) defines the gap between middle-management action requirements and needed results; and 4) makes recommendations in how to improve middle management role in strategy change implementation.

Keywords: Strategic change, middle management role, management role set, management integrations, management effectiveness

## INTRODUCTION

Modern organizations face significant shifts in the environment. Technological developments force companies to adopt new technologies and build new interfaces with customers and suppliers. Industry consolidation has increased pressure on senior management planning as the number of mergers and acquisitions grows. Company products are becoming commodities. Competition for customers and resources is growing. This pressure forces companies to change strategies. However, the success rate for strategic change programs may be as low as 30 percent (Balogun and Hailey, 2008: p. 1). This paper defines and explores the role of middle management as a key factor in success of strategic change implementation.

Middle managers are crucial drivers of strategic change. They face many challenges in performing this role. They implement new strategies mandated by top management. Middle managers operate in a complex environment. They have to manage relationships with top management, answer questions from all parts of the company and overcome resistance from their teams. They have to build a workable balance between implementing the change and keeping normal business functions operating. Middle managers also continue to manage relationships with customers, suppliers and other external stakeholders. These interactions often require compromises that are not aligned to the new strategy.

By focusing on the middle management perspective, this paper contributes both to the practice of strategy implementation and to research on strategic change implementation. Many management theories have excluded middle management from models of the strategy development process. Recent research has worked to remove this problem. The significance of middle management actions on strategy implementation has led to a new area of management research (e.g. - Balogun, 2007; Rouleau, 2005). Johnson, Scholes and Wittington (2008) have identified three forces that increase the importance of middle management: 1) decentralization of organizational structures, 2) improved business education of middle managers and 3) the emergence of the knowledge-based organizations. Despite these trends, little is known about actual middle management practices (Rouleau, 2005), how middle-management activities can be facilitated (Balogun, 2007), and why their role is often misunderstood and unsupported within organizations (Meyer, 2007).

This paper summarizes models and tools used to improve middle management performance in strategic change initiatives. It explores and explains the complex and demanding role of middle managers in strategic change implementation. It develops normative guidelines for senior executives, middle managers and consultants on how to improve middle-management performance in strategic change programs. Overall, the paper enriches our knowledge on strategy implementation and provides useful insights that can be used by anyone with practical or theoretical interest in effective strategic change implementation.

### Research Questions

The main research question of this paper is to determine what middle managers need in order to execute strategy successfully. To answer this question, four subsidiary questions are addressed including: a) how is middle management's role being defined in academic research, b) how do managers define the role of middle management in strategy implementation, c) how do researchers define the factors that drive middle-management effectiveness in strategy

programs, and d) how should middle managers be supported in their role in successful strategy execution?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Floyd and Wooldridge (1994: p. 48) define middle management and the middle manager as: “the coordinator between daily activities of the units and the strategic activities of the hierarchy.” They stress the middle manager’s role as “a link, a tie between top managers and operational workers ... more than the ‘hierarchical’ definitions” (cited in Vogler, 2007: p.11). This paper builds on Floyd and Wooldridge by addressing three issues.

1. The role of middle managers in strategy execution - Although many other people are involved in strategy implementation (e.g. - top managers, consultants and employees), middle managers face particular challenges in their position between the top and operational levels. Since they have a strong influence on the way the operational-level actors interpret, adapt and implement the new strategy, they are key to the success of strategy execution (Balogun, 2007). At the same time, middle managers act in a social context so their daily activities are also a factor in the formation of strategy (Rouleau, 2005). Therefore, middle managers both implement and form strategy (Balogun, 2006).
2. The middle manager’s situation – A critical factor in strategy implementation are middle managers and this factor needs to be explored across industries, sectors, and strategy implementation processes (e.g. - the big bang or incremental model discussed in Johnson, Scholes and Wittington, 2007). Analysis across these domain dimensions will allow the identification of similarities and differences across implementation contexts.
3. The execution of strategy - Experience shows that the greatest challenge of strategy is not its definition, but its successful implementation. Strategy implementation often requires changes of behavior of organization actors. Effectiveness depends on how people in day-to-day operations apply the new strategy. The traditional responsibilities of the middle manager to train, guide, and motivate subordinate behavior plays a crucial role in this success.

In order to lay the foundation for studying the role of middle managers in the implementation of strategic initiatives, two questions should be addressed. 1) How is middle management’s role in implementing strategic changes defined? and 2) What are the important success factors in fulfilling this role? These two questions motivate the overview of the strategic process defined in the literature and its impact on middle management’s role in strategy implementation presented next. From this foundation, three views representing different conceptions of the middle management role are developed. These views are 1) implementers of strategies mandated by senior management, 2) networkers that coordinate strategic programs, and 3) interpreters of expectations in the implementation process.

### **Middle Manager’s Traditional Role in Strategic Implementation**

A traditional view of the middle management role in strategy implementation suggests middle managers act as implementers of a mandated, top-down strategy. However, the more modern definition views middle managers as key actors in the process of strategy formation

and its evolution during implementation. This development is part of a changed perception of the strategy process. The strategic process was perceived as the planning, directing, organizing and controlling organizational strategy. It was seen as two sequential steps: strategy formulation and strategy implementation. The traditional division between strategy definition and strategy implementation has been blurred or perhaps erased. Today, strategy definition and implementation are seen as interrelated steps in an iterative, strategy-development process (O'Shannassy, 2003: 59).

The traditional view of the strategy process is one of a rational, planned, top-down activity leading to an action plan that is passed down to line managers for implementation. Strategy formulation is the task of top management. Middle management's main task was planning and control. They were the implementers of top management strategies. In the late 1980's, slower growth drove business priorities toward speed and flexibility. Organizations needed to be more flexible and adaptable to demands of markets and customers. More focus was given to effective strategy implementation and strategy was seen as an executive-driven activity based upon a balance between 'hard', quantitative tools and a 'soft', judgmental approach (O'Shannassy, 2003: p. 60). The evolution of the strategic process from a top-down, directed approach towards a bottom-up, participative approach is well described by Bourgeois and Brodwin (1984). They identify a shift from a top-down centralized model with the CEO controlling a planning process that tells middle managers what to implement to a more participative development of strategy. This process empowers subordinates to assist within the boundaries defined by the CEO so that middle managers become key actors in strategy development.

O'Shannassy (2003: p. 61) summarizes the end of the evolution of the middle management role as the implementer of a strategy process which facilitates strategic conversations and the flow of information. The middle manager role changed from that of an order transmitter to a more active participant in strategy formulation and as boundary spanner who facilitates strategic conversations and information flows.

Three different views of the middle-management role in strategy development and implementation have emerged from this base. The first (e.g. – Hrebiniak, 2008) sees middle managers as implementers of top-management, defined strategy. The second represented by Floyd and Wooldridge (2000) defines middle management's role as participants in strategic conversations and as boundary spanners between top-management and lower levels. In the third view represented by Balogun and Hailey (2008), middle management is the key strategic actor in making strategic changes.

### **View 1: Middle Managers as Implementers of Top-Management, Defined Strategy**

The first view describes middle managers as implementers of strategies developed by top-management teams as represented by Hrebiniak (2008). It relates to the traditional view on middle managers as the 'linking pin' between upper and junior-levels of management (Likert, 1961). By linking the organizational space between strategy and operations, middle managers connect strategic objectives with day-to-day operations and the concerns of personnel at different organizational levels (Hrebiniak, 2008). Maintaining these complex links requires a well-defined, logical approach with planned activities. In Hrebiniak's view, execution represents a disciplined process that performs a logical set of connected activities that enables an organization to develop a strategy and make it work (Hrebiniak, 2008).

Hrebiniak (2008) talked to hundreds of managers with responsibility for strategy execution. From these discussions, he identified twelve execution challenges in the strategy-execution process. He then completed two surveys of 400 managers in order to rank problems according to their importance in strategy execution:

1. Inability to manage change effectively or to overcome internal resistance to change,
2. Trying to execute a strategy that conflicts with the existing power structure,
3. Poor or inadequate information sharing between individuals or business units responsible for strategy execution,
4. Unclear communication of responsibility and/or accountability for execution decisions and actions,
5. Poor or vague strategy,
6. Lack of feelings of 'ownership' of a strategy or execution plans among key employees,
7. Not having guidelines or a model to guide strategy-execution efforts,
8. Lack of understanding of the role of the organizational structure and design in the execution process,
9. Inability to generate 'buy-in' or agreement in critical execution steps or actions,
10. Lack of incentives or inappropriate incentives to support execution objectives,
11. Lack of upper-management support, and
12. Insufficient financial resources.

Hrebiniak's work showed that 'lack of upper-management support' and 'insufficient financial resources' were not considered to be important hurdles in the process of strategy execution. His explanation of this outcome is that managers do think that top-management support and adequate financial resources are critical, but that these were developed in the planning process and become 'givens' in the execution process (Hrebiniak, 2008). Based on the eight most important obstacles to strategy execution, Hrebiniak defined eight areas of opportunity that will help deliver success of strategy execution:

1. Having a model or guidelines for execution outlining the entire implementation process and the relationships among key decisions and actions,
2. Understanding how strategy creation affects the execution of strategy,
3. Managing change effectively, including culture change,
4. Understanding the power structure,
5. Developing organizational structures that foster information sharing, coordination and clear accountability,
6. Developing effective controls and feedback mechanisms,
7. Knowing how to create an execution-support culture, and
8. Exercising execution-biased leadership.

In Hrebiniak's view, a well-defined, logical, structured approach is crucial to the success of strategy execution. Although his view is consistent and provides interesting conclusions, consulting experience in strategy implementation projects (Kuyvenhoven, 2008) leads to the conclusion that this approach may be most effective in complex strategic changes and less so for strategic initiatives on a smaller scale or when a sense of urgency is not present. This type of change often requires a more bottom-up approach that gives freedom to middle management to develop and implement their strategic ideas. In this type of process, strategy

formulation and strategy execution are not two separate steps, but emerge as a natural outcome of the implementation of strategy.

This view goes beyond the middle-manager-as-implementer, top-down perspective. This top-down view has an internal focus and does not incorporate management's relationship with the external environment of suppliers, customers, and politics. Neither does this view focus on the 'softer' parts of managing change such as how to deal with employee resistance or to generate employee empowerment (Beer and Nohria, 2000). The next section augments the top down, hierarchical approach by viewing middle managers as co-actors and influencers of strategic changes.

## **View 2 - Middle Managers as Relationship Managers in Strategic Change Management**

Floyd and Wooldridge (1994, 1997) identify middle managers as 'linking pins' between the top and bottom levels, but their view goes beyond the implementation role of middle managers above. In the Floyd-Wooldridge paradigm, middle management involvement is significant in both the definition and the execution of strategy. By performing these dual functions, middle managers contribute to the competitive advantage of the company (Floyd and Wooldridge 1997, 1994). They view strategic change as an emergent process, rather than "a process of deliberate decisions by top management" (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1997: p. 467).

Their research is an extension of the re-engineering paradigm that was driving much of management thought and consulting in the late 1980's and early 1990's. One practical result of re-engineering was a reduction and rationalization of the management function at all levels but particularly at the middle-management layer. In the late 1980's, competitive pressures pushed organizations toward increasing speed and flexibility in implementation. Middle managers were seen as potential roadblocks because they increased the distance between the customer and corporate response to shifting customer requirements. Many organizations were reorganized into more "horizontal processes." As a result, much of the middle management function was eliminated or replaced by more sophisticated management decisions support systems. Additional pressure came from perceived deficiencies in middle-management effectiveness in the implementation of strategic change. Middle managers were often viewed as protectors of their own self-interests and as 'saboteurs' of strategy execution (e.g. - Guth and MacMillan, 1986: p. 314).

However, the de-layering during re-engineering did not yield the expected benefits. According to Floyd and Wooldridge (1994), this occurred because organization-process engineers saw the middle management as a component of the organizational control system. Floyd and Wooldridge (1994,1997) argued that middle managers also play a strategic role and that they are a crucial factor in organizational success. Their strategic contributions directly affect the bottom line (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1994). They also identify middle management as managers of external organization relationships with organization stakeholders such as government regulators, suppliers and customers (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1997). This boundary-spanning role is a critical component in the achievement of corporate strategic success (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1997).

Floyd and Wooldridge (1992, 1994, 1997, 2000) define a typology of middle-management roles in strategy development and implementation. Middle managers contribute to strategy by the way they behave and how they think. In their model, Floyd and Wooldridge view middle managers as 'linking pins' between the top and the bottom of the organization, they connect the overall direction provided by top management with their subordinates' day-to-

day activities. Middle managers coordinate strategy and action by mediating, negotiating and interpreting connections between the organizational strategic and operational levels. Middle managers take actions that have both upward and downward influences on strategy formation. Their upward influence affects senior management's view of organizational circumstances and alternatives to the intended strategic change. Middle managers' downward influence affects the alignment of organizational activities with the strategic context (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992: 154).

Middle management also performs a role in managing ideas within the organization that either integrate with or diverge from the strategy. At the integrative pole, strategy requires coherent ideas that support a common direction and coordinates and reconciles divergent views of the strategy. At the divergent end, strategy is a change process and divergent ideas alter the organization's concept of strategy (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992: 154).

Floyd and Wooldridge use these ideas to define a broader role for middle management. Middle managers champion alternatives by bringing entrepreneurial and innovative proposals to top management's attention. Middle managers also provide top management with unique interpretations of emerging issues. They have the potential to alter the firm's strategic course. Middle managers synthesize information about internal and external events for top management. They interpret and evaluate information and have powerful influence on how top management perceives the situation. Middle managers facilitate change. They increase the ability of others to respond to change by providing a structure, resources and a safe place for learning. They stimulate behavior by task forces, informal discussions and experiments. They foster flexible organizational arrangements. Middle management guides organizational performance with respect to the desired ends defined by top management. They monitor activities in support of top management objectives, and they translate goals into action.

Floyd and Wooldridge (1992) consider the implementation role of middle management as the most important. In their view, implementation is not the carrying out of top management's intentions, it is a set of continuous interventions which is partly driven by senior management priorities and partly an adjust of strategic direction to suit emergent events. In order to perform the implementation role effectively, middle managers must understand the strategic rationale behind the plan and its specific directives. In addition, middle managers must also understand and willingly pursue emergent opportunities and act to reduce the impact of emerging problems. This implies broad participation in the strategic implementation process (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1994).

Although Floyd and Wooldridge don't describe success factors for effective strategic change, their work contains enough ingredients to abstract some important factors that can be clustered into the themes: relation with top management, strategy, role, skills as developed in Figure 1.

**Figure 1- Success factors for effective strategic change**

<p><b>Relation with top management</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Top management must recognize the strategic value of middle management</li> <li>• Good relationship with top management</li> <li>• Clarification of expectations</li> </ul>
<p><b>Strategy</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding of the specific directives and the strategic rationale behind the plan</li> <li>• Involvement in strategic thinking</li> <li>• Commitment to strategy</li> </ul>
<p><b>Role</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Process leadership</li> <li>• Authority</li> <li>• Freedom to experiment</li> </ul>
<p><b>Skills</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategy skills</li> <li>• Team leadership skills</li> <li>• Good communication skills</li> <li>• Boundary spanning experience</li> <li>• Knowing and managing the informal network and the ones who have most strategic influence</li> </ul>

*Source* (Derived by the authors based on Floyd and Wooldridge, 1994, 1997, 2000.)

If we compare Floyd and Wooldridge's view to that of Hrebiniak, the following fundamental differences emerge:

1. View on the strategic process: Hrebiniak separates strategy formulation from implementation, whereas Floyd and Wooldridge consider them to interact in an emergent way.
2. Perspective: Hrebiniak takes a top-down view and is focused on planning and control. His primary concern seems to be how the *content* of the strategic change can be implemented in an effective way. Floyd and Wooldridge take the perspective from the middle manager. Their primary concern seems to be how the *process* of strategy development and implementation can be facilitated in an effective way. Their focus is on managing relationships (internal and external).
3. Middle management role: Hrebiniak sees them as implementers; Floyd and Wooldridge agree but also give middle managers a role in the strategy definition phase.
4. Factors of Strategic Success: Both views mention other factors that influence the success of strategy implementation. For Hrebiniak, structure, planning and control are key, for Floyd and Wooldridge, success is related to the way internal and external relationships are being managed and facilitated.

Floyd and Wooldridge's contribution to middle management's roles in strategy implementation is their focus on middle managers in the strategic process as active participants in the development of the emergent strategy. The third view is based upon current research on middle managers themselves and their role across all the steps in the strategic process.



### View 3: Middle managers as key strategic actors

The third view of middle management's role in strategic changes is the strategy-as-practice (SAP) view. In this view, strategy is something that organization members are doing, not something an organization has. The focus is at the micro level of the practices and practitioners of strategy (Johnson et al., 2003). Balogun (2003, 2008) is one of the researchers in the SAP school. She focuses on the way middle managers experience their role in making strategic changes. Balogun concludes that middle managers have a complex, demanding role to play in connecting the strategic and operational levels of the organization. The tasks they perform include a translation task, a mediation task, a buffering task and a negotiation task. Translation is the communication and interpretation of plans. Mediation is the reconciliation of divergent demands and activities from strategic and operational levels. Buffering is the absorption of the emotional, negative impact actions on others. Negotiation is resolving conflicting views between other internal or even external actors.

Balogun sees middle managers as key strategic actors in the strategic process. Due to their position in the organization, middle managers are both recipients and implementers of change. Balogun (2003) defines their role as "change intermediaries." The way middle managers interpret and make sense of the strategic change is crucial and directly influences the outcome achieved by the strategy. In Balogun's view, failure of interpretation is a key cause of differences between top management intentions and the actual implementation.

Balogun (2003) defines four middle-management roles by combining *orientation* ('team' or 'self') and *nature of activity* ('coordination and management' and 'sense making'). By 'coordination and management' Balogun refers to traditional middle management activities like planning, budgeting, resourcing, overseeing change-related activities. 'Sense making' is the process individuals undertake when they try to understand what is going on around them by making sense of experiences and events and interpreting what they mean for subordinate behavior. The middle manager also uses these activities to make personal changes as their perception of their role and responsibilities change. Middle managers have to undertake changes in their individual behavior, help others through the change process, meet the continuing operational demands of the business, and implement the change itself.

Balogun concludes that middle managers have a complex task in strategy-as-practice view. The sense-making roles are less visible, but they influence the more visible and recognized coordination roles. Balogun concludes that the sense-making role of middle management is often not acknowledged which leads to problems in the implementation of strategic change (Balogun and Hailey, 2008: p. 248). Critical risks include middle managers becoming overloaded leading to a lack of time for important tasks such as communication, counseling of staff, and teambuilding. In addition, the emotional impact of the work middle managers perform is not acknowledged and supported. As a result, middle managers might feel lonely and abandoned. When these risk factors emerge, middle managers become frustrated and resistant to change. Therefore, the following success factors in strategy implementation can be derived from Balogun's work as developed in Figure 2.

**Figure 2 - Success factors for middle management's role in strategic change**

<p><b>Relation with top management</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Senior management should conceive middle management's role not in the traditional way, but as one that adds strategic value to the company.</li> <li>• Senior managers need to support and legitimize the sense-making process.</li> <li>• Senior managers need to understand that the sense-making process costs time.</li> <li>• Senior managers can support middle managers by avoiding conflicting signals about priorities.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Middle management skills</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Middle managers have to invest in networking with senior management and peers in order to get a good understanding of the intended change. They also have to put efforts in the communication and coaching with their staff.</li> <li>• Middle managers need to develop their analytical abilities in order to understand the organization and the change context, the ability to judge what is critical in the particular context and the ability to manage the implementation of change.</li> <li>• A middle manager needs to have a degree of self-awareness in order to understand his prejudices, preferences and experience. Recognizing those enables him to distinguish the needs of the organization from his own and focus on the first. It also enables him to understand and cope with the prejudices of other people</li> </ul>

*Source:* (Derived by the authors from Balogun 2003, 2008)

Balogun takes a micro perspective and focuses on the tasks and challenges that middle managers face in the practice of strategy implementation. She concludes that middle managers perform coordination, management and interpretation tasks. Balogun's research further expands on the complexity of middle management's role in the effectiveness of strategic change initiatives. It builds on the relationship management role recognized by Floyd and Wooldridge and the implementer of top-management strategy initiatives exemplified by Hrebiniak. Middle managers are not only implementers, but also relationship managers and strategy interpreters.

### **The implementer, the integrator and the active participant role types of middle managers**

In the research literature, middle management's role in strategic change has evolved from the view of middle management as implementers of top management intentions to key strategic actors in a strategy-as-practice process. This development is a reflection of similar changes in the view of the strategy development and implementation process itself. In the traditional view, represented here by Hrebiniak (2008), strategy definition and strategy implementation are seen as two separate steps. Recent research (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1997; Balogun, 2003, 2006) considers strategy definition and strategy implementation to interact in an emergent way. From these authors, three different role types can be distilled: the implementer (e.g. – Hrebiniak 2008), the networker (e.g. - Floyd and Wooldridge, 2000) and the sense-maker (e.g. - Balogun, 2003, 2006). Each role acts from a different paradigm with each implying a different unit of analysis in the organization, a different view of the organization, of its points of focus, and of its the key success factors.

The implementer role is based on a macro (system) level strategic change. The change is seen from a macro perspective. The implementer role goes hand-in-hand with an organizational focus on internal relationships that are hierarchical. Middle management's main task is to plan and control the implementation of the strategy defined by top management. Its main concern is on how the strategic change can be implemented. In order to do this effectively, middle managers need a sound understanding of the new strategy, a roadmap with a guideline for execution, a structure that supports the intended strategy, and effective feedback and control mechanisms.

The networker role takes a cross-system and environment perspective. It focuses on the relationships within and around the organization. The networker role broadens the organizational focus to include horizontal and external relationships. The organization is not seen as a primarily hierarchical structure, but as a network of dynamic processes. Middle managers have a crucial role in managing different relationships both inside and outside the organization. Their primary concern is on how the process of strategy development and implementation can be facilitated in an effective way. Good communication processes are important to gather strategically relevant information and to communicate this through the organization and to appropriate external stakeholders.

The sense-maker role is built on a micro (sub-system) level. The organizational focus is on the persons within the organizations, especially on the middle managers. The attention point is on the practice of developing and implementing strategic changes. Middle managers' primary role in this view is on how to make sense of the strategic change, balance the different concerns of senior management, and other internal stakeholders. The key success factors in this role include the recognition and facilitation of the less visible aspects of the middle manager's role, time for middle managers to help actors understand the strategic change and support from top management in setting priorities.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

This paper provides very useful insights and tools for top managers, middle managers and consultants involved in strategic changes.

### **Recommendations for middle managers**

Middle managers can do the following in order to help drive successful strategic programs:

1. Invest in understanding the urgency and the rationale of the new strategy. If a manager does not buy it, then he or she cannot sell it to their team or other stakeholders.
2. Realize that implementing strategic changes takes a lot of energy and time. Find ways to make this time, for example by advising top management on the timing and timeline of the strategy implementation, or by delegating operational tasks to others.
3. Implementing change is a complex and demanding task. Unbiased assessment of strengths and weaknesses is needed. Remedial training and coaching should be available.
4. Build on the relationship with subordinates and involve them actively in the change process.
5. Communicating the how and why of the strategic change process is critical. Time needs to be given to deal with questions and resistance, give support and provide frequent feedback.

### **Recommendations for top managers**

Top managers can contribute to a successful implementation of their strategies by the following actions:

1. Analyze the desired type of strategic change. If the strategic change has to be implemented quickly and top down (which is the case, for example, with lay-offs and reorganizations), set clear and smart targets and provide middle managers with a roadmap that explains the goals, timeline, responsibilities, and mandates. If the strategic change can be developed over a longer period of time, recognize the possible strategic value of middle managers and involve them in the development phase.
2. Invest time and effort in the communication process and make sure middle managers share the vision. If middle managers are to execute the strategic change, it is crucial that they understand the 'why' and 'what.'
3. Develop and maintain a good relationship with middle management and organize open communication lines. As middle managers can provide senior management with crucial information about internal and external implementation issues.
4. Motivate middle managers by showing respect, listening to their concerns, giving them feedback, and awarding them for good performances.
5. Recognize that implementing change is a complex task that requires time and energy. Middle management must put most effort in less-visible things such as internalizing the strategic change themselves and dealing with emotions and resistance of employees.

### **Recommendations to consultants**

Consultants who advise in strategy implementation should consider the following:

1. Be aware of the different types of strategic changes and the implications for the roles of top management and middle management. Involve middle management in change projects.
2. Don't focus exclusively on the content of the strategic change. Realize that the change process is crucial in making the ideas happen. Advise top management and middle management on how they can avoid pitfalls and coach them in the process.
3. Developing understanding on the part of client representatives is an important factor in strategic changes. Develop methods and tools to support this process.
4. Understand the networks and the main influencers of the change process, help middle management in getting insight in their own concerns and those of others. Support them in dealing with conflicting interests. Involve influencers and important stakeholders actively in the strategic change.
5. Don't focus exclusively on the content of the strategic change. Realize that the change process is crucial in making the ideas happen. Advise top management and middle management on how they can avoid pitfalls and coach them in the process.
6. Be aware of the various roles middle managers can play in strategic changes. Provide advice and tools in order to support them in these roles. Whereas the implementer may need support on project management issues, the implementer might most of all need advice on how to deal with behavioral issues.

## CONCLUSIONS

Although the view of middle-managers role in strategy implementation has evolved over time, the traditional role of the middle manager as implementer still exists and it remains a valid and important view these days. The view of the middle manager role has not moved from this view but has added and expanded the understanding of what the implementation role is. Both Floyd and Wooldridge and Balogun conclude that the roles they define do not exclude the other views of the middle-management role but instead add depth to the understanding of that role. Depending on the context of the strategic change, one or more specific roles will be more useful in defining and understanding the effect of middle management on strategy implementation. Thus, the impact of middle managers on the implementation of strategic changes can only be understood by defining within each study of an implementation occasion the appropriate role set of the middle management actors.

## REFERENCES

- Balogun, J. and Hailey, H.V. 2008. *Exploring Strategic Change* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Prentice Hall.
- Balogun, J. 2003. From blaming the middle to harnessing its potential: creating change intermediaries. *British Journal of Management*, 14 (1): 69-84.
- Balogun, J. 2006. Managing Change: Steering a course between intended strategies and unanticipated outcomes. *Long Range Planning*, 39 (1): 29-49
- Balogun, J. 2007. The practice of organizational restructuring: From design to reality. *European Management Journal*, 25 (2): 81-91
- Beer, M. and Nohria, N. 2000. Cracking the Code of Change. *Harvard Business Review* 2000: 3-10.
- Bourgeois, L.J, and D.R. Brodwin. 1984. Strategic implementation: Five Approaches to An Elusive Phenomena. *Strategic Management Journal*, 5: 241-264
- Floyd, S.W., and Wooldridge, B. 1992. Middle management involvement in strategy and its association with strategic type: a research note. *Strategic Management Journal*, 13 (5): 153-167.
- Floyd, S.W., and Wooldridge, B. 1994. Dinosaurs of dynamos? Recognizing middle managers strategic role. *Academy of Management Executive*, 8 (4): 47-57
- Floyd, S.W., and Wooldridge, B. 1997. Middle management's strategic influence and organizational performance. *Journal of Management Studies*, 34 (3): 465-485
- Floyd, S., and Wooldridge, B. 2000. *Building strategy from the middle*. Sage.
- Guth, W. D., and Macmillan, I.C. 1986. Strategy implementation versus middle management self- interest. *Strategic Management Journal*, 7 (4): 313-327.
- Hrebiniak, L.G. 2008. *Making Strategy Work. Leading Effective Execution and Change* (9<sup>th</sup> ed.). Pearson Education, Inc.
- Johnson, G., Melin, L., Whittington R. 2003. Micro strategy and strategizing: Towards an activity based view? *Journal of Management Studies*, 40 (1): 3-22.
- Johnson, G., Scholes, K., and Whittington, R. 2008. *Exploring corporate strategy. Text and Cases* (8<sup>th</sup> ed.). Essex: Pearson Education Limited.

- Kuyvenhoven, R.E. Veranderingen managen? Meer loslaten! 2008.  
<http://www.managementsite.nl/664/verandermanagement/veranderingen-managen-meer-loslaten.html>. Last accessed 28/08/2009
- Mayer, M. and Smith, A. 2007. The Practice of Change: Understanding the Role of Middle Managers, Emotions and Tools. *European Management Journal*, 25 (2): 79-80.
- O'Shannassy, T. 2003. Modern strategic management: balancing strategic thinking and strategic planning for internal and external stakeholders. *Singapore Management Review*, 25 (1): 53-67.
- Rouleau, L. 2005. Micro-practices of strategic sense making and sense giving: How middle managers interpret and sell change every day. *Journal of Management Studies*, 42 (7): 1413-1441.
- Vogler, E. 2007. The strategic conversation as a power issue between top and middle managers. *Paper presented at 23<sup>rd</sup> EGOS Colloquium, Vienna.*

