

Who Succeeds In The Murky Middle?

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study examines technically educated middle managers performing ad hoc projects in flat organizations and develops a typology for examining the behavioral patterns associated with their effectiveness. Initial findings indicate the greatest success was achieved by “Type 1” managers (the Leaders) who were able to integrate collaborative selling skills and technical expertise within a web of both formal and informal interactions. Moderate success accrued to “Type 2” managers (the Learners) who used collaborative selling skills to develop social networks that allowed them to expand their own technical expertise. “Type 3” managers (the Leapers) primarily relied upon technical expertise as the tool for interacting with others and enjoyed only modest success. Although “Type 4” managers (the Laggards) had the requisite technical knowledge base, they were the least successful because their lack of collaborative selling skills made it difficult to utilize a compensatory social network. Suggestions are provided for leaders seeking to leverage and direct the abilities of key staff.

INTRODUCTION

As communication and technological innovations have converged to flatten organizations, many firms have reconfigured their architectures into matrix, network, virtual and other non-traditional structures. In the process they have expunged numerous traditional middle management incumbents and accentuated the role and responsibility of ad hoc project leaders. Many organizations now contain loosely defined internal work environments that we call the “murky middle.” Here managerial responsibilities often default to technical specialists. By tradition these individuals are considered “middle managers.” Yet many have little training or managerial experience. They often occupy their posts solely because of technical expertise (Webber, 2004).

Researchers have often noted the management difficulties experienced by technically trained people. Souder (1988) describes how the regimented linearity of successful scientists and engineers can often emasculate group ideation. Their technical mindset can “compel them to blot out things that may seem silly, or that smack of irrational thinking or fanciful excursions. Yet these are the very practices that lead one down new passages that may culminate in creative new ideas” (p. 532). On the other hand, technical capability is a critical prerequisite to effective performance in technical environments. Collaboration without technical substance produces only collaboration.

Researchers thus underscore the need for project managers to possess a skill set that includes both interpersonal and technical strengths (Codero, Farris and DiTomaso, 2004; Farris and Codero, 2002). Badaway (1982), for example, cautions that: “it takes a delicate blend of solid interpersonal, administrative, and, to a lesser degree, technical skills to succeed as a project manager” (p. 204). This success formula is not likely to disappear as more technical people find themselves operating in less controlled work settings. If they are to succeed in organizational contexts designed to embrace novel initiatives (Sull and Spinosa, 2005), project managers must be able to garner the support and commitment of workplace colleagues (Kim & Mauborgne, 1993). Without the authority of office, they need skills in what Cohen and Bradford (2005) refer to as influence without authority.

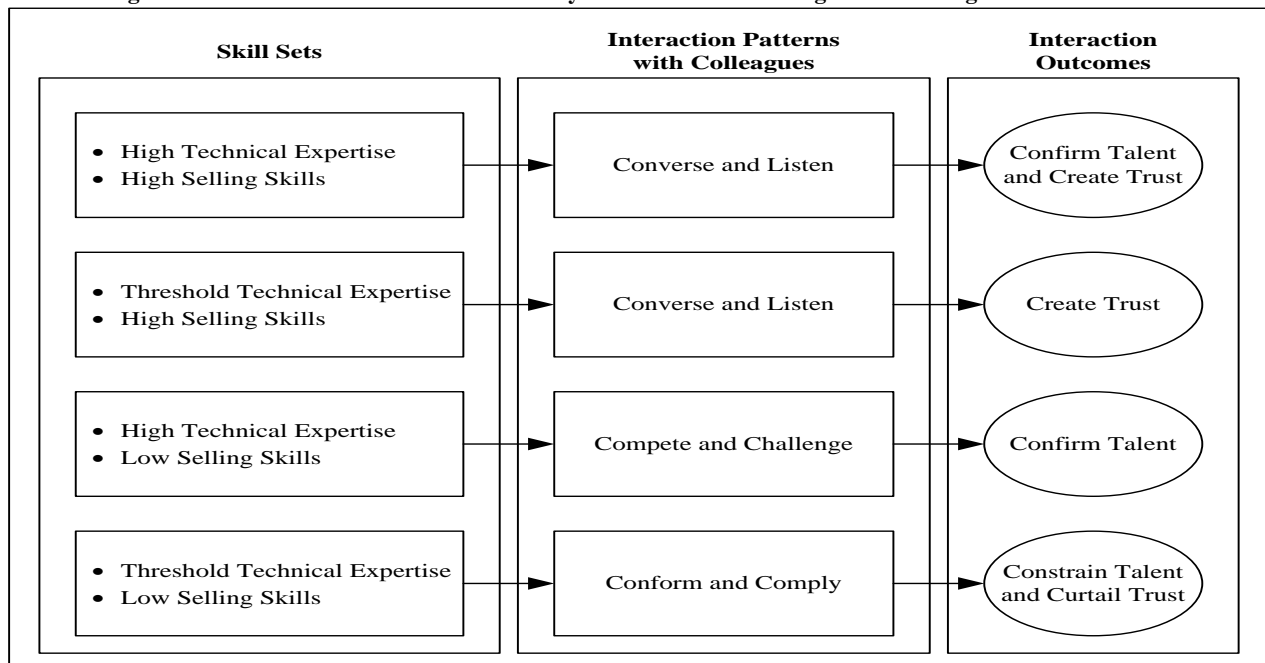
Technically trained middle managers are not the only ones who face this challenge. Salespeople must also achieve success in loosely defined situations with unclear power differentials. This parallel provides a useful framework for the current study by highlighting the need for collaborative interaction skills in combination with technical product knowledge. In a meta-analysis of the sales literature, Kainen (2001) followed business-to-business salespeople as they moved complex products and services through long sell-cycles with multi-party involvement. He

concluded that the demands placed on them are analogous to those of technically trained middle managers. Using this perspective, middle managers who compete on flattened playing fields can view the organization as a marketplace where new ideas gain acceptance and momentum through something akin to a selling process. The ideas are the product, the middle manager is the seller, and the buyers are coworkers, peers and other individuals functioning across a variety of intra-organizational boundaries.

Success in sophisticated business-to business selling environments requires a combination of several critical components. First is knowledge and technical expertise. Second is preparation for the planned interaction. Third is the real-time management of the interaction itself. When the latter two components are properly blended, the purveyor is considered to have high selling skills (Bosworth, 1995; Hanan, 1995; Rackham, 1998). They proactively listen to the other party’s critical issues, connect their own ideas to them and do so in a conversational manner that confirms their own technical talent and creates trust. The management literature supports a similar notion that careful orchestration of an inclusive and interactive process model is a *sine qua non* for success (Sawhney & Parikh, 2001; Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Based on available research, the authors have differentiated the interactive modes of the four combinations of technical expertise and selling skills (Figure 1).

The authors hypothesize that successful ad hoc project managers, like their counterparts in sales, will collaboratively use their expertise to interface with others in a way that produces joint gains. As they do so, they will also increase opportunities to augment their own technical expertise even as they solidify the social trust needed to support their projects. Thus the first two skill sets depicted in Figure 1 should be most associated with project success. The study further hypothesizes that ad hoc project managers who primarily depend on their technical expertise will engender less trust and so enjoy less success than their collaborative counterparts. Consequently, the final two configurations in Figure 1 will be suboptimal in terms of project success because they disengage talent from trust.

Figure 1: Interaction Patterns for Technically Trained Middle Managers in Flat Organizations

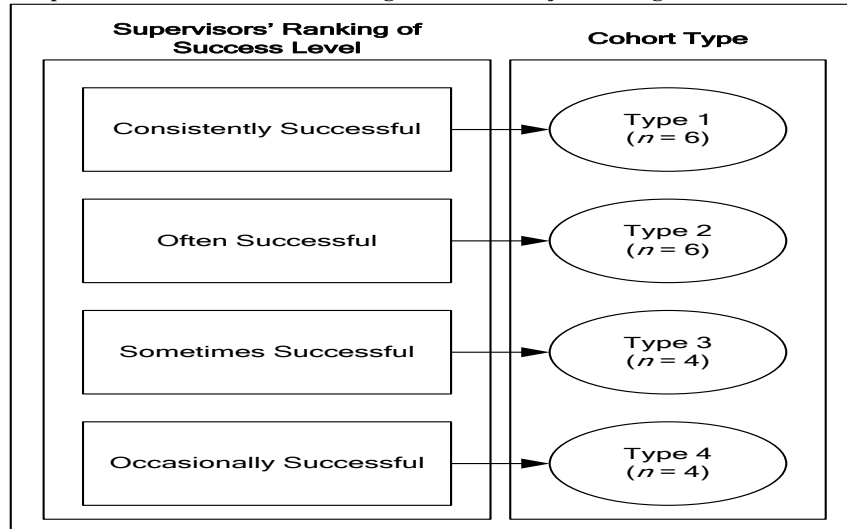


METHOD

This exploratory study samples a set of technically trained middle managers in non-hierarchical work settings and examines reasons for their differential success rates in managing ad hoc projects. The authors interviewed 20 ad hoc project managers culled from an information processing firm, an engineering services firm and a software manufacturing company. All those interviewed were technically trained college graduates who reported to the director level and managed projects that required collaborative interaction.

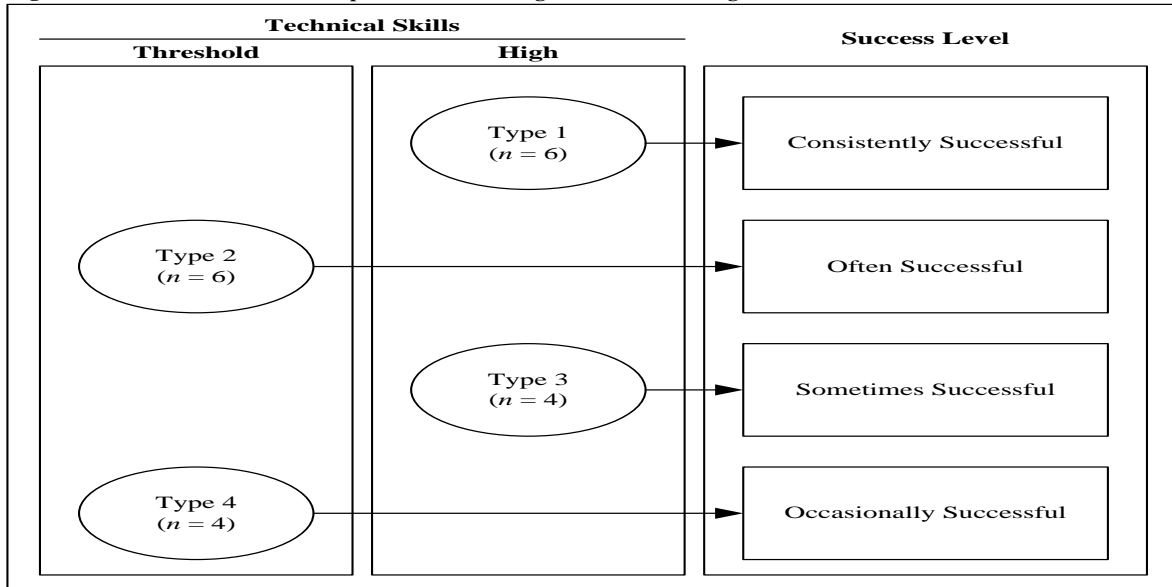
Success in managing ad hoc projects was the dependent variable. At the researchers’ request, supervisors placed each subject in one of the following performance categories: consistently successful, often successful, sometimes successful, and occasionally successful. These categories were arranged into cohorts that were held constant and respectively labeled: Type 1, Type 2, Type 3 and Type 4 (Figure 22). Rackham (1988) used a similar technique when he isolated salespeople at the Xerox Corporation by performance category and searched for the common threads of sales behavior among them. Middle managers in our study were unaware of the “project success” categories to which they had been pre-assigned by supervisors.

Figure 2: Supervisors’ Pre-Interview Ranking of Ad Hoc Project Managers’ Overall Success (N = 20)



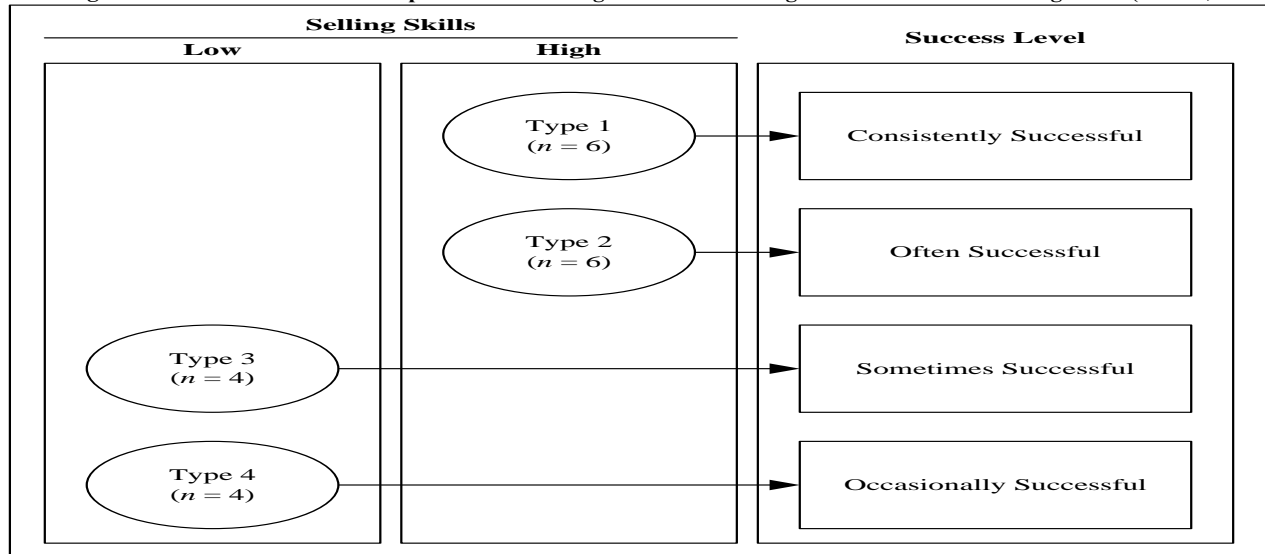
The second step of the research addressed respondents’ technical skills. All subjects possessed a basic level of technical skill as evidenced by the initial hiring decision as well as functional job descriptions. However, supervisors were asked to separate those middle managers who had high expertise from those whose expertise simply met the threshold requirement. This technical skill ranking process was removed in time from the success ranking process. As in the “success selection,” the middle managers were unaware of the “technological skill” category to which they had been pre-assigned by supervisors. The two rankings provided by the supervisors were then cross tabulated (Figure 33). The table shows the emergence of the Type 3 (sometimes successful) cohort of managers as one of the least successful cohorts even though they were independently rated by their supervisors as having high technical skills.

Figure 3: Cross Tabulation of Supervisors’ Rankings of Middle Managers on Success and Technical Skills (N = 20)



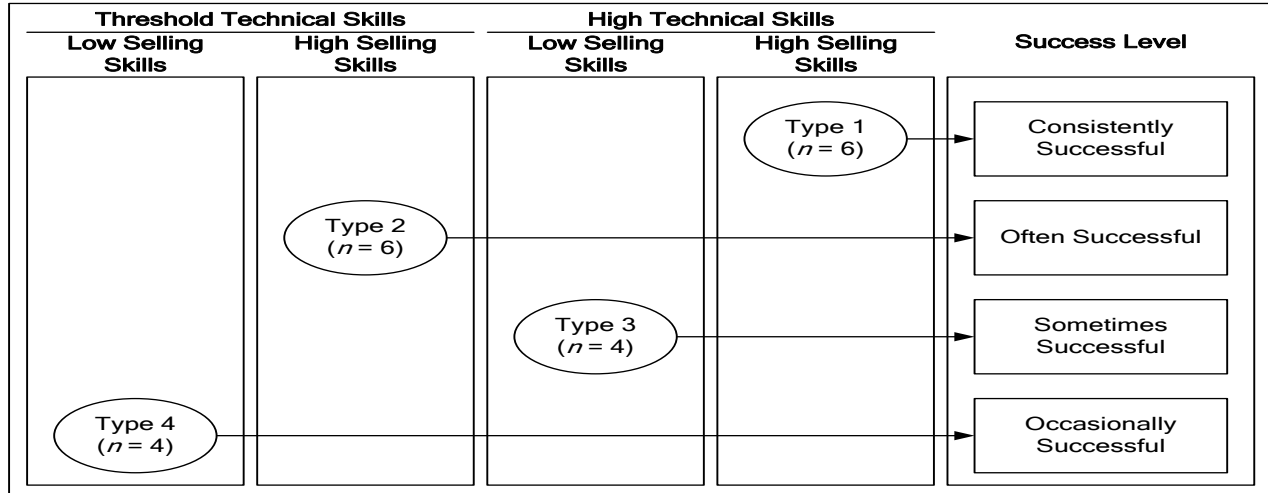
The third step for the study was to explore the independent variable. Here we employed a basic high-low range of collaborative selling skills using the sales paradigm as a basic guide. The authors conducted separate interviews with each of the individuals pre-assigned to the various ad hoc project success categories and technical skill categories. The intent was to determine how systematic the overall collaborative selling interactions were and the extent to which they sought to establish trust rather than play politics. Was the interaction typified by “hard selling” a preferred solution before a thorough diagnosis? Or was it driven by diagnostic questioning and “hard listening”? On the basis of these field interviews, it was possible to identify those individuals with low and high selling skills. Figure 44 cross tabulates these selling skills with the pre-established categories of success and identifies the emergence of Type 2 (often successful) managers as those having high selling skills.

Figure 4: Cross Tabulation of Supervisors’ Rankings of Middle Managers on Success and Selling Skills (N = 20)



The final step was to cluster respondents according to collaborative selling skills and technical expertise and cross tabulate them with the initial success categories provided by the supervisors (Figure 55). These findings confirmed the hypothesis. The top achieving cohort (Type 1's) had high selling skills and high technical expertise. However, the second highest achieving cohort (Type 2's) had high selling skills but only threshold technical expertise.

Figure 5: Cross Tabulation of Success Cohorts by Technical Skills and Selling Skills (N = 20)



RESULTS

The intent of this study was to explore lateral interaction among technically trained middle managers in non-hierarchical work settings and examine reasons for their differential success rates in managing ad hoc projects. The nominal data extracted from the interviews revealed distinct interaction patterns of ad hoc project managers that varied according to placement on the supervisors’ success rankings. In accordance with our hypothesis, the consistently successful managers possessed technical skill and were also cognizant of organizational dynamics. Like their counterparts in sales, they “had conversations.”

In further support of our hypothesis, the other high-selling cohort was more successful than those who relied strictly on technical acumen. Although this often successful group demonstrated only adequate technical expertise, it exhibited a greater willingness to engage in the collaborative selling interactions of the organizational marketplace. Like the top performers, this group “had conversations.” The other cohort in the middle success category consisted of managers with high technical acumen but low collaborative selling skills. These managers were sometimes successful but only within the confines of their knowledge base where they could “argue the case.” They were fond of hierarchical power and any mandates they could infer from it. Similar to less successful salespeople, they inclined toward “making presentations.”

The least successful managers were deficient along the collaborative selling skills dimension and, while adequate on the technical dimension, demonstrated no ability to use it as influence. They experienced occasional success by being in the right place at the right time.

Based on the variations of middle manager behavior within the success clusters, the authors propose a typology for categorizing ad hoc project management strategies. The four types listed below highlight the relative efficacy of various approaches used by middle managers in flat organizations.

Type 1 – The Leaders: These are the most consistently successful middle managers of ad hoc projects. They have skill and expertise in the business organization and likely have been involved in a number of ad hoc project assignments. They ask questions of peers and superiors to gain clarity on organizational needs. Although these successful managers possess skill and expertise, they readily acknowledge that questions bring further insight as well as peer support. These managers are conscious of reverse dependency flow; an inclusive approach builds momentum for the change they are espousing. One Type 1 manager in the study noted: “My time and energy is best used when focused on mutual problem identification. If I can get closure with the other person on how to frame the issue and have him take some ownership of it, joint problem-solving follows more quickly and flows more smoothly.” He spent extensive time with other players setting goals, establishing benchmarks, crunching data and rectifying errors. He also saw interpersonal relationships as “another part of the equation” and continuously strove to enhance information flow. By applauding the success of others, he looked to generate further success. Because of his tenacious concern, his group could outpace other technical feasibility teams and stay ahead of the curve.

Type 2 – The Learners: These are the often successful middle managers of ad hoc projects. While they may have adequate expertise in their field, their hallmark is a willingness to engage peers and superiors at all organizational levels by asking questions to augment their appreciation of organizational and departmental needs. If such middle managers do not have technical expertise in a particular area, they seek peers that do and involve them in the process. They realize that constructive outreach can inform their decisions as ad hoc project leaders. By virtue of their high selling ability, this cohort can secure the cooperation of relevant others and hence co-opt the extant knowledge base. This process helps develop a reputation for dependability and competence which in turn increases personal power. One of these “learners” took it as high praise when a team member observed: “You understand your capabilities and limitations. I consider that to be a hallmark of a good leader. That is probably why we trust you.”

Type 3 – The Leapers: These sometimes successful middle managers of ad hoc projects may win initial support simply because they are considered to be “right” given their experience and background. They are versed in their area and acknowledged for their expertise. These individuals carry out ad hoc projects by “knowing” the answer and telling subordinates how to achieve it. Such Type 3’s pay no heed to the behavioral nuances of flat surroundings. They either unilaterally impose the project plan or curry support from senior managers to push it through. They often assume power with self-styled objectivity. One of these “leapers” noted: “The most important aspect in moving a project along is to establish who is the most technically qualified to work on it. If I’m the one, I take the lead and establish the agenda.” Such vestigial comments do not always resonate well in a flat structure where process engagement and collegial endorsement displace command. Hierarchical techniques are unlikely to succeed in flat structures because the culture of these organizations generally devalues this kind of management. If managers in flat organizations resort to hierarchical techniques and “connections,” they undermine the efficacy of the very changes they seek to effect. However, it should be noted that such individuals are plentiful and even flat organizations regularly tolerate them if their technical expertise is difficult to replace. They are even accommodated if they have the political backing of powerful superiors or the leverage of tight timeframes. Yet there is no bank of goodwill on which they can ever draw.

Type 4 – The Laggards: These individuals have occasional success. While their technical expertise meets the functional job description, it is often at the low end of the scale. Additionally, many of them are not predisposed to seek out mentors or management training. Since they do not instinctively solicit the views of others, they enjoy scant automatic, upfront support. Deprived of idea exchange and devoid of social support, they have little likelihood of project success. One of these struggling managers offered a prototypical observation: “I think that asking a lot of questions puts your reputation at risk. It will cause others to assume that you don’t know what you are doing and create unnecessary confusion in the project.” These individuals seem uncomfortable with the uncertainty that often attends flat organizations. As a result of their insular attitude, they have little inclination to engage. Bereft of external ideas, the project soon flounders.

ORGANIZATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

The present study suggests that middle managers can grow their power by coupling technical skills with collaborative selling skills. If middle managers can create reciprocal engagements with other free agents in the organization marketplace, then it is reasonable to expect the successful pattern to recycle (Boyd & Kainen, 2005). Problem remediation reinforces professional respect. If middle managers extend their influence throughout the organization in this manner, they will exercise leadership, augment power, and enhance their reputation as managers. However, if they do so with a Machiavellian mindset, they will assuredly undo the trust necessary for the collaborative process to produce results. Like their counterparts in sales, their success relies heavily upon internalized ethical mandates that guide ongoing interactions.

Results from the study suggest a number of specific implications. Type 1 managers find the most success in flat organizations, but they must guard against a fatal mistake. With experience and familiarity comes confidence. Complacency can ensue, causing them to forego questions. When that happens, they run the risk of unwitting self-demotion to Type 3. It is interesting to note that even the most successful salespeople sometimes experience a step backwards for the same reason.

Type 2 individuals are considered to be a good investment for the organization. These managers have the most potential. By virtue of continuous inquiry, Type 2 managers in time accrue a knowledge repository. With the acquisition of expertise, it is possible for them to become Type 1 managers. However, as with their Type 1 counterparts, such managers can be victimized by their success. As they increasingly acquire knowledge, they may come to believe that fewer questions are necessary, thus setting the stage for reversion to compliance management.

The Type 3 manager can sometimes gain temporary traction through expertise. However, since these managers tend to eschew questions, they lose the incremental knowledge that emanates from idea exchange. This constrained communication ultimately erodes any perception of information power. These individuals are often trained in computer programming, engineering, the sciences, sophisticated finance and other highly technical areas where truth comes in the guise of measurable numbers. As such, they do not seem to have the instinct to probe, interact and arrive at mutually modified solutions. Yet if these individuals learn to query, they can migrate to Type 1 status and experience great success. Those that attempt to re-tool in this direction are often found as a major portion of the MBA population.

Type 4 managers can become Type 2 managers if they ask questions. Yet given their reluctance to inquire, they experience the highest turnover. Moreover, they show little receptivity to training protocols for skill enhancement. By precluding the possibility of expanding their repertoire, they curtail their organizational effectiveness.

This research also offers senior managers a set of implicit guidelines to encourage those interaction patterns conducive to successful middle management performance. Specifically, supervisors must address how to reward and retain the Leaders who carry the new culture; how to develop and promote the Learners who show promise; how to identify and socialize the Leapers who are not hopelessly lost in technology; and how to reassign or remove the Laggards who are not a good fit for the organization. As senior managers recognize the value of collaborative selling skills, they will align their selection and training processes accordingly. By doing so, they will enable their firms to build a reliable cohort who can comfortably navigate the loosely structured environs of the “murky middle.”

FUTURE RESEARCH

Much of the leadership and change literature focuses on senior managers who can wield power and control over the structures they command. However, technical people managing ad hoc projects in the murky middle of flattened organizations will need additional guidance as they work with less control. The power to make change must somehow be manufactured when it is not explicitly conferred. Through collaborative selling, power accrual can eventually morph into leadership. Research and development on techniques for effecting this transition invite further exploration.

Another area for additional research revolves around the size, age, and strategic position of the firm. A variety of hypotheses could be developed that control for these variables while examining middle managers' performance success. For example, a high-tech start-up company or a firm facing intense competition might be willing to tolerate the conflicts, power struggles and high turnover that often flow out of "winner take all" cultures. One research question could be: Under what circumstances might the high technical expertise/low selling skills middle manager rise to power and gain a reputation as the model for high success?

The ramifications for technical middle managers in the murky middle become even more interesting if we acknowledge a new variable in the mix: More of these middle managers must electronically conduct an increasing number of lateral interactions with unknown players at globally dispersed sites. Yet the absence of formal and informal physical interaction can make it difficult to establish trust. Additional research in this area would help identify interaction techniques for producing effective outcomes in such a milieu. The computer technology that produces speed may also serve as a communications barrier. Researchers should look to this area as fertile fodder for extending the current exploratory research.

The present study uses simple qualitative scattergrams. Future designs should measure variability across measures in a continuous rather than a categorical fashion. Scholars looking to extend the authors' research should survey a larger population and then precisely plot the sample scores. While the present study shows that both technical knowledge and collaboration are desirable, it also suggests that in certain situations selling skills can trump technical expertise. In the murky middle, the right technical answer may not automatically ensure the collaboration of colleagues. If future investigators replicate these results in a more extensive population, they will lend credence to the success factors proposed in this paper.

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