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Gaining middle managers' support for strategic change: literature review

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MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

GAINING MIDDLE MANAGERS' SUPPORT FOR

STRATEGIC CHANGE: LITERATURE REVIEW

by

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Middle managers play a central role in the success or failure of strategic change. Senior leaders often refer to those who are reticent to support change as the "frozen middle." This report reviews the extant literature on middle managers' resistance to change. The literature describes middle managers as the central gatekeepers and boundary spanners in the organization. They are ultimately the sensemakers in the organization, taking information from senior leaders and interpreting it for others. Likewise, they receive an abundance of information from subordinates, peers, and outsiders and interpret that information for their superiors. When middle managers resist change, there are often compelling reasons for that reticence. These reasons often stem from a number of issues including poor communication from senior leadership, lack of clear goals, inadequate leadership development for implementing a change effort, fear of the unknown, lack of involvement in the early stages of the change, lack of authority or autonomy to execute the change, and lack of clear role expectations with respect to the change. Organizations that excel at middle managers' support for strategic change have processes in place to develop both senior leaders and middle managers to aid them in creating a system for rapid change implementation.

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ABSTRACT

Middle managers play a central role in the success or failure of strategic change. Senior leaders often refer to those who are reticent to support change as the "frozen middle." This report reviews the extant literature on middle managers' resistance to change. The literature describes middle managers as the central gatekeepers and boundary spanners in the organization. They are ultimately the sensemakers in the organization, taking information from senior leaders and interpreting it for others. Likewise, they receive an abundance of information from subordinates, peers, and outsiders and interpret that information for their superiors. When middle managers resist change, there are often compelling reasons for that reticence. These reasons often stem from a number of issues including poor communication from senior leadership, lack of clear goals, inadequate leadership development for implementing a change effort, fear of the unknown, lack of involvement in the early stages of the change, lack of authority or autonomy to execute the change, and lack of clear role expectations with respect to the change. Organizations that excel at middle managers' support for strategic change have processes in place to develop both senior leaders and middle managers to aid them in creating a system for rapid change implementation.

Keywords: middle managers, frozen middle, change management, resistance to change

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Executive Summary

The US Department of Defense is facing unprecedented change as it seeks to adapt to a shifting character of war. At the 2017 Surface Navy Symposium, VCNO Moran discussed the United States' challenge to control the sea. Further he said, "Our ability to operate anywhere in the world unconstrained no longer exists" (Moran, 2017). Both operational and organizational systems will need to be reinvented if the US is to stay ahead of these shifts. Middle managers play a key role in the success or failure of any strategic change because they are the central gatekeepers and boundary spanners between the internal and external environments. They move information up and down the organization and are key to getting the commitment of others in the organization. They play the roles of listener, coach, entrepreneur, sensemaker, and sensegiver.

This literature review addresses a common complaint from senior leaders—that some middle managers are resistant to and impede, change efforts. So much so, that they are sometimes referred to as the "frozen middle." This paper addresses the rationale for these challenges and offers alternative ways of thinking about this dilemma.

Research studies tell us that middle managers have a challenging job. They face pressures from top leaders as well as subordinates as they manage conflicting needs and priorities. They are usually the ones responsible for implementing strategic change, but they are often ill-prepared to do so. Among the challenges they face are a lack of professional development, poor feedback, minimal recognition, lack of involvement in strategic conversations, poor communication, lack of empowerment, and ambiguous and contradictory role definitions.

Lessons learned, studies, and successful experiences show that middle managers are more supportive of strategic change when senior leaders learn to reframe "resistance to change," clarify roles, create systems that support continuous change, make a strong and coherent business case for change, assess the readiness for change, create change plans, professionally develop middle managers, empower and involve middle managers, and provide support for middle managers throughout the change effort. Likewise, senior leaders benefit from executive development as they learn to better lead middle managers for strategic change.

Ultimately, the US Navy would be well served to build a capability for continuous change and a culture that supports change efforts. In other words, the Navy needs to become more expert at supporting change and less novice in its efforts. This move would create middle managers who are more capable of contributing to the strategic efforts of the organization and less likely to impede or resist change.

Introduction and Purpose

The US Navy is in the midst of executing a myriad of high-profile organizational changes across multiple N-codes and in the operational arena. While top management makes strategic decisions, middle managers are central to the successful execution of major initiatives. The purpose of this report is to provide a review of the extant literature on middle management. We explore what it means to be a middle manager from the perspective of both senior leaders and middle managers themselves—viewpoints that, we find, are not necessarily in alignment. We review key challenges faced by those 'in the middle' and provide a set of recommendations for how to address them.

Background

Complexity and rapid change characterize today's strategic environment. Globalization, the diffusion of technology and demographic shifts are creating changes that are challenging the US military's current capabilities. The US Navy and all services are evaluating their organizational capabilities including the knowledge, skills, and abilities of their forces. This assessment is causing the US Navy to reinvent itself to meet the global challenges that it will face in the near and far future. This reinvention will place a heavy load on middle managers who are central to change implementation. This report addresses a common complaint leveled against the middle manager: that some are resistant to and impede change efforts. This literature review addresses the rationale for these charges and offers alternative ways of thinking about this dilemma.

Who Are Middle Managers?

Middle managers are, most simply defined, individuals who sit at the intersection of those at the top and those at the bottom of the organization, both giving and receiving direction (Floyd & Woolridge, 1997; Stoker, 2006). In recent years there have been various proclamations that the end of middle management is upon us. Companies like Netflix, Zappos, and a host of startups are making a rally cry for greater egalitarianism in organizations, with claims that flatter organizational structures and streamlined processes obviate the need for middle managers (Hastings, 2009; Zappos, 2016). Some have even gone so far as to say that, "data is the new middle manager" (Mims, 2015). In contrast to the claims of this vocal minority, our research revealed that middle managers are still a prominent feature on organizational charts, and in fact they are as critical as they ever were to organizational success (Mollock, 2011; Whitehurst, 2015).

The Frozen Middle

Many senior leaders express frustration with what has commonly been referred to as *the frozen middle* (Byrnes, 2005) or the *layer of clay* in the middle of the organization (Dourado, 2007). There is a perception that those in the middle stand in the way of change, making an intentional effort to block efforts and initiatives of organizational leaders. A recent study found that 31% of middle managers were resistant to change efforts, while the number
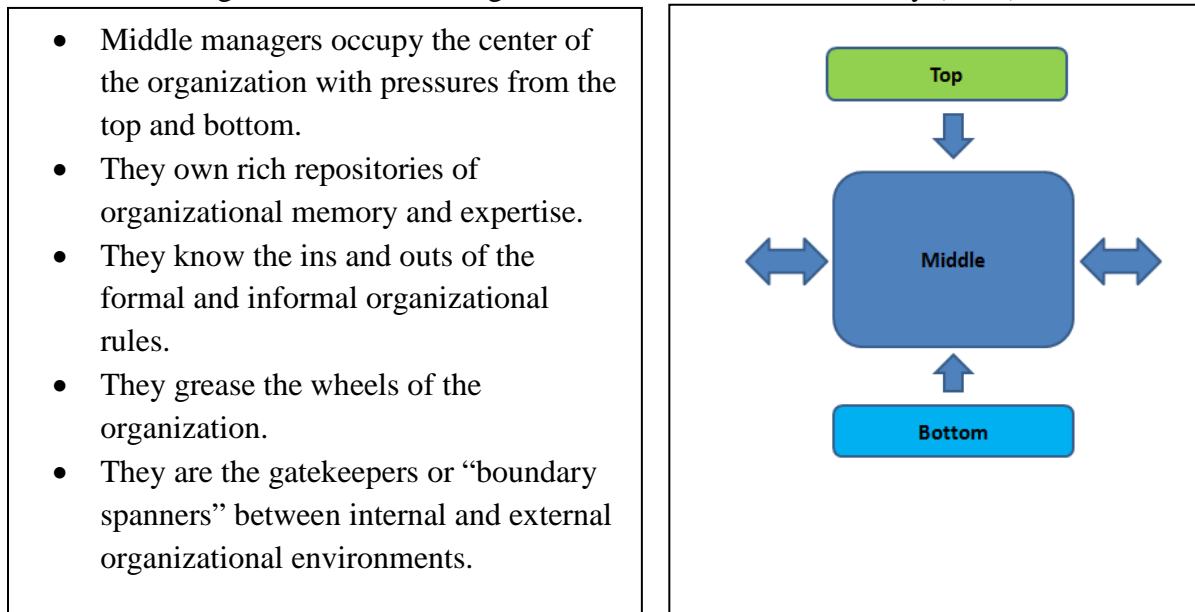
drops to below 20% for employees in other levels of the organization (Joseph-Little & Zolner, 2016). A variety of factors may contribute to this lack of action. The most prevalent assumption is that middle managers just do not care, or that they are actively resisting change efforts (Barton & Ambrosini, 2013; Dent & Powley, 2002). This is an oversimplification of a complex issue, however. These individuals sit at a critical juncture in most organizations, and as a consequence they are often faced with many conflicting roles and responsibilities. What could be perceived as a lack of action or "frozenness" could be relabeled as lack of information, unclear roles and responsibilities, or inadequate preparation and skills to manage change well.

In the coming pages, we review these factors while highlighting some of the key challenges that middle managers face. By taking a closer look at what it means to be 'in the middle,' *we challenge the assumption that the middle is frozen.*

Middle Manager Roles

Oshry (1994) spent decades studying the role of the middle manager. His observations revealed the complexities in the relationships between the middle manager and those who reside at the top and bottom of the organization. Figure 1 lists some of the major findings from his research.

Figure 1. Middle Manager Characteristics. Source: Oshry (1994)

- Middle managers occupy the center of the organization with pressures from the top and bottom.
- They own rich repositories of organizational memory and expertise.
- They know the ins and outs of the formal and informal organizational rules.
- They grease the wheels of the organization.
- They are the gatekeepers or "boundary spanners" between internal and external organizational environments.

McKinney, McMahon, and Walsh (2013) offer a number of common assumptions about middle managers and challenge those assumptions. See Table 1 (page 4) for a summary of the myths and challenges to those myths. First, many believe that middle managers are imbued with authority and can use that authority to make things happen. Instead, McKinney et al. claim that middle managers are embedded in social networks with numerous conflicting demands from all directions in the organization. Along with that authority, many also believe that middle managers' power emanates from their formal

organizational positions. Instead, McKinney et al.'s research shows that power actually relies more on informal or social attributes such as trust. Third is the misconception that middle managers must control their direct reports. To the contrary, McKinney et al. believe that control may engender compliance but is less likely to gain commitment from subordinates. Finally, many assume that middle managers best lead employees through one-on-one interactions. Instead, McKinney et al. say that managing the team, rather than the individual, is key to fostering commitment to a shared purpose and enabling culture.

Table 1. The Reality of Middle Managers: Myths vs. Truths. Source: McKinney et al. (2013)

Reality of Middle Management	
Myths	Truths
They have a great deal of authority and freedom to make things happen.	They are enmeshed in a web of relationships generating relentless and conflicting demands.
Their power comes from their formal position in the organization.	Their power comes from their ability to establish trust with employees, peers, and supervisors.
They have to control their direct reports.	They may get people to obey orders, but will not necessarily get their commitment to the team's work.
They lead direct reports most effectively through strong one-on-one relationships with individual team members.	The most powerful way to affect direct reports' behavior is to manage the team as a whole by fostering a commitment to a shared purpose and shaping a positive team culture.

Additionally, middle managers play these vital organizational roles (Table 2):

- **Listener:** Middle managers have the important role of developing an active listening strategy to ensure employees feel they have been heard (Whitehurst, 2015). They also shoulder the emotional concerns of their employees in times of uncertainty in an effort to keep work moving (Huy, 2001; 2002).
- **Coach:** Middle managers also play the role of coach for their direct reports, playing an active role in helping them to develop their skills and competencies (Stoker, 2006).
- **Boundary Spanner:** Middle managers sit at the intersection of many organizational boundaries, and those who are effective in their roles act as boundary spanners. They are able to connect people and ideas, and they help to facilitate the flow of information throughout the organization by leveraging both their informal and formal networks (Conway & Monks, 2011).
- **Entrepreneur:** Middle managers are exposed to a greater diversity of ideas than senior managers. They are closer to the actual work and customers, so they know

where the problems lie. This results in more diverse ideas and solutions to real problems, though this is only meaningful when senior managers listen to what they have to say (Huy, 2001; Kanter, 1982).

- **Sensemaker and Sensegiver:** Middle managers are sensemakers and sensegivers, and in this role they contribute both to change implementation (Balogun & Johnson, 2005) and strategy development (Rouleau, 2005). As sensemakers, they must take information from superiors, subordinates, peers, and those outside the organization and make sense of what is going on for themselves, their subordinates and, often, their bosses. After that, they become sensegivers when they provide their interpretations to those who are superior to them and to those who are subordinate to them.

Table 2. Roles of Middle Managers

Roles of Middle Managers	
Role	**Behaviors**
Listener	soliciting feedback, suspending judgment, providing support, conveying empathy
Coach	inspiring, championing, providing feedback, setting goals
Boundary Spanner	building relationships, communicating, leveraging informal networks, integrating, coordinating
Entrepreneur	experimenting, taking risks, sharing ideas, solving problems
Sensemaker and Sensegiver	asking questions, gathering information, interpreting, translating, storytelling

Middle Manager Challenges

Being in the middle is not an easy job. Managers must interface between the top and bottom of the organization, working to balance often conflicting needs and priorities. As a consequence, this is a stressful place to be. One recent UK study found that only 44% of middle managers reported being happy with their work-life balance, in contrast to 70% of those who are not in a management role (Korn, 2013). Another recent study found higher rates of depression and anxiety among individuals who sit in the middle of the organization compared with those at the bottom or top (Prins et al., 2015).

This becomes even more difficult when they feel they are not operating in supportive environments. Recent research has revealed a number of areas where middle managers have reported feeling dissatisfied, and many of these factors are directly impacted by the actions (or inaction) of senior leaders.

Lack of Professional Development

As the nature of work and organizing shifts, middle managers need to be equipped with new sets of skills (Whitehurst, 2015), but middle managers are often not provided with adequate opportunities for professional development. Many organizations take a 'barbell approach,' providing training to new hires and senior leaders while overlooking those in the middle (McKinney et al., 2013). This may arise from the assumption that periodic performance evaluations paired with on-the-job experience provide middle managers with the skills they need (Byrnes, 2005). As a consequence, middle managers become frustrated with a lack of opportunities for professional development. This lack of training can also stand in the way of career advancement.

Poor Feedback and Minimal Recognition

Receiving timely and tailored feedback on what they are doing right and wrong is essential to ensuring middle manager success. Research shows that employees who feel they receive inadequate feedback are at an increased risk for experiencing job burnout (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Many middle managers report that they would like to receive more feedback, however, and that they are not recognized for their efforts (Zenger & Folkman, 2014). Feedback and recognition would be especially important for helping middle managers better lead and implement large-scale change.

Often Excluded from Strategic Conversations and Poor Communication

Middle managers often experience feelings of exclusion and domination when it comes to strategic conversations (Westley, 1990). One survey found that only 10% of middle managers reported that they were included in strategy-related conversations (Antonioni, 2000). In the cases where they *are* included in these types of conversations, there is a sense that their ideas and concerns are not really heard by senior managers (Zenger & Folkman, 2014). This lack of listening is problematic for senior leaders. When strategy is communicated in a one-to-many, as opposed to a conversational, format, the result can be a lack of understanding of, and as a consequence resistance to, change initiatives (Josheph-Little & Zolner, 2016).

Lack of Empowerment

While middle managers may be assigned the responsibility for implementing change, they often lack the authority or autonomy to enact real change. Additionally, during times of organizational change and transition they feel a greater sense of powerlessness regarding the future of their jobs than do senior managers (Armstrong-Stassen, 2005). Research indicates that failure to empower employees and provide them with decision-making authority can lead to burnout (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001).

Ambiguous and Conflicting Role Definitions

With respect to change implementation, middle managers often receive ambiguous or contradictory cues from senior management regarding their role expectations. When they lack clarity around what behaviors they are expected to perform and, correspondingly, how their performance is being evaluated, the results can be disillusionment, disaffection, reluctance, or even paralysis (Currie & Procter, 2005). This dissatisfaction can then have cascading effects throughout the organization. A recent study by Chen et al. (2014) found that when middle managers were not happy with their senior managers, their direct reports were more likely to indicate they wanted to leave the organization. This stands in contrast to middle managers who were satisfied with their senior managers, whose subordinates reported lower levels of turnover intention.

Recommendations

While many challenges exist to creating an engaged middle management workforce, the good news for senior leaders is that there are also many straightforward solutions that can be implemented (Johnson & Hartel, 2014; Kuyvenhoven & Buss, 2011; USAID, 2015). The critical role that leadership plays in developing an effective middle management workforce cannot be overemphasized. The problem does not always lie with leadership, but this is a critical starting point. As Zenger and Folkman (2014) note, "when a good leader is in place, there's no reason to put up with a disengaged employee. But every employee deserves to work for a good leader. No organization should tolerate the harm that bad ones do to their people and their business."

Reframe "Resistance to Change"

Senior leaders who think of middle managers as the "frozen middle" often have a mental model of change that is characterized by the following:

- Resistance is inappropriate
- Middle managers should happily accept the change and execute it
- Managers and their subordinates are often the source of implementation problems
- Middle managers are sometimes just being "disobedient," "selfish," or "disrespectful"

Instead, senior leaders are often more successful when they alter their mental model and think of resistance as a means for revealing valuable information. Resistance has a driver. What might be driving the resistance? According to Ford, Ford, and D'Amelio (2008), resistance from personnel is often the result of one or more of these factors:

- Surprise
- Misunderstanding
- Emotional side effects

- Lack of trust
- Fear of failure
- Personality conflicts
- Poor training
- Threat to status/job security
- Work group breakup
- Fear of poor outcome
- Caused to do more work
- Pay reduction
- Uncertainty
- Unpreparedness

Senior leaders should ask, "Which of these factors might be present in my organization?"

Piderit (2000) states that resistance generally has these aspects: cognitive (thoughts about the change), emotional (feelings about the change), and intentions (one's intentions about actions toward the change). Senior leaders' understanding of these aspects throughout the implementation of a change effort is crucial. Yet leaders often treat a change effort as a rational, operational effort and forget the human side of the change.

Shifts in mental models also have the potential to change the interactions and dynamics between the senior leader and the "resistant" middle managers. Maurer (1996) explains that senior leaders often experience resistance as opposition, hassle, pain, annoyance, anger, and/or suspicion. In their quest to remove resistant middle managers they use power, manipulate those who oppose, apply force of reason, ignore, play off relationships, make deals, kill the messenger, or just give in too soon. These default strategies generally increase resistance, fail to create synergy, create fear and suspicion, and make it difficult for the senior leaders and middle managers to work well together. Those who reframe resistance generally take resistance seriously, treat those who resist with respect, design structures that aid communication, take the long view, and seek mutual gain.

Clarify Roles and Address Identity Issues

By clearly defining roles, responsibilities, and key capabilities, leaders can ensure that managers know what is expected of them. Most employees aim to please, but this can be difficult for them when they do not have a clear understanding of expectations.

Additionally, senior leaders should be alert to change efforts that might impact middle managers' identity. For example, when organizations move to self-managed team designs, middle managers often feel like their identity as a manager is being stripped. This often results in feelings of anger, frustration, and confusion. Senior leaders who are alert to these types of changes can better prepare their managers for the change effort.

Create Systems that Support Continuous Strategic Change

In addition to reframing "resistance," senior leaders should examine the systems that support the desired change. Waterman, Peters, and Phillips (1980) offer the 7S framework for diagnosing and improving organizational effectiveness. These seven interactive factors are key to any change effort:

1. Structure – Does the structure of the organization support the change?
2. Strategy – Is the organization's strategy aligned with the desired change?
3. Processes and Procedures – What informal and formal processes and procedures need to be in place to support the desired change?
4. Leadership and Culture – Do leadership and the organizational culture support the change?
5. Staff – Do you have the right people? Have you established management development programs to support middle managers?
6. Skills – Do people have the right skills to execute the desired change?
7. Superordinate Goals – Are the higher order goals that support the change effort clear to everyone?

Senior leaders are responsible for understanding and evolving organization systems that support strategic change efforts. If these systems are not addressed, it is more likely that the change will not be successful.

Make a Strong and Coherent Business Case for the Change

Senior leaders are responsible for developing and communicating the business case for a strategic change. Middle managers need to know for themselves and their subordinates the reasons for the change. We might expect that they will ask questions: "What's wrong with what we are doing now?" "What new behavior does senior leadership desire?" "What problem do we think this change is addressing?" It will be difficult for middle managers to get behind the change effort if they do not see a strong business case for the change.

Assess Readiness for Change

Senior leadership should assess the middle managers' readiness for change. Hiatt (2006) uses the ADKAR model for assessing readiness:

- Awareness – Is there an awareness of the need for change?
- Desire – Is there the desire and motivation to support the change effort?
- Knowledge – Do the middle managers have the knowledge to execute the change?
- Ability – Do the middle managers have the ability to implement the required skills and behaviors for the desired change?
- Reinforcement – Do we have a process in place to sustain the change?

Senior leaders often embark on a change effort without assessing middle managers' readiness for change. Inevitably, this lack of information leads to surprise, confusion, and frustration for both the middle managers and the senior leaders.

Create Change Plans – Communication Plans, Timelines, Feedback Loops, Progress Reporting

Large-scale change efforts require a planning process. Senior leaders should make sure that middle managers are equipped to develop change plans, communication plans, timelines, and feedback loops. Additionally, systems should be created for reporting progress, adapting the plans, and reassessing the change effort.

Develop Middle and Senior Managers (Conflict Management, Change Management, Strategic Thinking, and Collaboration)

To be good change leaders, both middle and senior managers need knowledge, skills, and abilities in topics such as change management, conflict management, strategic thinking, collaboration, team development, and communication. Senior leaders should not expect middle managers to execute large-scale change efforts simply through intuition. Organizations also need to develop their senior leadership teams so that they can maximize their alignment and more effectively lead middle managers.

Empower and Involve Middle Managers Early and Often

Research shows that middle manager involvement tends to increase the success of change efforts (Johnson & Hartel, 2014). Westley's (1990) model summarizes middle manager empowerment effects with various levels of inclusion (Figure 2 on page 11). The horizontal axis illustrates the level of middle manager inclusion in the strategy. The far left side of the axis represents middle managers who are included in the development of the strategy, and the right side represents middle managers who are excluded from the process. The vertical axis represents the level of empowerment of the middle manager, ranging from passive to active.

In the lower right quadrant, we would expect that a middle manager who has been excluded from the change process, and not empowered, to be apathetic toward executing the change effort. In the lower left quadrant, we would expect a middle manager who is included in the process, but not empowered, to be compliant in executing the change but to take little initiative.

In the upper right quadrant, we would expect a middle manager who is excluded from the change process, but empowered, to be resistant and/or bureaucratic in the execution of the change. This condition might be true because of the middle managers' lack of understanding of the change or a disagreement with the change effort that has not been taken into consideration by senior leaders.

Last, and the most ideal scenario, are the middle managers who are both included in the change process and empowered to execute the change. These middle managers are most likely to be highly supportive, committed to the change, and willing to be part of the coalition for change. These managers are more likely to participate actively in the change by providing senior leaders with ongoing feedback and by helping senior leaders come up with good ideas on how to better execute the change.

Figure 2. Middle Management Inclusion and Empowerment. Source: Westley (1990)

	Included	Excluded
Active	**Empowered and Committed, Part of the Coalition**	**Resistant and Bureaucratic**
Passive	**Compliant, No Initiative**	**Apathetic**

Empowerment (vertical axis, Active to Passive)

Inclusion in Strategy (horizontal axis, Included to Excluded)

Identify and Provide Support to Middle Managers throughout the Change Effort

Middle managers will likely require support in the change effort. Senior leaders should provide middle managers with feedback, recognition, and resources throughout the change process. Large-scale change is not a one-shot effort. In a large organization, it may take months or even years to execute a change.

Conclusion

The US Navy faces unprecedented change in its attempt to adapt to technological advances and global political shifts. Strategic change is becoming increasingly challenging and complex for several reasons: 1) The Navy has a large, diverse workforce. With more than 600,000 active duty, reserves, and civilians, the workforce includes a large number of employees who differ by age, gender, ethnicity, race, hierarchical level, education, geography, and function. This diversity creates cultural differences that need to be recognized and addressed. 2) Senior leaders, who often initiate change efforts, rotate every two or three years. While these rotations have advantages, they also create churn and diminish continuity within the various commands. 3) The US Navy is 242 years old. It is imbued with tradition and thousands of established routines that are difficult to change. The enormous bureaucratic system has numerous controls and rules that make it difficult to be flexible, agile, and adaptable.

If the Navy desires to lead effective strategic change, perhaps it needs to become more expert at change management. Research shows that cognitive processes of experts versus novices differ. Experts have well developed strategies to draw on, whereby novices

are simply left to trial and error (National Academy of Science, 2000). In the US Navy, the majority of middle and senior managers are not prepared or developed well to lead and manage large-scale, complex change efforts. In other words, the Navy has a naïve and novice system of change management. It has not established a culture of change, and it does not systematically prepare middle managers or develop systems to support change. Likely senior leaders are not prepared or developed to support middle managers in the change efforts.

If senior leaders wish to gain support from middle managers for strategic change, they must begin to think more systematically about ways in which the US Navy might build a change capability that would sustain the many change efforts that are ahead.

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