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Key Tensions in Purposive Action by Middle Managers Leading Change

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Abstract

This research contributes to understanding emotional and political challenges experienced by middle managers as they work with contradictions inherent in leading change from the middle. Focus group data from 27 such middle managers based in the UK indicate that, once they have been assigned roles and tasks for leading change, underlying dynamics and processes influence the degree to which they become capable (or unable) to shape and navigate that change. A proposed conceptual framework, illustrated by a case vignette, provides a base of existing knowledge for understanding and explaining these dynamics. We also construct a model of the key tensions that are integral to middle managers leading change. A further contribution to practice involves elaborating the importance of collaborative effort across hierarchical and vertical boundaries, despite emotional and political tensions that undermine middle managers' roles as change agents.

Keywords

Introduction and Overview

This inquiry began with a few researchers and consultants discussing how to talk about, think about and otherwise make sense of experiences UK middle managers were having with leading change. Heartfelt interactions were taking place in post-graduate classrooms, throughout consultation engagements, at networking events, during coffee breaks and mealtimes. There emerged a practical direction for improving managers' capabilities to lead change from the middle. However, preoccupations strongly expressed by middle managers themselves pointed to the need for a theoretical exploration of dynamics of being in the middle and still being able to make changes.

Thus evolving, this research contributes to understanding emotional and political challenges experienced by middle managers as they work with contradictions inherent in leading change from the middle. While the chapter's structure respects conventions of social scientific reports, it also demonstrates some evolution and iteration. Blending theory and practice in response to concerns of our research participants necessitated a degree of repetition.

In what follows, we offer a literature review illustrating three streams of thinking with which the research starts. These confirm: a recognised trend of middle managers being expected to take up roles related to organisational change; a useful connection made about institutional processes that both constrain and enable their doing so; and a systems psychodynamic orientation that highlights contradictions within complex authorisation processes.

Then, we describe our research methodology with reference to philosophy of science as well as spelling out two phases of studies. An initial phase helped to map the territory based on focus group data from 27 UK participants. A second phase added contextual data

from four managers telling extended stories that provided the basis for selecting a case vignette that we used to sound out an emerging conceptual framework.

Thus, after describing methodology, we present and elaborate the data structure from the focus groups, which shows how the aggregate dimensions relate to initial findings about the underlying dynamics and processes of leading change from the middle. The chapter then shifts into our proposed conceptual framework, which resulted from iterative analyses between data and initial literatures. As a second finding, this framework captures the complex context of constraints and enablers being experienced by middle managers.

For this research report, we then present a selected case vignette intended to trial how the proposed conceptual framework makes sense in real life practice. A discussion following the trial culminates in a slimmed down, practical model of key tensions in purposive action by middle managers leading change – a simplified blend of findings. The chapter finishes with a consideration of conclusions, including future research and practical implications as they may relate to paradoxes, anxiety, ambivalence and uncertainty for middle managers leading change.

Initial Three Literatures

Our focus is on revealing and analyzing the emotional and political challenges experienced and understood by middle managers as they take up change leadership. In studying the possibilities and problems inherent in positioning such work from these roles, we initially brought to bear a combination of three literatures that account for the phenomena. Firstly, we recognize that a scientific thread exists that increasingly refers to *middle managers leading change* as primarily functional and promising. Secondly, we acknowledge that being positioned in the middle of social stratification encapsulates *institutional processes and power relations* within which managers feel expected to take actions as if doing so was

unproblematic and straightforward. And thirdly, we understand that conditions of organizational change stir *systems psychodynamics and authority relations*, which are often characterized by injunctions against expressing emotional reactions to contradictory conditions.

Middle managers leading change. Leading change from a middle manager position points to debates, ongoing for at least two decades, addressing different ways of thinking about and enacting leadership in institutions (Fitzsimons, Turnbull James, & Denyer, 2011). Forms of leadership have been summarized as either "focused" wherein "only one person is attributed the status of leader, and the unit of analysis is this stand-alone leader, or "distributed" that "encompasses patterns or varieties of leadership involving multiple people" (Ford, J.D., & Ford, L.W., 2012: p. 4). Distributed leadership can include "collective leadership" that is "dispersed among some, many, or even all organizational members", as well as "co-performing leadership" that involves "action by a specific group or unit of people" (ibid., pp. 5-6) ranging from teams or committees, intuitive working relationships or spontaneous collaborations.

Literature as early the mid-1970s defines middle management as: a position in organizational hierarchies, between the operating core and the apex, whose occupants have responsibility for a unit at this intermediate level of hierarchy (Harding, Lee, & Ford, 2014: p. 1214). While it is still common for middle managers to be treated in the literature and the field as inhabiting a unified block of positions with a single authority structure called "the hierarchy", we consider that middle managers experience themselves as being in diverse roles and working within simultaneous authority structures.

Indeed, our research builds on literature that characterizes middle managers as change intermediaries with significant sense-making capability, as well as opportunities to go-between disconnected actors and domains both hierarchically (i.e. top, middles, bottoms) and

functionally by parallel divisions, units, departments, products and services (Balogun, 2003; Balogun & Johnson, 2004). Middle managers - recognized as being well placed to receive plans from the top, ideas from the bottom, communicating and interpreting in both directions - also come up with their own notions of development and innovation (Nonaka, 1988).

We consider that simultaneous authority structures, especially in medium and large enterprises, demonstrate both hierarchical and distributed leadership models (e.g. Fitzsimons, Turnbull James, & Denyer, 2011). When middle managers operate as internal change agents, expectations towards collaborative and shared leadership may well be enacted (Huy, 2002; Neumann, Schneider, & Clegg, 2009). Indeed, larger scale organizational changes increase the likely use of a mix of focused change leadership and varieties of distributed leadership (Ford, J.D., & Ford, L.W., 2012: p. 26).

Change initiatives that cross hierarchical and functional boundaries tend to be assigned to middle managers using some form of co-performing leadership: no one sub-system within an organization can progress substantially without hitting an interface with another sub-system. Such observations result in some researchers arguing that senior managers charge middle managers with internal change leadership as an element of a post-bureaucratic practice of change. Managers are portrayed as internal consultants, as "a partner and catalyst of organizational change" (Sturdy, Wright, & Wylie, 2016: p. 185) with an emphasis on "the strategic orientation (and integrative function) of the role" (ibid., p. 12). For example, middle managers have been found to be capable of balancing emotions within on-going operations and significant change (Huy, 2002).

Institutional processes and power relations. While middle managers' taking up roles as internal change agents may be considered necessary for furthering strategies, there remains a gap in knowledge about what constrains and enables their efforts to do so

(Wooldridge, Schmid, & Floyd, 2008). Middle managers are invariably connected to institutional processes and power relations, raising the question of how they can fully engage in 'purposive action' in such a context (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Voronov & Vince, 2012).

It appears to us as researchers that the very position that enables middle managers is also that which constrains them. They are controlled by the same hierarchical situation that gives them control with others. They resist their controllers (i.e. senior managers and those who represent them) and are subjected to resistance from those staff whom they need to influence. So, while being 'controller, controlled, resister and resisted' (Harding, Lee, & Ford, 2014: p. 1232) middle managers must find a way to lead change. While we tend towards a view of resistance as natural, normal and a result of interactions between change agents and change recipients (Ford, J.D., & Ford, L.W., 2009), we assert that complex authorization processes are implicated and otherwise influence leading change from the middle.

We aim to connect collective emotional work and institutional work. As individual change agents, therefore, middle managers' roles need to be understood as joined in the emotional, relational and political nature of action. The idea of *emotional work* is used here to study collective emotional dynamics - an integral part of processes for creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions (Voronov & Vince, 2012). By collective emotions, we mean emotions that are in and of the system or sub-system they helped to create.

Middle managers struggle with 'contradictions', for example, inconsistencies and tensions within and between social systems (Seo & Creed, 2002) that undermine change. Such contradictions emerge from emotions and politics (power relations) connected with

'driving change' and 'driving continuity' at the same time (Huy, 2002). Contradictions in risk and uncertainty appear inherent in leading change from the middle.

While existing research has yet to adequately address ways in which collective emotion is tied to power, we anticipate that considering middle managers' emotional work in the light of their institutional work (i.e. creating. maintaining and disrupting organizational change) may illuminate some related power relations. For instance, there may well be disassociations between emotions and politics coincident with leading change from the middle.

Systems psychodynamics and authority relations. Systems psychodynamic theories (Neumann & Hirschhorn, 1999; Vince, 2002) emphasize interweaving emotional responses with political behavior. "Systems", in this research, "draws attention to the connected parts of a complex organizational whole", while the "psychodynamics" refers to "the energizing or motivating forces resulting from the inter-connection between various parts of individuals' personality or character" (Neumann, 1999: p. 57). Systems psychodynamics, widely understood to be a normal part of human behavior and organizational life, become more pronounced during political organizational change (ibid.).

Ambitious improvements introduced by senior managers as strategic often result in 'multiple, simultaneous initiatives' (Neumann, 1999: p. 54). Such comprehensive changes evoke strong political and psychological dynamics, because so many aspects of the organisation are implicated. Significant changes in one organisational aspect almost always affect others, stirring some sense of personal and group interest.

Change agents and change recipients may experience and notice political behavior with awareness, acting singly and with others "to achieve a set of ideas, principles and commitments relevant to organizational structures and processes" (ibid., p. 57). However,

emotions may be mobilized in service of politics without full awareness or without collective willingness that they voiced overtly. Systems psychodynamics become tangible collective emotions when expressed in service of politics.

This stream of research points to emotional mechanisms, indicated in the literature as the "building blocks of dynamics" (ibid.) and "dysfunctional dynamics … that militate against necessary organization change" (Brown & Starkey, 2000: p. 102). These include introjection, projection and dissociation. In an illustrative case of introjection, managers involved in large scale change efforts became "the receptacles for the most unbearable disarray, chaos, uncertainty and doubt" (Krantz, 2001: p. 135). These result from collective anxieties and defences aimed at the management of complex and challenging unconscious experiences (ibid.).

Projective processes become confusing during situations of "ambivalent authorization" (Neumann, Schneider, & Clegg, 2009: p. 26), especially under conditions of simultaneous authority structures. In multiple cases, middle managers assigned to make changes across boundaries were blocked from making progress when ready to undertake or implement those changes. While having been openly given the role to lead change, the very act of their accepting and taking up the role seemed to spark relational difficulties. Usually, these pre-existing conflicts broke out one level of hierarchy above or in an implicated unit alongside the authorizing senior manager. Middle managers felt unjustly accused of having been wrong, apparently for not having managed to make the changes without igniting conflict.

It seems nonsensical that senior managers "would knowingly embark on change efforts that are more likely to fail than succeed, yet this is apparently exactly what is happening more often than not" (Pasmore, 2011: p. 260). In trying to explain this "irrational exuberance concerning change", issues from phases of change consulting were brought to

bear: understanding the need for change, framing the change, undertaking the change process and sustaining change outcomes (ibid.). While we sympathize with the hope of bringing rationality into such situations, dissociation – the conscious or unconscious denial of challenges in the field of action – rarely responds to rational interventions at the collective level.

Failure is more likely to be connected to collective emotional and political dynamics. We anticipate that such dynamics enact competing desires in the context of relations of power, both between and amongst focussed leaders and distributed leaders, as well as change agents and change recipients. Our initial three literatures motivate us to consider that anxiety, envy and ambivalence emerge from institutional dynamics and fuel actions taken in service of leading adaptive changes.

Research Methodology

An integration of perspectives applied in this research balances on a tight rope between a critical theory of human change and a phenomenology of being embedded in a social order: that is, a radical humanism and an interpretative sociology (Burrell & Morgan, 1985). Our findings highlight preoccupations with how people in the middle of a system of authority relations are simultaneously enabled toward and constrained from leading organizational change. We adopted a subjectivist approach for this research because of our concerns with understanding the experiences of people in organizations.

Our epistemology favors *social constructionism* in the sense that this study targets "human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world and transmitted within an essentially social context" (Crotty, 2004: p. 42). We aim to identify the experiences of middle managers, as they "reach out and into the objects" (ibid., p.

44) and relationships that constitute human practices of organizational change in their workplaces.

We used two phases for the research: reported below sequentially yet separately. Data collection methods encouraged managers to tell their stories and experiences of leading change as well as engaging with others in similar situations to reflect on their narratives (Czarniawska, 1997). Data analysis resulted in a thematic display and elaboration of focus group data. An extended conceptual framework arose out of subsequent analyses between thematic data and initial literatures. We then trialed the conceptual framework with some case stories to explore contextual impact in the form of enablers and constraints.

Phase I data collection and analysis. During March 2011-March 2012, the three researchers conducted a study to map the territory of their research concerns and to capture the diversity of the central phenomena. Using a variant of 'convenience sampling' (Bryman & Bell, 2006: p. 105) we convened a single day of intensive focus groups (Bryman & Bell, 2006: pp. 367-380). Invitations were emailed to members of two different university-affiliated, corporate networks announcing free research workshops specifically for those interested in the research topic. Pre-registration forms allowed researchers to ensure that participants currently or recently held roles as middle managers leading change or had relevant, fresh experiences with middle managers doing so.

This sampling process resulted in 27 managers, from 22 organizations in both public and private sectors (see Table 1). Given the small sample size and the localized nature of several of the UK organizations from which participants were drawn, researchers have prioritized protecting the identities of participants while disclosing sector, organizational type and indicative job titles.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Two different workshops were held at two different universities. Each workshop lasted four hours during which: six focus groups were held (3-6 participants in each), covering the themes 1 and 2 (below) with an initial membership, then themes 3 and 4 with a second mixture of members. Overall, these four themes guided the focus groups' discussions:

1. Their motivations for attending the research workshop based on experiences as/with middle managers.

2. Who are the middle managers in their organization, how they are defined and otherwise located in an authority system.

3. What are middle managers asked to do in relation to change, specifically what would be apparent if watched, listened to, overheard and felt, and with whom or on what are they engaged as it relates to change.

4. In what ways are middle managers supported and otherwise authorized to lead change, what are their sources of power and access to resources, to whom or what are they accountable and where would they go for trouble-shooting conversations.

All focus group data were tape recorded and transcribed. Participants from the focus groups received a data feedback document based on an open (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) or explanatory (Miles & Huberman, 1994) coding process that had been undertaken by two of the researchers. Care was taken to ensure that only input from 3-5 members of a focus group received a code, avoiding domination by singles or pairs. That data feedback document also functioned as an analytic memo (Glaser & Strauss, 1979) for the research team.

Towards the end of the research workshop days, participants were asked a 'co-researching' question (Pettigrew, 2003) on priority themes and categories. In both workshops, participants were keen that researchers prioritized 'understanding complex dynamics over improving existing tools and techniques.' With this shared priority in mind, the prepared

focus group data were subjected to axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Three themes emerged as central.

In working with the results of the axial coding, researchers began discussions that resulted in a rewording of the main core categories of data, thus agreeing each "central issue or focus around which all the other categories are integrated" (Bryman & Bell, 2006: p. 429). At this point, they experimented with a data structure figure (Corley & Gioia, 2004): an evolved version of this data structure is presented early in the section entitled, "elaboration of the data structure" (see Figure 1).

Phase II data collection and analysis. Even with a meaningful data structure, researchers considered that the analyzed focus group data underplayed context. We held memories, thoughts and transcribed notes about the fuller stories offered by research participants. As we discussed the thematic analysis from phase one, we found ourselves going back and forth with the initial three literatures. We noticed how often we were drawing on additional concepts and literatures, as well as illustrating the connections we were making to the fuller stories. We began to sketch a wider conceptual framework (see Figure 2) that helped to explain theoretically what was emerging from our data structure. The focus group data was in the form of group discussions based on our four themes. We needed a different sort of data to consider constraints and enablers.

We decided to recruit a handful of middle managers who were leading change to tell longer stories. During April 2012 – January 2014, researchers used a variant of 'snowballing sampling' (Bryman & Bell, 2006: p. 105) from the same corporate networks (but not the same people). This resulted in four research participants who were able and willing to speak about their compelling, substantial experiences with ongoing change projects. We were looking for rich, qualitative stories from individuals that expanded contextual data, while adding an in-depth focus on specific phenomena. Data were collected by telephone or face-

to-face with the four participants, from three different organizations – two from the public sector and one commercial (one from a national site and one from an international site). Three of the four interactive interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. The remaining single interview was typed up after a face-to-face meeting, using written notes, pictorial representation and archival documents.

First, the researchers subjected all four in-depth, interactive interviews to selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990: p. 116), initially using the data structure emerging from the focus groups. Then, four short stories were written to illustrate the aggregate dimensions. These stories took the outlined form of: this was the context for change, this is who and how the middle managers became involved in the change, as time unfolded here are some key points in the dynamics of the change, here is how things culminated and where they are now. All four stories were then interrogated using elements from the proposed conceptual framework (see Figure 2).

Through discussion and debate, researchers selected one case story that clearly illustrated aspects of all seven elements. That selected case story was then written up as a tighter, more focused case vignette for this research report. Researchers noticed that the case vignette process seemed to be "forcing" an analysis that was leaner than the proposed conceptual framework. After resisting the simpler analysis, we decided to experiment with it. The case vignette's structure, then, became our practical model subsequently labelled, "key tensions in purposive action by middle managers leading change" (Figure 3).

The following four sections of this chapter begin with the elaboration of the data structure and corresponding data display of the thematic analysis (see Figure 1). We then describe the proposed conceptual framework (see Figure 2), a trial of which is then illustrated by the case vignette. We then highlight the emerging practical model (see Figure 3).

Please note that direct quotes throughout will be introduced with (RP) - the capital letters within parentheses meaning "research participant" - immediately before the quotes. This (RP) indicates that the actual words used by a research participant are being reported. Quotes have been taken across the full range of participants. Shorter quotes within a paragraph will be a sentence or less. Longer quotes appear outside a paragraph in quote format.

Elaboration of the Data Structure

Our data structure from focus groups provides a snapshot of underlying dynamics and processes of leading change from the middle. Three columns (see Figure 1) reading from left to right start with first order concepts, clustered into second order themes culminating into a distillation of three main elements. These three aggregate dimensions are: underlying *emotional* dynamics and processes; underlying *political* dynamics and processes and underlying *uncertainty and ambiguity* of change. We now elaborate this data structure by commenting on what the analysis shows and offering illustrative quotes from research participants (indicated in front of quotes with the initials, RP).

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Underlying emotional dynamics and processes. The middle managers participating in this study work in situations of comprehensive change initiated by directors who are reacting to or anticipating extraordinary shifts in their business environment. Research participants report an atmosphere of heightened anxiety and fear.

(RP) 'Parts of the organization sabotage your change initiatives because of inappropriate levels of fear.'

(RP) 'So I think people are fearful and therefore middle managers will feel threatened, but in a fearful way because they actually feel that if they don't get it right first time…even if the messages are mixed in the first place, that they're not going to be able to…carry on as they are, because they'll lose respect from both sides. I think that is difficult for them.'

Middle managers feel swamped with pressure from their bosses. (RP) 'If they say to their bosses, "you need to take something off me if you want me to do that", they are told to "figure out a way to make them both happen"!' Middle managers are required to find ways to continue change-related work without passing the pressure on to direct reports, peers and colleagues in other units.

(RP) 'We forget that everybody's going through a change curve. They might not lose their job, or they might not change their job, but they'll be managing people that are. It's just fantastically difficult for us to understand what it means by change and how to manage that effectively. You can almost swamp people with emails, so they don't read them ("oh, no, not another one") and they've actually missed some very important points that have offered change in direction.'

The internalization of anxiety by middle managers can result from overly rational approaches to the structuring of change by top management. Increasingly, project management techniques combine with change management infrastructures (steering committees, project teams, change champions, project leaders, etc.) to lend an air of familiar working practices to change efforts. When pressures increase on the top, project management becomes the structure by which pressure is passed through the organizational system. Along with being assigned change leadership, middle managers may be delegated the inherent emotional complications of doing so. Senior managers treat leading change as if it involves no emotional work; therefore, middle managers are told to succeed solely (RP) 'armed with will power and common sense'.

(RP) 'The last thing I want to do is have to go back into that meeting to get a decision, 'cos it's not quite right and that's soul destroying from an emotional management point of view. I was told "well here's your project; oh, you haven't done this before, you're not quite sure? Well don't go telling people, just do it, make it up." Promotion was the lowest point of my working life: completely unprepared, no support, no help, I had nightmares.'

Both top and middle managers collude in constructing leading change from the middle as: (RP) 'fundamentally the same as existing operational jobs.' Full of practical difficulties and emotional reactions, middle managers often cooperate. (RP) 'You give them that empowerment; they have to be the ones that deliver, unless the managers themselves change, the culture won't.' Middle managers expect the same change management infrastructure to sort out the inconvenient realities that slow or undermine time sensitive goals. (RP) 'An ineffective steering committee doesn't provide support but demands "what have we got for us this month"!' In the face of being held accountable for change as if it is ordinary work, middle managers fluctuate between powerlessness and self-efficacy, being perceived by others as defensive victims or unsung heroes.

(RP) 'There's the balances, that's the whole point about the ability to manage up and manage down and across. They're really the mud in the middle that can actually become like concrete, a solid base, or something like molasses and get sticky and in the way.'

Underlying political dynamics and processes. Research participants identify various tensions that relate to the politics of change leadership. Leading change from the middle within a top-down hierarchical decision-making structure can feel like a perpetual contradiction. By virtue of being assigned roles and tasks for leading change from the top-down, change agency is enacted as an individual job. Middle managers are thereby held individually responsible for putting planned change into action.

(RP) 'By the very nature of your middle managers there's a level of responsibility that's expected. …If they're in those positions, I expect them to take a degree of responsibility and get some sort of ownership of it ... that's what you are looking for, to show that they do believe in it and they've got an interest.'

(RP) 'It's all his responsibility…and the unfairness of that in saying, then off you go deliver it…Well…that's putting the whole lead onto him. Instead of sharing it out… always suggests it's one person though, doesn't it?'

Alongside being held individually responsible for the change, middle managers perceive a contradiction whereby senior managers and executives scrutinize the details and processes of the change. In other words, they are being delegated change leadership while also being dictated to from above.

(RP) 'There is a different dynamic between someone in the middle thinking of an idea that they want to impose and being given a change down to implement.'

(RP) 'Most of our changes are dictated to us. If we could have control over what we want to do in our organization ... but a lot of our changes are dictated ... if that happens, as a middle manager, you just have to deliver on them whether you believe in them or not.'

Such conflicting expectations seem to be both self-imposed, as well as mobilized from above and below. This becomes apparent in 'vertical' tensions. Middle managers conceptualize their change leadership from an image of (RP) 'an active, switched-on individual' at the same time as recognizing that the hierarchy still matters.

(RP) 'I would certainly expect a manager to feel empowered to have the capability to have the engagement of the workforce to make them feel as if they were part of an overall process.'

(RP) 'Middle managers usually have operational responsibility and they do have responsibility for delivering strategy, but the actual setting of strategy happens really higher up...so you take that big hint.'

(RP) 'You've got a case of one director says, "A must happen, B must not". The other person says, "B must happen, A must not". It is the middle manager that's actually expected to

deliver both. Everybody is now working in a slightly more ambiguous position, but the middle managers have got the job of providing something cohesive to the actual whole workforce.'

Tensions also arise because of an on-going expectation that individuals will make things happen (heroically) while progress requires co-creating and acting collectively with others across boundaries of various types and permeability. Middle managers rely on co-creating actions and solutions with others across hierarchies, departments, geographies and other sorts of political boundaries (i.e. decision-making and resource allocating). However, their capability for purposive action is under-authorized by the very system that gave them the change leadership assignment.

> (RP) 'I've now been given a different title that I think the senior people believe…will enable me to make the change, just by giving me the title and not much else.'

> (RP) 'The reality of where this stuff keeps going back up, you get the round tripping going back up, is that the middle managers quite often are set up. They're set up not in a cynical sense; they're set up to fail. Because the change required, when you get into the implementation of the change, it requires you to change things which aren't in your power'.

Underlying ambivalence and ambiguity about change. Middle managers are expected to deliver change on the ground, often going beyond the boundaries of the teams for which they have direct responsibility. However, their delegated authority may be insufficient to influence change outside of their own groups. When their own boss delegates change leadership to them, their authority may not be communicated broadly or supported by bosses of implicated sub-units or departments. Indeed, their own boss may simultaneously expect middle managers to lead but constrain routes that might help them to meet objectives. It is clear from this data that authority can be simultaneously given and taken away.

(RP) 'I've been in situations where the director would sort of seem to empower their managers, but they want them to do it exactly their way ... there was a major step change and I can remember a meeting where they called all the general managers together and the new marketing director explained the new strategy, which was that the general managers were to "leave their brains in the basket on the way in".'

(RP) 'You've got your director saying "this is what I want to happen, go away and do it"; it's done but actually they don't want it done that way, they want it done the other way; there's still some kind of circularity.'

Therefore, middle managers must authorize themselves as buffers against disruptive contradictions in order to help themselves and their co-producers of change to build enough confidence to shape new processes and practices. Part of this process involves allowing oneself to notice that this is necessary and possible. (RP) 'You see people suddenly realize they're a player at whatever their level, they realize they've got quite a lot of influence.' Senior managers were not always perceived as helpful in this respect: middle managers are expected to take strategic plans on board while (RP) 'missing a senior manager role as buffer at the interface to make sure that things stay on track.'

(RP) 'I have a view that in that level of the organization ...you should be working out how you're going to get to the point where you do feel empowered.'

(RP) 'You've got a very directive organization, it's all top-down, but all of a sudden you realize that that's not the way it should be, and you need to get something that's more empowered and decision-making that's more diffused.'

Finding one's authority in role is compounded for middle managers by the ambiguous characteristic of the change for which they have leadership responsibilities. Middle managers cannot define and determine exactly what needs to be done but need to engage others in solutions and (RP) 'an on-going conversation'. This requires tolerance of ambiguity and not

knowing: (RP) 'I don't know, let me think about it, let us think about it, let us discuss it, let's evaluate and it challenges our control of the situation as a manager.'

> (RP) 'It should be an on-going interaction ... we're probably not tolerant enough of ambiguity, you don't have an answer to everything today, you know, problems occur, what are we going to do ... but then recognize its there and a decision needs to be made ... I would extend that to roles as well...from my point of view it's okay to stand up and say, I know this, or we know this, and this is also what we don't know, and this is what we're keeping an eye on.'

Middle managers report needing to manage the tension between expressing certainty and allowing uncertainty; recognizing that others expect or want them to know what to do. Yet it is through (RP) 'holding not knowing' and allowing others to generate ideas that ways forward are found. At the same time, working with junior and operational staff can be (RP) 'quite challenging for a manager, because it almost says, I'm your equal.' This is highly problematic for middle managers.

> (RP) 'The real work is being both positive and negative, appropriately hanging in, persisting again and again and again.'

> (RP) 'The view of middle management around ... their positional power and their influence and what people think of them... that is the thing that's always at risk isn't it? If they're asked to participate in change, if it goes wrong, how's it going to look for them? So, to what degree is it attractive for middle management to either lead or accept change? It's an unattractive bargain isn't it?'

To handle this tension middle managers describe adjusting the directives they have received, whilst often getting no acknowledgment that this is what it takes to make a strategy work on the ground. The involvement of middle managers in translating a strategy into a manageable process is not always the way senior leaders want them to engage in change.

Middle managers deal with different expectations from above and manage relationships along many vectors.

> (RP) 'Transformational change --it's in all directions in the organization, not just calling in favors of peers but figuring out how to position people above you in the organization.'

> (RP) 'There's guys in the middle of that organization on both sides who are sitting there, who have two different mandates to do two different things but have realized that the two mandates can actually work together and to achieve … but to do that they have to change, slightly change the direction and mission statement of both of the mandates.'

Conceptual Framework

From the elaboration of these first order concepts and second order themes (see Figure 1), three aggregate dimensions became apparent regarding leading change from a middle position. These are: underlying emotional dynamics and processes, underlying political dynamics and processes, and underlying uncertainty and ambiguity. Such a finding echoes the initial three literatures that informed our research design, data collection and analyses. Our starting argument integrated: middle managers leading change, institutional processes and power relations, and systems psychodynamics and authority relations.

Working with the empirical data, however, sharpened our focus on the question of what enables and constrains middle managers in taking purposive action in the context of leading change (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Voronov & Vince, 2012). In order to explore answers, we sketched a more developed framework (see Figure 2) that was informed by data from both focus groups and case stories. This figure is labelled, 'purposive action in the context of constraints and enablers.' It shows seven conceptual elements, each one numbered according to the sequence by which we describe and discuss them in the text. The numbering is meant to help the reader in moving back and forth between text and figure.

An overview of this proposed framework begins with a central line of three elements that can be read from left to right. Middle managers speak as if they are experiencing a kind of linear flow: (#1) they are assigned roles and tasks for leading change; (#6) they become capable, or find themselves unable, to shape and navigate change; and (#7) , and sometimes they manage to work through emotionality and politics related to contradictions. This linear flow seems to be influenced by fluctuating constraints and enablers within their organizational context that further affects how middle managers think about change leadership.

Above the central line in the framework are two factors that middle managers recognize as relevant to their having opportunities to lead change: (#2) shifting ways of thinking and enacting leadership brings distributed change leadership into the picture; (#5) while unsettling existing role and authority relations become necessary to implement such collective or co-performing leadership. That said, middle managers experience issues of leadership as strongly emotional and political constraints to taking up roles, both in terms of focused leaders, (RP) 'coming down from above' as well as multiple authority structures above and beside authorizing senior managers.

Below the central line in the framework are another two factors that middle managers acknowledge as essential to counter-acting the constraints from above: (#3) attempting substantial change while maintaining relationships; and (#4) needing relational leadership for collective action. While they speak of these factors as worrisome and somewhat difficult, requiring nuance and delicacy, middle managers consider that these other people clearly constitute support (RP) 'coming up from below and on occasion from beside' as enablers in leading change.

Finally, in taking in the overall view of the conceptual framework, we researchers have sketched intersecting 'figures of eight' into the background representing enduring

tensions, polarities or paradoxes – 'contradictory yet interrelated elements… that exist simultaneously and persist over time' (Smith & Lewis, 2011: p. 387). In practice our data suggest that, middle managers tend to relate to such tensions as "polarities", defined as: "sets of opposites which can't function well independently" requiring them to fluctuate their attention "because the two sides of a polarity are interdependent"; they do not have the option of focusing on one to the exclusion of the other (Johnson, 1996: p. xviii).

Initially, we meant this proposed conceptual framework to visualize the underlying processes and dynamics that came from the data structure interacting with the starting literatures. Our research participants seem to hold themselves accountable for a linear flow of assignment, effort and achievement. However, their stories and reflections on efforts toward change indicate a non-linear, integral part of collective emotions and politics. We consider that these data capture middle managers simultaneously creating, maintaining and disrupting the organization: providing a view into the interconnected, concrete "conditions of the field at that time" (Lewin, 1997: p. 211).

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

In this section of the chapter, we now extend beyond the initial three literatures summarizing our thinking sparked by data analyses to discuss and explain our findings. This conceptual framework (see Figure 2) stands alongside the elaboration of the data structure (see Figure 1), as a finding of this research. After addressing each of the seven elements, we will offer a case vignette and its discussion as a trial of the framework.

(#1) Being assigned roles and tasks for leading change. Organizational leaders increasingly assign to middle managers roles and tasks for leading change. By virtue of

position, managers in the middle can go-between otherwise disconnected actors and domains such as top and operating levels (Huy, 2002; Wooldridge et al., 2008). This capability contributes to middle managers being identified as change intermediaries with a significant sense-making role in organizations (Balogun, 2003; Balogun & Johnson, 2004). Opportunities for leading change from the middle often appear tied to implementing strategic changes. Therefore, middle managers can be required to add change agency to their individual jobs, as if this can be achieved readily within the realm of their everyday responsibilities. Additional pressure is placed on middle managers as a result of the gap between the desire to make change happen and the emotional and political complexities of implementing change (Neumann, 1999). This implies the need for further knowledge about what constrains and enables middle managers in undertaking change leadership roles and tasks (Woolridge et al., 2008).

(#2) **Shifting ways of thinking and enacting leadership.** We differentiate collaborative, distributed and shared leader/follower relationships from those in hierarchical authority relations (e.g. Fitzsimons et al., 2011). In established views of leadership, a leader might expect (and be expected) to show heroic qualities (Bennis, 2007). From this perspective, an individual leader with apparently clear lines of authority and responsibility aims to align followers with organizational goals relying on good interpersonal relationships to achieve them. This contrasts with a view of leadership as relational: as undertaken in an inevitable 'entanglement' between administrative and adaptive functions of leadership (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009); as present in the interface between leader/follower; and as caught up in organizational dynamics arising from power and authority interactions. Relational theories view leadership as socially constructed, understood through an analysis of how relating is

experienced (individually and collectively) and of dynamics between leaders' roles and others' roles (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Western, 2008).

For two reasons, this chapter focuses on the less hierarchical, change leadership practices and skills needed to engage collaborative and collective working. Firstly, just such a need (to distribute the tasks and responsibilities of leadership up, down and across the hierarchy) is present when senior executives mobilize middle managers to lead changes. Secondly, the idea of leadership as heroic endeavor is deeply embedded in individual and organizational thinking: collaborative practice may not be easily embraced (Turnbull James, Mann & Creasy, 2007).

(#3) Attempting substantial change while maintaining relationships. Middle managers face the challenge of making change while also maintaining cooperative relations with senior managers, peers and direct reports. Institutional scholars ask how actors can change institutions when their thoughts, actions and intentions are conditioned by the institution they wish to change (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). One proposal is that individuals are constrained by institutions, yet "also remain capable of artfully navigating and shaping them" (Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca, 2009: p. 12). Middle managers leading change exemplify this challenge of attempting to change within their institutions, while also being thoroughly conditioned to maintain them. Thus, our research seeks to understand more about how middle managers engage in intentional effort or 'purposive action' aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006).

(#4) Needing relational leadership for collective action. The practices of leading change from the middle take place in situations requiring complicated collective learning and negotiated leadership relationships. As institutional work, the context for middle managers

leading change involves grappling with tensions for and against making the required change happen. Such purposive action can be understood as continuous (individual and collective) struggles to work with underlying emotional and political dynamics of control and change (Voronov & Vince, 2012). As change agents, middle managers' individual roles need to be recognized as joined in the emotional, relational and political nature of action. Thus, we propose that leading change from the middle necessitates relational leadership in the context of collective sense-making and action (Pettigrew, 2003).

(#5) Unsettling existing role and authority relations. An under-examined contradiction integral to middle managers leading change is the degree to which this practice is likely to unsettle existing role and authority relations (Fitzsimons et al., 2011). Most organizations assign authority formally along hierarchical and functional reporting lines, while using less formal, parallel or temporary project and cross-boundary based mechanisms for managing changes (e.g. Sturdy et al., 2014). This 'both-and' approach proves challenging when strategic changes are required because strategic changes tend to evoke strong emotional and political dynamics, implicating many aspects of the organization (Neumann, 1999). Significant changes in one organizational aspect almost always affect others, resulting in overall change strategies with 'multiple, simultaneous initiatives' (Neumann, 1999: p. 54). Executives and senior managers regularly underestimate the collective emotions and politics stimulated by multiple, simultaneous initiatives. The result is that middle managers feel 'ambivalently authorized' (Neumann, Schneider & Clegg, 2009: p. 26), being unclear about the lengths to which they can go to negotiate and lead change.

(#6) Becoming capable or unable to shape and navigate change. Our interest in the institutional context of middle managers leading change focuses on "the small worlds of

institutional resistance and maintenance in which institutionalization and institutional change are enacted in the *everyday getting by* [emphasis added] of individuals and groups who reproduce the roles, rites and rituals at the same time as they challenge, modify and disrupt them" (Lawrence et al., 2009: p. 57). In this context, 'everyday getting by' involves middle managers in the rational implementation of their strategic role as change intermediaries (Balogun & Johnson, 2004). However, middle managers are capable actors whose organizational lives are "embedded in obdurate social relations and contexts" (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006: p. 226), which can generate restriction, confusion and ambivalence. Opportunities to lead change from the middle arrive already pre-set in the context of demanding conditions in the field. Middle managers being mobilized explicitly to lead changes that cross national, regional and organizational boundaries arrive with forces pre-set against their success: authorizing senior leaders would have to have cooperated across boundaries themselves to have paved the way for cooperation. This chapter explores data that demonstrates how middle managers become capable (or, indeed, unable) to shape and navigate change, particularly in relation to the collective emotions and political contexts that surround their attempts.

(#7) **Working through emotionality and politics related to contradictions.** Our proposed conceptual framework underlines the importance of dexterity with collective emotions in what middle managers need to do when leading change. Our research is not about attempts "to perceive, to process, to understand, and to manage emotions in self and others" (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Rather, our analysis focuses on collective emotion set in the uncertain and power-laden context of leading change from the middle. This approach differs from other studies of collective emotion, for example: the contagious nature of emotions (Barsade, 2002) or 'emotion perception competencies' (Sanchez-Burks & Huy,

2009). Here we link emotions with political tensions and 'contradictions' - inconsistencies and tensions within and between members of the social system (Seo & Creed, 2002) that undermine the targeted changes. Our data suggest that this situation may well require some "deep acting" on the part of middle managers leading change (Barsade & O'Neill, 2016: p. 65).

We highlight three such contradictions. First, middle managers are required to make challenging changes while maintaining cooperative relations under circumstances that unsettle established role and authority patterns. Second, middle managers continuously grapple with political tensions for and against making the required change happen. Third, middle managers are faced with the task of trying to embed change (through creating and disrupting activities) when change 'doesn't last' as the system maintains and otherwise returns to itself (Vince, 2002).

Case Vignette and Discussion

The case vignette that this section presents is a smaller story, selected from a longer, fuller story provided by a middle manager leading change. As the research methodology explains, this case was chosen from four, semi-structured qualitative interviews undertaken during phase two of this study. The main criteria for that choice was a trial of the emerging conceptual framework: to what degree can all seven elements be discerned and illustrated in this case? While crafting the case vignette presented here, however, a narrative analysis process resulted in a practical model for identifying 'key tensions in purposive action by middle managers leading change' (Figure 3). We used that practical model to help shape and inform the case into a vignette. The discussion that follows the case vignette considers how the case illustrates and informs both the component parts of the conceptual framework and the related, practical model.

Case Vignette

Executives in a large healthcare enterprise responded to a UK national strategy focusing on the ability of patients with (RP) "life-changing medical issues" to choose and book appointments more easily. They decided to introduce a centralized booking system, thereby removing booking from specialist clinics. Seven years on, the central booking service (CBS) had a terrible reputation. Some patients hung on the line for two hours before being answered; 44% hung up and extra clinics scheduled to deal with backlogs frequently had to be cancelled for lack of booked patients. At its inception, the CBS team had been located in a (RP) "dark and dingy basement" and (RP) "thrown in at the deep end". Several managers attempted leadership: (RP) "they had manager after manager and nobody got to grips with what they were doing". When a manager with impressive experience was appointed to run several units, of which the CBS was one, staff feared they would be sacked.

Four years into the seven years of poor performance of the central booking service (CBS), executives appointed a manager who was well respected internally for her program and project management capability. CBS, one of several units and projects under her new role, was an unwelcome presence. This new manager was known to have not supported the creation of a centralized unit years before. (RP) "To me they were just like a thorn in my side because patients couldn't get through: they just had a really bad reputation". Indeed, she wasn't motivated to undertake change within CBS for the first 18 months into her tenure. The trigger that (RP) "turned on my power" came with being put in charge of the (RP) "organization-wide program for improving outpatients". In reflecting on why she took so long to take up her structural authority, the middle manager leading change considered that she had allowed herself (RP) "to get caught up in an organizational myth that the team was useless".

The central booking service (CBS) manager subsequently became (RP) "very active with my usual approach of can-do, ask forgiveness not permission and don't sweat the small stuff". Early in this active phase of her change leadership, data emerged that specialist clinics would not cooperate with CBS. For example: they waited until the last minute to tell CBS about new clinics and then blamed them for the lack of patients. They refused to pass on necessary information electronically, insisting instead that CBS physically send around a trolley to collect files for appointments. Despite internal politics and mounting pressure to close the team down, CBS began to (RP) "improve outpatient experience: hanging on the line time decreased to 3-5 minutes and the hang-up rate to 5%". The Board of Directors wrote to CBS as a team saying (RP) "well done and would they take on more work and eight more people".

There had been a widely held opinion that the central booking service (RP) "was beyond redemption". The team itself (RP) "appeared emotionally flat and depressed… seemingly not knowing why they were under performing". The middle manager leading change initiated an iterative process with the CBS team, asking why they couldn't perform. They studied performance data, complaints, incidents and feedback from other users. Her goal was to help them take responsibility for what was going on. She signaled her seriousness one afternoon by cancelling all call making. (RP) "I've stuck my head out on the block and said I don't think it's you that are the problem, I think it's the system that you're working in is the problem". Together, they re-designed the workflow and considered how to (RP) "give the CBS team a voice" across organizational boundaries. They conducted telephone conversations with patients (gathering data and apologizing). After she authorized them to stop using a trolley to collect files, CBS staff visited booking staff in the specialist clinics in order to motivate them to give the right information electronically. The middle manager leading change (RP) "monitored and supported CBS closely over the next few months".

Case vignette discussion. This discussion demonstrates how the case vignette illustrates and informs the component parts of the conceptual framework (see Figure 2) that were known to researchers as a result of analysis of focus group data in phase one. It also manifests the practical model (see Figure 3) that emerged during the narrative analysis processes central to creating a case vignette during phase two. Indeed, components of the practical model form the outline for the discussion. We think the practical model clarifies the dynamics surrounding how middle managers are able and unable to negotiate change, through their social interactions with others and in the context of social structures that both restrict and release their ability to contribute to leading change.

INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

A key tension of *heightened anxiety* draws on the aggregate dimension of 'emotional processes and dynamics' (see Figure 1) and appears in practice as 'social interactions of leading change from the middle' (see Figure3). Research participants spoke extensively about an atmosphere of heightened anxiety that coincided with middle managers feeling swamped with pressure. Our findings suggest that emotional complications are delegated along with the idea that managing change is an ordinary part of a manager's job. In such situations, middle managers might attempt to manage emotions as a matter of operational competence or – perhaps equally - withdraw from them.

In the central booking service (CBS) case, responding to strategic pressure from central government contributed to a decision to centralize an essential input service impacting all specialist clinics. This change unsettled (without addressing) role and authority relations related to the workflow of booking appointments. The CBS middle manager's role implicitly

encapsulates the tasks of (RP) "bedding in the change" as matters of will power and common sense. Cross-boundary aspects (e.g. with patients booking appointments, relevant information technology units and specialist clinics) appear ignored or taken for granted. Anxiety builds as the worsening performance of CBS becomes intractable. Manager after manager proves unable to shape or navigate the operational and emotional challenges delegated to CBS. Anxiety turned to fear as the work of the CBS was seen to undermine a new initiative on outpatient care that originated at the highest level.

A key tension of a*mbivalent authorization* draws on the aggregate dimension of 'political dynamics and processes' (see Figure 1) and appears practically as 'social structures of leading change from the middle' (see Figure 3). Research participants exemplified variations of a common practice in organizations of using both a hierarchical formal authority structure for operations alongside a horizontal informal authority structure for change management. Thus, middle managers report conflicting expectations of being held individually responsible for leading a change that is simultaneously dictated and controlled from executives and senior managers. This means that their range of authority may be too narrow for change implementation, particularly as progressing change from the middle depends on cooperation across role boundaries. Middle managers leading change under conditions of ambivalent authorization may develop ideas about themselves as (RP) "people who make things happen".

In the central booking service (CBS) case, the act of being assigned responsibilities that included a seriously failing sub-unit did not result in action. Instead, this middle manager acted out her ambivalence and others' conflicting expectations for 18 months while CBS's situation worsened. Once she was assigned a change leadership role that incorporated cross-boundary authority (in effect a promotion to a slightly higher middle role, a bit closer to senior leaders), the manager understood the necessity of incorporating CBS into the

outpatient improvement program. She interpreted being charged explicitly with strategic change as requiring leadership that ranged widely and deeply. Subsequent, she and members of CBS purposely acted: vertically upwards to Board level and downwards to implicated, multiple sub-units; horizontally incorporating cross-boundary legitimacy within her division and across to other divisions; while crucially including patients, themselves poised on the boundaries of inside and outside the organization.

A key tension of *simultaneous motivations* draws on both aggregate dimensions of 'political dynamics and processes' and 'underlying uncertainty and ambiguity of change' (see Figure 1) and appears in practice as 'political dynamics' (see Figure 3). Under conditions of ambivalent authorization, research participants reported the necessity of finding some way to self-authorize. They explained challenges and contradictions they faced that disrupted their efforts, particularly that potential collaborators were undermined while trying to participate in cross-boundary changes. Middle managers leading change need to maintain current relationships and operations, while simultaneously creating something different with others. This involves finding ways to work through reactions to losses and to recognize and compromise on conflicts of interest – real or imagined.

In the central booking service (CBS) case, the active role that specialist clinics took to undermine the work of CBS highlighted a need to attend to systemic disruptions, along with building relationships with clinic leaders. While the manager felt confident to lead such changes, the data indicated she could not control changes in the clinics or the information technology departments. Being capable of shaping improvements for outpatients meant particularly navigating collective emotions in this political context. Relational leadership helped the various sub-units (CBS included) to come to terms with their simultaneous motivations. Somehow, they had to both maintain and disrupt their current ways of booking appointments, while creating sustainable developments with others.

A key tension of *contradictions and uncertainty* draws on the aggregate dimension of 'underlying uncertainty and ambiguity of change' (see Figure 1) and appears in practice as 'emotional dynamics' (see Figure 3). Research participants were surprised at the frequency with which their delegated authority was unrecognized or undermined. They were positive about their ability to convene planning and problem-solving meetings but despaired at how implementation was blocked. The more ambiguous the change tasks and processes become; the more competitive people become to retain what they have, while others might take risks. Being able to self-authorize - so that people could be encouraged to share the risks - required (RP) "hours of talking things through both behind closed doors and in small meetings of like-minded folks".

In the central booking service (CBS) case, ironically, once the problems in the CBS became intractable, it freed the manager to experiment at the level of workflow involved in booking appointments. Using relational leadership for motivating collective action allowed CBS staff to participate in diagnosing and negotiating interventions for improving their own situation. Building relationships with patients and with other booking personnel across boundaries in specialist clinics began a process of 'managing uncertainty from competition to reciprocity' (Marris, 1996). Anxieties and uncertainties were reduced as CBS staff successfully made and maintained improvements and other clinics benefitted from cooperating with them.

Key Tensions in Purposive Action

As both the data structure and case vignette suggest, middle managers' experience of change is a story of tensions. Our research offers a snapshot of this phenomenon with a practical model entitled, 'key tensions in purposive action by middle managers leading change' (see Figure 3). Examples from data include tensions between: their willingness and

their unwillingness to act; their emotional positioning as 'victims' or 'heros' of change; conflicting expectations on whether and when to lead and follow; and how their self-authorized desire to make change happen meets their experience of their authority being undermined. Such tensions arise from the continuous interplay of emotions and politics that infuse middle managers' understanding of leading change. Tensions of leading change from the middle are created and played out in social interaction; and they represent the contradictory work that people do in organizations – giving stability to social structures and institutional dispositions while at the same time making attempts to transform them.

The personal, social and systemic dynamics of interaction between senior and middle managers restrict communication and support disruptive over creative change - referred to in the data as (RP) "undoing the old and not quite putting in the new". This creates, and is compounded by, ambivalent authorization. Ambivalent authorization sustains several structural contradictions that further constrain interaction. Examples include constraints like: contradictory expectations between the individual responsibility of middle managers and how change is dictated to them; contradictions between roles that are given and roles that are taken; and contradictions of engagement between the individual's sense of an imperative to act and the desire to connect with others, often under difficult circumstances. Such dynamics stem from tensions between emotion and rationality in systems, which emphasize the domination of rational working practices and approaches that function as defenses against the anxieties of change.

The 'key tensions' model (see Figure 3) summarizes a self-perpetuating system in which simultaneous motivations, contradictions and uncertainties generate anxieties that inhibit communication about change and undermine the authority to deliver change. Often fueled by interactions between senior and middle managers, two primary dynamics stand out – heightened anxiety and ambivalent authorization. Heightened anxiety is constructed from

personal anxieties about (for example) being sabotaged, feeling threatened, being kept in the dark. Such worries can make leading change (RP) "an unattractive bargain" for middle managers, manifesting in various forms of self-protection. Ambivalent authorization shows up in difficult interactions between senior and middle managers. Classically, strategic challenges require collaboration across hierarchies, but the data suggest a preference not to communicate about change. Thus, untested introjections and projections strengthen, and chances of effective implementation decrease.

Conclusions

This chapter reports research that helps us to comprehend emotional and political challenges experienced by middle managers as they work with contradictions inherent in leading change from the middle. Using our analysis of qualitative data from 27 middle managers experienced in leading change, we have elaborated and illustrated 'key tensions' for middle managers as they engage in collaborative effort across hierarchical and vertical boundaries. This practical model shows a self-perpetuating system of heightened anxiety and ambivalent authorization complicated by simultaneous emotions, politics, contradictions and uncertainties. The model and the conceptual framework are discussed further through the mechanism of a single case vignette, which illustrates the non-linear and dynamic characteristics of middle managers' efforts and intentionality in the light of such key tensions.

The research presented in this paper has practical consequences, as well as implications for future research in two areas – the acknowledgement of paradox as integral to leading change from the middle; and that anxiety and ambivalence are pervasive emotions for middle managers leading change. In the following brief consideration of implications for future research and practice, we return explicitly to these as indicated by those numbered

components from our proposed conceptual framework (see Figure 2) to draw attention to a theoretical view that is wider than our initial three literatures.

Future research and practical implications: paradox and polarities. Our data illustrates two ongoing paradoxes for middle managers leading change (represented in the intersecting figures-of-eight in Figure 2). We use the term paradox here to refer to "contradictory yet interrelated elements (dualities) that exist simultaneously and persist over time" (Smith & Lewis, 2011: p. 387) and to distinguish such elements from other organizational tensions such as dilemma and dialectic. First, there is a paradox created from middle managers' attempts - on the one hand - at making change happen while maintaining relationships with others (#3) and - on the other - the unsettling effects that leading change has on both existing and disrupted role and authority relations (#5) – what we refer to as ambivalent authorization. Second, we identify a paradox between deeply embedded assumptions of heroic leadership (#2) and the need for relational leadership (#4), often across vertical boundaries, for collective action: also labelled focused versus distributed leadership elsewhere (Ford, J.D., & Ford, L.W., 2012).

We see these paradoxes as pivotal elements in managers becoming capable or unable to shape and navigate change from the middle (#6). Existing relational approaches have been concerned with the development of "leadership models that more accurately reflect the complex nature of leadership as it occurs in practice" (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009: p. 631). Such models focus, for example, on "the interplay between administrative (formal) and adaptive (informal) functions" and the "entanglement between administrative leadership and adaptive leadership" (ibid: p. 633). Here we are concerned with understanding the ongoing, contradictory and persistent nature of such dualities (Luscher & Lewis, 2008; Smith & Lewis, 2011). We think that future research on leading change from the middle will benefit from

more precise focus on peoples' experience of paradox in organizations as a "discomforting tug-of-war" (Lewis & Smith, 2014: p. 135) involving:

> 'The absurdity of coexisting opposites' that both evoke strong emotions and pose 'a double-edged sword… On one hand, actors may respond defensively, clinging to the pole that supports their preferred priorities, skills, and routines… Yet anxiety, fear, and discomfort may also foster creativity, innovation, and change through more strategic responses' (ibid.).

In terms of improvements in practice, we might well learn from middle managers who quietly (maybe even secretly) treat such opposites as polarities (Johnson, 1996) that they can manage by focusing on one (e.g. focused leaders and change infrastructure) until pressures for attention build from another co-existing force (e.g. parallel middle managers leading changes alongside and multiple projects). It seems to us that middle managers need to develop capabilities in articulating and explaining the impact of contradictory feelings, motivations and actions through public reflection (Raelin, 2001). Such dialogue may well enhance noticing (individually and collectively) how contradictions that are embedded into their distinctive organizational context both support and undermine their efforts to lead change.

Of course, public reflection has paradoxical effects. It is often anxiety provoking to speak out in situations that challenge established authority relations, while such actions also open out authority and accountability structures in organizations from their association with individual leaders towards more collective engagement. Improving managers' abilities to 'notice what we are noticing' in organizations (Turnbull James & Ladkin, 2008) encourages different interpretations, making complex dynamics more visible and discussable. However, it also requires leaders to accept the complex, messy and uncontrollable nature of leadership

in organizations, something that is not always personally or politically expedient for them to do.

Future research and practical implications: anxiety and ambivalence. We have emphasized the prevalence of anxiety and ambivalence expressed throughout our study. Our data also highlight that emotions and politics inevitably together combine to characterize the contextual dynamics that surround and inform how middle managers lead change (see Figure 1). By position and definition (Harding, Lee and Ford, 2014), social emotions and political contexts (#6) continuously inform purposive action (#7). Leading change as a middle manager therefore is synonymous with becoming capable of – or dealing with being unable to – shape and navigate change (#6), while working through emotions and politics related to contradictions inherent in the change (#7). Middle managers receiving change assignments as individual responsibilities (#1) pave the way for numerous mixed messages and misunderstandings and feed directly into ambivalent authorization (#5). Our data also indicate that change leadership requires working through collective emotions (#7) with relational leadership (#4) under conditions of disrupted roles and authority relations (#5).

Our research participants experienced both awareness and acceptance of being pulled in different directions; working with and through contradictory goals; and with tensions and conflicts that are integral to their role. From an emotional culture perspective, there may be elements of distinct and correlate cultures (O'Neill & Rothbard, 2017: p. 102) related to the simultaneous use of focused and distributed leadership (Ford, J.D & Ford, L.W., 2012). Our research indicates that middle managers experience this both-and, structural approach to change leadership, in particular, as both opportunistic and problematic.

Thus, we think that future research on leading change from the middle might expand on insights reported here specifically in order to comprehend more about the problems

created for middle managers both by anxiety and by ambivalence. Ambivalence, which is to say: "simultaneous positive and negative orientations towards an object" (Ashforth, Rogers, Pratt, & Pradies, 2014: p. 1454) is integral to middle managers' role as internal change agents. Ambivalence informs middle managers' mixed emotions but "the major contextual roots of ambivalence appear to be complexity and dynamism in the environment and the organization itself" (ibid.: p. 1456). To express this differently, the ambivalent authorization of middle managers is bound up with simultaneous positive and negative orientations towards authority in the system. In addition to helping researchers to understand middle managers leading change in the context of complexity, there may well be a sensible link to the multiple ways in which "consultant managers" are being used to deal with downsides of bureaucracy (Sturdy et al., 2016).

In practice, middle managers can benefit from understanding that both anxiety and ambivalence are normal (and not necessarily pathological) to organizational politics and to leadership of change (e.g. Hirschhorn, 1993; Neumann, 1999). Longing after the perfect organizational change infrastructure suggests that middle managers think there is a structural solution to the complexities that they are experiencing. Our view from this study is that it is important for middle managers to abandon such notions, and instead to work across positional boundaries in order to emphasize the collaborative efforts required to change (Turnbull James et al., 2007). Simultaneously, it will be important for middle managers to acknowledge that anxiety and ambivalence are likely to be ever-present aspects of such efforts.

An additional issue for practice concerns the identification of the most effective training and learning approaches that can support and inform leading change from the middle. These are likely to include interventions designed: to highlight the fundamental role of a relational perspective in leading change from the middle; to accept and work with negative as

well as positive behavior and action; to focus on collective as well as individual approaches to leadership and to connect with individual and collective emotional dynamics that surround leadership. One emphasis for the development of middle managers' capabilities as internal change agents will involve improving their determination to work with others above, alongside and below. The aim of developing such capability is to support collaborative effort across hierarchical boundaries in the face of pervasive emotional and political tensions that unsettle middle managers' role as change agents, as well as the persistent, complex authority relations that underpin this role.

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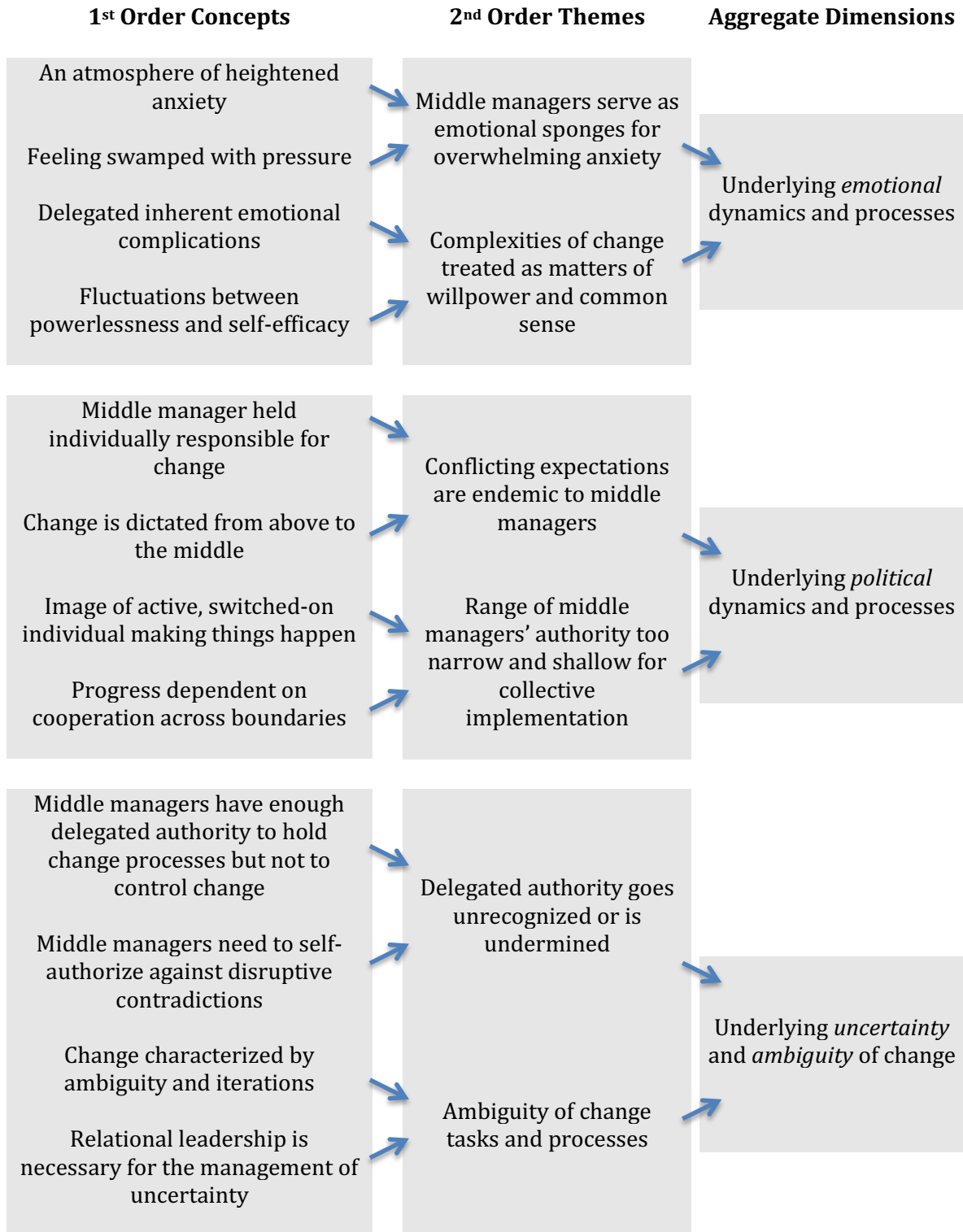
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Appendix A

TABLE 1: Research Participants

Overall Industry Sector	Organizations Operating in UK & MNC	Method & Location	Indicative Job Titles With Gender
Agriculture	• Animal husbandry (UK)	FG-B	• Sales manager (F)
Built environment	• Property & construction (UK MNC) • Construction of energy plants (UK & MNC)	FG-C FG-C	• QA manager (F) • Transformation manager (M)
Business services	• Business processing (UK) • Accountancy (UK)	FG-C FG-C	• Change programme manager (M) • Business change manager (M)
Finance & insurance	• Bank & insurance A (UK) • Bank & insurance A (UK MNC)	CV CV	• Head of organisational change, technical services (F) • HR (international assignment) special project coordinator (M)
Healthcare & education	• Hospital (UK) • Healthcare trust (UK) • Regional agency (UK)	FG-C & CV FG-C FG-B	• Special projects (F) • Change specialist at university (F) • Deputy director, strategy & business redesign (F)
Information & Tele-communications	• Software developer (UK) • Enterprises services (UK MNC) • Computer services A (UK) • Computer services A (UK)	FG-C FG-C FG-B FG-B	• Principal consultant (M) • Capability lead, programme & project management (M) • Business development (M) • Change manager (F)
Manufacturing	• Aerospace and electronic systems (UK MNC) • Pharmaceuticals A (UK MNC) • Pharmaceuticals A (UK MNC)	FG-C FG-C FG-B	• Service excellence manager (M) • OE (organisation effectiveness) change agent (F) • OE change agent (M)
Public services & administration	• Police (UK) • Information services A (UK) • Local authority (UK) • Information services A (UK)	FG-C FG-C & CV FG-C FG-B	• Head of ICT design (M) • Business change manager (F) • HR business partner (F) • Deputy head, business change (F)
Transport & storage	• Port authority A (UK) • Port authority A (UK) • Shipping (UK MNC) • Global logistics (UK MNC) • Salvage (UK MNC) • Port authority B (UK)	FG-C FG-C FG-C FG-C FG-B FG-B	• Managing director(M) • Deputy managing director (M) • VP human resources (F) • HR director (M) • Corporate business manager (F) • Port manager (M)

MNC=multinational company; FG=focus group; C & B=university sites; CV=case vignette interview

Appendix B

FIGURE 1: Data Structure for the Underlying Dynamics and Processes of Leading Change from the Middle

1st Order Concepts	2nd Order Themes	Aggregate Dimensions
An atmosphere of heightened anxiety	Middle managers serve as emotional sponges for overwhelming anxiety	Underlying *emotional* dynamics and processes
Feeling swamped with pressure		
Delegated inherent emotional complications	Complexities of change treated as matters of willpower and common sense	
Fluctuations between powerlessness and self-efficacy		
Middle manager held individually responsible for change	Conflicting expectations are endemic to middle managers	Underlying *political* dynamics and processes
Change is dictated from above to the middle		
Image of active, switched-on individual making things happen	Range of middle managers' authority too narrow and shallow for collective implementation	
Progress dependent on cooperation across boundaries		
Middle managers have enough delegated authority to hold change processes but not to control change	Delegated authority goes unrecognized or is undermined	Underlying *uncertainty* and *ambiguity* of change
Middle managers need to self-authorize against disruptive contradictions		
Change characterized by ambiguity and iterations	Ambiguity of change tasks and processes	
Relational leadership is necessary for the management of uncertainty		

Appendix C

FIGURE 2:
Conceptual Framework: Purposive Action in the Context of Constraints and Enablers

Constraints = Middle Managers Unable to Lead Change

2. Shifting ways of thinking and enacting leadership

(Deeply embedded heroic leadership)

5. Unsettling existing role and authority relations

(Ambivalent authorization)

1. Being assigned roles and tasks for leading change

(Change agency as an individual job)

6. Becoming capable or unable to shape and navigate change

(Social emotions and political contexts)

7. Working through emotionality and politics related to contradictions

(Essence of purposive action)

3. Attempting substantial change while maintaining relationships

(MM leading change as institutional work)

4. Needing relational leadership for collective action

(Grappling with, for and against change)

Enablers = Middle managers Become Capable of Leading Change

Appendix D

FIGURE 3: Practical Model:
Key Tensions in Purposive Action by Middle Managers Leading Change

Social Interactions of LCM
(Heightened Anxiety)

(Sense of personal threat)

POLITICAL DYNAMICS
(Simultaneous Motivations)

(Disrupting, creating, maintaining)

KEY TENSIONS
Leading Change
from the Middle

EMOTIONAL DYNAMICS
(Contradictions & Uncertainty)

(Secure base)

Social Structures of LCM
(Ambivalent Authorisation)

(Both top-down & horizontal)