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CHANGE FROM THE MIDDLE: A GROUNDED THEORY APPROACH ON MIDDLE MANAGER-INITIATED ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE FROM A SOUTHEAST ASIAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Prior studies on the strategic influencing done by middle managers emphasized on a unidirectional sensemaking and failed to explore how middle managers utilized discursive capabilities in engaging stakeholders in change projects. To forward this, we used the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory as embedded within the power distant cultural norms of Philippine society. Using the LMX model as frame, we aimed to understand how middle managers position and navigate themselves to promote change upward in the organizational hierarchy. Respondents for this study were middle managers in small or mid-sized companies reporting to a business unit with subordinates working under them. Results showed middle managers utilized smooth interpersonal consultative relationships to strategically influence others, and paired this with the financial and output-focused language of their superiors. Communication, negotiation, and persuasion were considered essential leadership skills in working with peers and subordinates, while expectations of responsibility and autonomy helped initiate change. These findings open the discussion for leadership development.

Keywords: 'LMX', 'middle managers', 'organizational change', 'culture', 'Philippines'

1. Introduction

Middle managers have traditionally been expected to navigate their organizational context, act strategically, and influence co-workers toward institutionalizing change strategies, despite their lack of formal authority [56]. Past research have shown how these middle managers utilized their increasing strategic influence at different organizational levels to propel change[9]; [12]; [21], since they have been deemed important partners in conducting organizational change [32]; [1]; [61]; [30]; [31]; [13]; [8]; [17]; [36]; [45]; [48]; [55], [23].Studies have investigated how middle management sense giving and sense-making [66], [58]; [56]; [47]; [37]; [9]; [8]; [7]; [27], their supportive role in strategy making [24];[25];[14], and creating strategic agency [48] were valuable in a top-down decision-making process, with the top leader initiating action and the middle managers dealing with execution issues. Other studies (see [46]; [3]; [45]; [38]; [19]; [24],[23]; [18] described the context where middle managers try to sell issues to execute changes but did not specifically consider the quality of leader-member exchanges (LMX) to explain differences in issue-selling approaches.

These studies used samples from the global West; hence, their results may not be directly applicable to the global East due to varying cultural nuances.

Our study aimed to fill this gap by describing the processes middle managers do to convince top management to approve with their proposed strategic changes to allow implementation of organizational changes. Rather than proceed from a middle-manager-as-intermediary mindset, our study focused on the middle-manager-as-initiator of change programs. Thus, the findings presented here suggest similarities and differences in middle manager-initiated change processes that rely on the quality of the LMX interaction, as well as sub-processes endemic to a collectivist Southeast Asian context. This extended the findings of Ling and colleagues (2005) [45] with the addition of a description of an emergent context-laden grounded theory model. To achieve this, we reviewed literature about issue selling, culture-influenced organizational change, and LMX, while understanding the unique experiences and contexts of middle managers as they introduce change programs in their own organizations. We then described the methods and the emerging resultant grounded theory model, concluding with strategic and research implications of the findings and recommended future research directions.

Issue Selling

"Middle management" in this study is the layer of management below top management and above frontline management [48]; Wooldridge et al., 2008; [22];basically, these managers "supervise supervisors and are supervised by others" [18]. They perform roles in organizational change such as influencing their superiors towards change, interacting with their subordinates to get buy-in, and managing stakeholder resistance in relation to their proposed changes. This process of getting people's attention and making them understand issues was termed issue selling [18]. Middle managers used this strategy of issue selling to influence issue recognition and diagnosis, especially of problems top leaders would not have paid attention to if these had not been mentioned by middle managers [20]; [18].At the outset, middle managers made two key decisions: to initiate issue-selling or not, and once decided to do so, how to do it [45].

According to [18], issue selling usually commenced at the earlier portion of change management strategies through convincing top leaders about change initiatives. As the change process went along, further issue selling was needed to be done on vertical and horizontal relationships [56]; [8]; [20] to propel and sustain the change momentum, while taking emotions into account [39]. This focus on emotions was deemed particularly important to ensure the success of the change effort [35].

Issue selling was described as a series of movements designed to be commitment-building exercises for all those involved [45];[20]. There were other tactics middle managers use to gain traction with their organizational change ideas, such as gaining familiarity with the audience, linking the change to the organization's priorities,

managing stakeholders' emotions, using proper timing, involving others rather than doing it alone, being mindful of and follow organizational norms, and presenting specific suggestions[3]. [38] described issue selling in terms of learning from experiences culled from interactions with stakeholders affected by the change effort, making full use of resources such as formal authority, relationships, expertise, normative knowledge – adapting and adjusting with these to make the process more effective.

These studies mentioned were all done in the global West and therefore accounted the cultural facets of their samples. Unfortunately, scant literature existed on this same topic from the global East that could provide a different cultural lens. Thus, our study, couched within a Southeast Asian context aimed to provide a model that illustrated similarities and differences with these earlier models, highlighting how culture heavily shaped middle management agency.

Cultural Underpinnings

Triandis in 2000 [62] defined culture as a "shared-meaning system" (p. 146) of people sharing a common language, area, or historical moment; or "the way by which a group of people solves problems and reconciles dilemmas" [65]. Similarities and differences in values exist across cultures, with the differences leading to dissimilar behaviors and considerable variety across nations [57]. Leadership research, therefore, should highlight these cultural dimensions since the cultural values intrinsic in different countries consequently influence leadership

action [44]; Alves et al., 2005), making it problematic to expand leadership understanding globally in a one-size-fits-all design (Steers et al., 2012; Ulrich, 2010).For instance, [60] found feedback-seeking behavior varied greatly in individualist versus collectivist cultures. In collectivist cultures, the primary concern is on preserving relationships and having benign processes in conflict resolution [63]. As such, this emphasis on relationship preservation and maintaining smooth interpersonal relationships was found essential in studying the interaction between top and middle managers, and between middle managers and their direct subordinates.

These differences in cultural nuances led to disparities in how middle managers approach issue selling, strategy making, prioritization of issues, and interpretation of top management intentions [45]. Studying leadership roles in shaping change management processes, therefore, must have respected a country's peculiarities and nuances "unique in the studied context, [thereby] requiring an indigenous approach" (Zhang et al., 2012, p. 1064), similar to [43] assertions.

The Philippines, with its collectivist [33]; [29]; [64], humane-oriented [40], conformist [57], and highly power-distant [33] culture, may have its own nuanced framework in understanding leadership and leader-initiated processes dissonant from other nations and global contexts. Given the cultural underpinnings besetting management and leadership agency, leadership and change management studies should have acknowledged these cultural differences –

comprehending leadership behaviors and roles based on cultural, and methodological and substantive aspects [11] while taking care not to be overly narrow and parochial [44].

Leader-Member Exchange Theory

The variances in interaction quality between leaders and in-group versus out-group subordinates were the focus of the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory [28]. Alternatively, these gave rise to differences in treatment or approaches between out-group and in-group members with their leader. LMX theory posited that effective leadership processes happen when leaders and followers chose to develop mature and mutually beneficial relationships to access the many benefits these relationships may reap [28]. These led to better organizational changes due to the presence of better-quality leader-member exchanges [2], as these relationships were able to generate bases of incremental influence [42] necessary for effective leadership.

Using LMX as a frame, our research aimed to understand how middle managers used their agentic roles within the organization to promote change in the organization. The combination of leader-member (middle manager) relationships, organizational nuances, and culture developed better insights on how organization members understood and acted on change initiatives.

Qualitative Approach

In doing our research, we assumed "a new framework for leadership studies [must] be built upon a direct, phenomenological experience of leadership" [10]. Quantitative research often predicted behavior through distinguishing between subjects and objects [10], identifying a determined cause and a perceived effect. In contrast, qualitative methods interpreted human behavior as embedded within complex social processes, where the interaction of culture and context help shape agentic actions. In this research, we sought to understand the change management process acted on by middle managers using qualitative methods because it provided vividness and a large density of information regarding the concept [4] and allowed us to understand processes by which actors interpret and construct meaning out of intersubjective experiences [59];[53].

Specifically, we used grounded theory to identify middle management strategies on change processes, utilizing methodologies and analysis rooted in psychology. Grounded theory method allowed theory to emerge from and become grounded in the data, to the extent that the adequacy of the theory cannot be divorced from the process of creating it [26]. It progressively integrated various processes that emerge to a higher level of abstraction, such that the overarching social process explains the variation in all lower concepts and processes [51].

2. Method

Participants

Twelve respondents from 12 different business organizations participated in the study. They were middle managers in small to large-sized companies from different

industries. Being middle managers, they reported either to a function, business unit, or company head, with subordinates working under them. All of them worked in Philippine-based companies, either in Philippine subsidiaries of multinational companies or in Filipino-owned companies. For those coming from large companies, these middle managers reported to a head-of-function or a Vice-President, General Manager, President or Director, and have front-line managers (or officers/supervisors) working under them. For those coming from smaller institutions, these middle managers reported to a business owner who took an active role such as a President, Managing Director, or Chief Executive Officer.

To join in the research, the participants had to be a: [1] middle manager in any organization for [2] at least one year, and had [3] commenced a strategic change effort during the most recent year. It was not imperativeto determine the success of their proposed change efforts; what mattered was that the middle manager proposed it and that the plan was implemented. Location, gender, education level, age, and marital status were not controlled as these demographics had no bearing on change institutionalizations.

Instruments

A standardized semi-structured interview guide was used to ask questions to the respondents. This interview guide asked about their role in the organization and level of relationship (LMX) with their superiors. It also investigated in the processes involved in their change initiatives including causes for the change, steps used to introduce their

projected change to their bosses, procedures underwent to ensure change institutionalization, hindrances encountered, and steps they would have altered to improve on what they did. This allowed participants to elucidate a progression of actions to describe how middle managers initiated the change. The tool was pilot tested to a middle manager and feedback was asked to edit and restructure the guide.

Aside from this, an informed consent form was crafted, given, and read to the respondents before data gathering to ensure their understanding, agreement, and rights as the data source as required by ethical procedures. The document explained the rationale behind the research, the limits of their participation, their contribution to the body of knowledge, and the parameters involved in privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality of their information and their data.

Procedures

We sent out invitation emails within our networks to find individuals corresponding to the participant requirements. Once the target respondents confirmed agreement and is within the inclusion criteria, they were invited to an interview. Interviews were done in a location conducive for the interview to occur that we and the participant agreed upon. Prior the interview, respondents were handed the informed consent form, which was read and explained to them. Once they agreed to the informed consent form, they were asked to sign it and only then did the interview commence. Interviews took around 45 to 70 minutes depending on response

speed depth of answers by the respondents. The respondents were thanked after the interview and were asked if they wanted a copy of the research output, which would be freely given to them.

With the respondents being in crucial and sensitive middle management positions, it was clear that confidentiality and anonymity were highly significant in this study. We used codes while analyzing the data to anonymize identities of our respondents. In addition, we reported the data in aggregate rather than individually to obscure who said which information. At the researcher level, all the data was kept secure in exclusively one laptop, with the data to be disposed after three years of storage after publication. All physical documents identifying the respondents were shredded immediately after accomplishing the paper.

Data Analysis

The method used for data analysis followed the guidelines [15] recommended for social constructivist grounded theory. In this method, analysis followed the sequence of conducting initial coding, focused coding, raising focused codes to conceptual categories, and finally memo writing. The data was examined and coded line-by-line to identify participants' thoughts regarding the questions in a coherent manner. These emerging codes were categorized into focused codes through judging which of the initial codes made most analytic sense. Through constant iteration and comparison between codes, categories, and interview responses, the focused codes were then elevated to conceptual handles by choosing

relevant terminologies that cuts across different disciplines. The conditional requirements of these categories, descriptions, and their conceptual definitions were then crafted as the model emerged.

We classified the interviewees into two, those who fall into the +LMX category, and the -LMX category. Interviewees in the first category expressed ease in dealing with their bosses, and/or showed through their examples that their bosses sought their counsel in making decisions or deferred to their judgment. On the other hand, we classified as -LMX those who expressed discomfort or any other negative feelings in their relationship with their bosses, and/or showed through their examples that they had to resort to different tactics just to get their bosses' attention.

3. Results

Since we were trying to develop a process model of middle manager-initiated organizational change, we arranged the focused codes in a sequence of steps. The data generated the following focused codes, based on the clustering of the relevant initial codes: adjust and adapt to the culture and realities of the organization; establish the need for the middle manager as necessary change agent; cultivate a personal and professional relationship with the boss; plan the change effort; get support from boss to carry out the change; communicate change plan to the larger group; overcome resistance from other stakeholders; execute change; and fix the kinks in execution.

After identifying the focused codes, we

raised these to conceptual categories: Imperative relationship development with the superior; Adjust to organizational realities and establish Middle Manager Credibility; Detail the change effort and seek superior approval and support; Manage stakeholders, Higher/lower levels of autonomy; and Fix the kinks in execution.

The results presented here showcase conceptual categories generated after the iterative process of analyzing the collected data. The data indicated codes and sample verbatim responses from participants. References in parentheses denoted the letter code assigned to the person and the line number of the quotation from the transcriptions.

Imperative Relationship Development with the Superior

Organizational changes initiated by middle managers need to pass through their superiors for scrutiny and approval. Cultivating a personal and professional relationship with the superior appeared as necessary prerequisite, and this included getting to know their supervisors, what their motivations were, and what would get them to approve their proposals.

Cultivating this relationship with their leaders involved mutual understanding of working styles borne out of years of working together. A participant spoke of this familiarity: "I know how she works. She knows how I work. And then she knows if I have a suggestion, she knows it's not only how I see it as a manager, I see it also as an employee, as a rank-and-file, because I've

also been there" (CVB, 43). Other respondents echoed this, saying: "We've been working together for almost 12 years, I feel it's OK. I feel I could just go into his office and address my concerns and it's easy" (EB, 57); "In terms of communication, we're quite open. I can tell him the challenges that we have, and also the successes" (MDM, 250).

Even if one was not known well by the superior, it was still deemed possible to develop a good personal relationship by searching for commonalities in extra-curricular interests, ethnic background, or advocacies. One participant said, for example, "I would share with her my challenges and I discovered – we both discovered – during times like that, we would have our ministry groups that we would turn to. So, we found something in common" (MDM, 220). Another said, "We belong to the same (ethnic) community that's why I understand where he is coming from because my relatives are basically like him" (MC, 38), while another found the connection through shared advocacies: "Our (hospital) administrator came (onboard) in 2014. He's a doctor/lawyer. So, he was the one I would always talk to (to help me start up anti-corruption projects). 'Doc, please, file a case. Please, let's be partners (in stamping out corruption)'" (BC, 72).

Others focused on developing the professional aspect of the relationship with their bosses to get on their good side. One way was through doing good work or in improving services:"All of the problematic areas, they would let me handle… My boss – the President – liked the way I work" (BC,

46); "In the beginning, my boss said to me, 'We want to change the paradigm of the (organization) in terms of delivering (the service)…' Then I said to him, 'Why not create institutes?' He agreed" (JB, 34). Another used cost reduction: "I saw personally why we (were) losing money…I pointed it out in my paper and I think that paper was discussed in our country management meeting. So, some of the areas were raised that, 'Why, yes, why didn't we see this? We're spending a lot of money for training and nobody (else) raised this…' That started it all" (JO, 234).

Establishing good relationships with their direct superiors was relevant for the participants so their prospective change programs would get off the ground. Otherwise, what would happen might be what one participant described, "He turned the change initiative down because he had his own framework" (MDM, 100).

Impact of LMX on the Change Process

From the interviews of the participants, it was apparent -LMX middle managers – those with a more negative relationship with their superiors –have a longer process to follow to initiate change. These -LMX middle managers adjusted first to the organization's cultural and political realities, and then they had to establish their credibility as middle managers before planning the change efforts in detail. These steps did not appear needed for middle managers with +LMX, who started with planning the change initiative immediately.

Adjusting to organizational realities.

Adjusting to organizations' cultural and political realities was described as a primary impulse for middle managers operating within -LMX. This was developed for relationship maintenance; it was not a natural impulse. As a participant shared, "When I was younger… I was working with another group. I didn't want the political whatnot. But I realized over the years that it's not being political, it's just maintaining strategic relationships" (MDM, 170). Others saw the need to choose one's words carefully so as not to offend: "Sometimes I hold back because sometimes it's not easy what I am saying. Sometimes I hold back a little bit" (MC, 410); "There are times when I hold back… I've noted that he's too process-oriented and quick-on-the-draw" (MDM, 251). Another needed to understand the unwritten code of conduct among the bosses, "They have this agreement among themselves, that 'We have to support each other's decisions. No matter what.' Even if sometimes, it's the wrong decision. So that's where the conflict was" (BC, 92). Respondents agreed there was difficulty in starting changes if one has not understood the political and cultural dynamics of an organization. A participant learned this after presenting a change proposal to her boss, "He (the boss) thought it was a personal attack. So, it was so hard to get our ideas implemented…I had to do things slowly" (BC, 12).

Establishing middle manager credibility. -LMX respondents stated they had to gain first credibility both professionally and personally to instigate changes, working within means they know and can handle. This meant hyping one's strengths rather

than challenging their own superior's strengths like one participant did: "I was careful when I was making my pitch not to promise him sales. And I said, 'I'll give you leadership, I'll fix your organization, I'll improve your processes, I'll improve your hiring,' just nothing about sales" (MC, 202). For another, establishing credibility for middle managers meant keeping abreast of the critical issues in one's area of expertise. She had been having problems getting her new change proposal approved until she saw a law supporting it recently passed by Congress. She said, "My boss approved … when the (law) was passed. I brought her attention to that" (MDM, 113). Another participant gained the trust of the board by reminding them she was the initiator of a successful revenue-generation plan, "That [plan] was implemented without a hitch. And it was so timely because we lost one of our biggest clients after that. If we had not implemented the plan, sales would have gone down by 70%" (BC, 52).

Detailing the Change Effort

As narrated by the respondents, this step included thorough preliminary research on the details and repercussions of the change effort. This was important to ensure the details needed to be undertaken to achieve the change effort were in place, as one respondent learned: "If I had studied the details of the project more before I implemented it, it could have been done faster, and I could have done more" (JB, 350). Other respondents echoed this: "If I were to do a process flow, I'd start with setting up a standardized process" (CVB, 55); "Bias was removed because the system

was organized" (LM, 101).

Small-scale pilot runs of the change efforts were done to test the plan's feasibility: "I did a pilot run in our (provincial)city office; I used this office as pilot site since it is relatively small" (MDM, 143); "I had to do a rehearsal for all the ones involved" (BC, 52); "When we did the pilot last year…I developed the course probably in two months…I had a look at the survey…what I saw there was, in terms of how I envisioned the course versus the feedback of the customer, more or less it was matching" (JDP, 100).

Superior Approval and Support

When asking for approval and support from one's superior, middle manager respondents got either a positive or negative answer. An approval meant the process moved on to the next step. But disapproval meant the middle manager would have to convince the superior about the soundness of the plan to get it a second chance at approval.

Respondents reported different ways they got their bosses' approvals. One strategy used was involving their superior in a brainstorming process to get their buy-in on the idea: "Just the two of us, me and my boss first. 'How will we do that?' we asked ourselves" (JB, 34). In doing so, middle managers found a way to incorporate their superiors' ideas into the change process to foster buy-in on the change initiative. Other middle managers chose to ride on a company direction: "It's like you are water and you're just getting diverted to the right direction. It's really more like, 'This is the vision.' We

are able to create the pathways towards the direction" (JDP, 154); "I have no problem with him since the vision comes from him. From him and the President and CEO" (JB, 369); "Most of the programs I initiated, initiatives I did there weren't original ideas of mine. I heard (the boss) say (those directions) so many times" (MC, 183).

Converting a negative decision. Changing a negative decision on the change proposal to an affirmative was a difficult situation to handle, said the respondents. An oft-repeated objection was the cost of the entire change process. Speaking about her superior, a respondent recalled, "He's a fine hard-core finance guy so, at the end of the day, of course, he will ask how much will it cost to make a change. So, of course, if you don't have the numbers, you won't be able to convince him" (CZ, 164). Others said: "If (the boss) thinks it makes sense business-wise…you just have to justify this time in numbers" (ES, 146); "He's very strict on some ad hoc requests for additional budgets and all. Because there was a precedent where he approved a certain budget that wasn't in the approved one, the approved budget. And that affected the profitability of the company" (EB, 59).

Aside from the sensitivity to their own superior's input, it was also important to pay attention to the boss's mood and bide one's time when asking for reconsideration. Said some participants: "There are times when I don't like what (boss is) doing, I keep quiet. I wait for the right time. We cannot be ill-tempered at the same time" (BC, 112); "I tried to come up with a framework for all (department) activities. But it would always

be rejected, as I couldn't get the timing right. Approval would depend on what the Vice President wanted at the time" (MDM, 89); "I was also trying to see what kind of reporting relationship would work, or how are we (he and his boss) going to work together…It's hard to sit a person down or write down, 'This is what I'm going to do; this is what you're going to do.' You sort of talk about it and feel your way around it" (MC, 74).

Using connections to seek approval. Involving other people in presenting ideas for approval to the boss also worked: "I talked to the ER (Employee Relations) Manager. I said, 'What can be done here?' She was the one who talked to my boss. My boss listened to her" (MDM, 264). Another respondent had to involve another manager, at the behest of his boss, "He was straightforward enough to tell me that I may not have the right tools in place yet… He said I had to gather more data and perhaps engage the HR to work with me on it. So, it's actually a tandem between the HR (Human Resource Manager) and me" (EB, 23). Another respondent said, "I had to go through friendships. Like Doctor (X). She's a person of integrity. We do have persons like that in the board. I said, 'Doc, you have to help me. Our (organization's) image lies in your hands'" (BC, 64).

Multiplicity of supportive leadership behavior. When the superior ultimately approved the change plan, leader support was shown in diverse ways. The bosses offered help, ranging from mere presence to staging role-plays to prepare for a presentation to presenting the plan himself to ensure approval: "Whenever I have initiative,

like 'Boss, I want to have a comprehensive study on electric cooperatives, basically like a market study,' he will tell me 'That's OK. If you need help from management, if you want us to go with you, we can do that'" (JO, 175); "So, like me, I'll be presenting to (General Managers) on the L&D (learning and development) programs. So, he really sat down and role-played with me. So, he's acting like he's the GM. He said, 'These are the questions. This is not me. Because… I can understand why you want to do this. But these questions that I'm asking you, these are the possible questions that the GMs would probably ask you.' That's how he is" (MDM, 199-203); "Because that's what I would do. 'Please present this as your idea.' That's what I would do so that they get… to approve it" (BC, 50).

Other superiors showed support by being more forceful in influencing other stakeholders about the need for change. One respondent said that his superior used "an iron hand that he laid down when he first came in to actualize the change" (ES, 164).Another said the company president took it upon himself to "bring (the change management proposals) to the board as his way of showing support – even going to the extent of threatening, 'No! Implement that already! If they don't want to approve it, I will resign!'" (BC, 52).

Autonomy in Execution

In executing the change, two possibilities happened to the middle manager acting as change agent upon receiving their superior's approval. He was either allowed to execute the change autonomously, i.e., the superior will content merely himself with approvals and intermittent asking of feedback. Or, the middle manager was allowed to execute the change, albeit non-autonomously, i.e., the superior was involved in the detailed running of the change program.

Bestowal of trust. According to our respondents, if a middle manager was allowed to execute change autonomously, then trust was bestowed upon them by their direct superiors. The bestowal of trust can be gleaned from the observations of an interviewee, as she described her boss, "He just talks to the leadership team only, me, and some of the other trainers within the organization. He's like, 'OK if you guys think it's working then I'm good with it'" (CZ, 249-251). For some, trust was given as a matter of course attached to the position of the middle manager. As some respondents narrated, "He (boss) didn't go into the level of details like, for example, 'You're allowing too much Internet. People are not working.' He didn't go into that detail" (ES, 325); "So, now I've noticed that my boss has become more open because before, she used to watch your every word. One wrong word and you have to start from zero defending what you are saying. Now, she allows us to really speak up. Even the president perhaps I think it comes also with the position because you're a manager, you're given the trust and confidence. My feeling is, when I first got promoted to manager, I felt that I was given little freedom to decide on my own" (HM, 377).

However, some respondents shared that autonomy was given with the superior still easily accessible in case concerns come

about. As one respondent revealed, "He gave me a free hand on how to manage my accounts and how to impress the customers. And as much as possible, as long as I can handle the situation or mission, I delegate. But if there are issues that need his concern, I just ask him. He's very supportive but there are avenues in terms of our work that I can easily voice out to him" (JO, 56-59).

Those who are not allowed to implement change autonomously had to institutionalize their change projects on a piecemeal basis: "This was because that was the untouchable area at that time because if you change the Purchasing Officer, the one who will go after you will be the head. (The boss) is clean but then, she has too much trust in the Purchasing Officer. So (change) had to come in small parts, really" (BC, 96).

There were certain parameters that their superiors set in advancing the change initiatives. Despite these parameters, middle managers had to continue executing the change working with other stakeholders, and adjusting the involved change processes along the way. Respondents talked about how their bosses would frame the parameters in terms of financial impact, concern for employees, and levels of expertise: "'Look, are we making money out of it? Or is it if you're not making money, are you sure we're not deterring how we make money?'" (ES, 162); "Initially, (the boss) wasn't approving (the roll-out of the change) because he knows it might cause some people to be uncomfortable" (EB, 21); "(The boss's) expertise is his creativity, as he's the expert in the design and construction of (the products). I leave that

part of the business to him, that part of the business that excites him. And then the rest I try to fix"(MC, 29).

Managing Stakeholders

Engaging stakeholders. Management of stakeholder resistance was a continuing activity of the middle managers as they underwent the rest of the change process. Engaging resistors by explaining the change plan and learning about their misgivings was mentioned by several respondents: "It's really more of making sure that you talk to them, understand what their inputs are. You also make sure that they feel they are part of the process," (JDP, 140). "It's OK to disagree. But for us, even if we don't agree, we don't take it personally. That's what I like" (CZ, 220-223). To lessen the resistance, a respondent involved the stakeholders in crafting the processes or algorithms needed to carry out the plan: "Anyway, the department managers would know better the flow their clients have to follow when these clients are in their units" (JB, 202).

Negotiation tactics. Developing personal ties and having a negotiation strategy were utilized to smooth over the resistance, as a participant recalled: "Gentle persuasion. It has to be a mixture of that, like, 'No, it has to be like this' when you send out a memo. But when you talk to them, 'Let's please do this. Let's give it a chance. Because it's like this…'" (BC, 90). This strategy helped move the change plan forward. It was possible that because of these consultations with stakeholders, plans had to be adjusted or changed. One respondent said he had to negotiate and come up with compromise

agreements with contending stakeholders before he was finally able to hammer out a deal: "They're just waiting for each other, to see who will be the first one to bring down prices. Unfortunately, I was the man in the middle and I had to step in and create agreements" (JB, 226). The result of all this communication, according to another respondent was, "if they see that their inputs are reflected in what you do, then you get some credibility. And then, in a way, they own… they co-own … they feel that they are part of that particular change" (JDP, 146). In this way, installing the change became easier.

Using a 'good cop, bad cop' routine also worked for another participant, with the participant – who was the proponent of the change – playing the role of good cop, and the HR Manager playing the bad cop. "I had a deal with the HR Managing Director that it (the change plan)will be (positioned as) an HR initiative. Not by me… I had a sit-down session with the sales supervisors and administrative and told them that the reason behind. 'You know, how it was explained to me by HR,' that's how I put it. 'That, you know, the HR found out that the things they were doing but not measured on, so we want to make sure that whatever you do is based on the PMS (performance management system). At least, you know what you're doing is value-adding and giving credits to what should be measured on later.' So, that, in a way, made them more receptive and more participative" (EB, 47).

Clarity in communication. It was imperative to "convey one singular message" (MC, 372) to all stakeholders to thwart any confusion because of conflicting messages. The middle manager acting as change agent must also be clear in explaining the advantages of the change program through "side-by-side computations" (LM, 95) of the pros and cons of the change as one respondent explained. This could be done by showing research findings, as one respondent did: "Based on historical data, I was able to show that we were losing a lot of (clients) because of the length of the lines. This means we were not able to serve those clients; they went over to the (competitors)" (JB, 164).

Fixing the Kinks in Execution

Executing the change initiatives was rarely perfect, with the middle managers failing to anticipate unintended consequences. The last part of the change initiative, then, was to fix the kinks in execution, to ensure that whatever mistakes were made would be corrected in some future re-staging of the change plan. These snags were usually gathered from stakeholders' feedback or individuals affected by the change or by the change initiator's insights, then turned into organizational knowledge. One participant recalled his experience: "In reality, (the execution) will take longer because I did not factor in all the other things I had to do. So, if I were to do it differently, I would not over-commit" (JDP, 160). Another spoke of her need to change her attitude, as this proved to be a problem area during the execution of her change plan. "Maybe if it's one thing I need to learn... sometimes I need to let go a little bit more because I have a very… my nature can be very controlling" (CZ, 321).

One of the consistently difficult tasks in execution was making sure those included in the change process understood the tasks well enough to be able to do them accurately. As a respondent said, "Sometimes, when there is a meeting, they don't participate, or else, they're there when I lay out the instructions but when it comes to execution, it's wrong. When you ask them or confront them as to why they made a mistake, they would say, 'Well, sir, you did not tell us that'" (MC, 376-379).

4. Analysis and discussion

The results above present a preliminary emergent model of the middle manager-initiated change process, analyzed from semi-structured interviews using grounded theory. This may be the first attempt at a model of this kind aimed at understanding the dynamics of middle managers acting as change agents. Nonetheless, since our research participants were all Filipinos working as middle managers in companies in the Philippines, we will describe our emergent model as indicative of a change process anchored on a Southeast Asian culture and Filipino milieu. Since our research is qualitative in nature, and social constructivism assumes difference because of its premise of context specificity, our resultant model is implicitly atypical and contextual. The resultant model originated from a unique context and was meant to interpret the distinctive experiences within this dynamism.

Our proposed model shows an emergent grounded theory model of how middle managers push through change initiatives in their organizations. It commences with middle managers' imperative relationship development with their superiors and recognizes differences in approaches of middle managers, depending on the quality of their relationship with their superior – either +LMX and -LMX. The type of relationship the respondents have with their superiors spelled the difference in immediately achieving superior approval and support for the change initiatives, or make necessary adjustments in their methods (adjusting to organizational realities, establishing credibility, and detailing further the change effort). Once the support has been established, the middle managers turn to managing stakeholders' resistance to the change by communicating the advantages of the change initiative. Aligned with this stakeholder management is the necessary autonomy to execute the change initiatives, which is again different depending on whether one has a +LMX relationship or -LMX relationship with the superior. As the change gets executed, middle managers attempt to fix snags in the execution process of the change initiatives to ensure the success of the project, further meriting approval from their superiors.

[REFER FIGURE 1]

The emergent model presents the importance of cultivating a personal and professional working relationship with the superior as a prerequisite for the change process to commence working. Comparing this with the packaging strategy of the issue selling framework [45]; [18]; [20] which recommends couching middle manager suggestions and proposals in a way to

address threats to the organization, this part of the process is markedly different. This first step in our model is also quite different from the tactics described by [3]. This first step is decidedly relational, which may be due to the collectivist [29]; [64]; [33] and conformist [57] descriptions of Filipino culture. These explain the emphasis on personal relationships with the boss, in addition to getting to know and aligning with the culture and needs of the organization. One participant recalled: "Building a relationship, getting to know the person. Getting to know what makes this person tick" (MDM, 292).This mirrors the high power-distance index scores of Southeast Asian cultures like the Philippines [34] where people place much stock on the opinions of leaders positioned higher in the hierarchy. A gentler way of seeing this may be the characterization of Filipino leaders as seeking the prized characteristics of kagandahangloob(shared humanity) and exhibiting pakiramdam(empathy) in their dealings with their superiors, peers, and subordinates [52]. This can also be looked at from the study of [45] on issue selling and national culture; specifically, that there is a "direct effect for culture on subsidiary managers' choice of issue-selling strategies." (p. 642). Our finding may be a manifestation or illustration of our respondent-Filipino middle managers' strategic choice.

The model, as contrasted with similar studies [3]; [38]; [45]; and [20] shows the different starting points of -LMX and +LMX middle managers when initiating change efforts in organizations. Results show that -LMX middle managers had to start with adjusting to the organizational realities and justifying why middle managers are important as change agents. This dovetailed neatly into the original LMX theory description of outgroups, where people cast into these groups have to exert more effort to convince their leaders to listen to them [28]. In contrast, the +LMX middle managers, being part of the ingroups, went straight into presenting to their bosses and detailing their ideas about the change effort.

These steps within the emergent model – the act of the -LMX middle manager to adjust to organizational realities and to justify why middle managers are important as change agents – also extends Arifand colleagues' (2017) understanding of the relationship of LMX and change management. It is possible, despite a -LMX relationship, for a middle manager to get a superior's assent by adjusting his understanding of the context and varying the approach.

The rest of the model is straightforward, as both +LMX and -LMX middle managers have to get support from the superiors to push forward with the change. There appears to be no distinction between +LMX and -LMX middle managers with regard to getting or not getting approvals right away. Even +LMX middle managers, especially those with superiors with a hard-numbers orientation, had difficulty in getting immediate consent. These middle managers, therefore, had to adhere to the requirements of their superiors and the needs of the organization to get their bosses' agreement. One participant recounted how he got his boss to agree: "I talk to the CEO…to show him, 'OK, this is the feedback.' He does

read the survey results. Basically, it's like the market is telling you that it's the way to go." (JDP, 106).

Another difference between +LMX and -LMX middle managers, though, is the level of autonomy given to them by their superiors to execute the change plan. From the respondent interviews, we noted that the +LMX middle managers were granted more autonomy than those of the -LMX middle managers. This also appears to be a manifestation of the [28] finding about the differences in leaders' treatment of their followers in the in-groups vis-à-vis those in the out-groups. One respondent aptly illustrated this difference, "He (the boss) was straightforward enough to tell me that I may not have the right tools in place yet…. He said I had to gather more data and perhaps engage the HR to work with me on it" (EB, 23).It has to be noted, though, trust was not outright. It came as a result of consistently good performance and eventual promotion, but even then, the autonomy given was minimal.

Despite the approval of the change plan by the superiors, these middle managers acting as change agents had to iron out the details of the change plan to ensure institutional compliance and had to contend with resistance from other stakeholders in the organization. These forms of resistance showed themselves during the communication phase to the stakeholders, the plan execution phase, and even in the post-execution phase. The forms of resistance varied depending on the culture of the organization but were there nonetheless. These were similar to instances of resistance

experienced by middle managers as described by [16].

To address these, most of the participants used consultation and communication as means to connect with the resistors, similar to the pagsangguni (consultation)-paghihikayat(persuasion)-pagkakasundo(consensus) traditional Filipino communication style described by [41]. This was also consistent with the proposition that managers from collectivist cultures were more likely to consult with and involve others than those from individualist cultures [45], most likely done to preserve relationships [63]. It appeared to be important to get stakeholders' buy-in not only logically, but also emotionally [5]. Some respondents used personal power [54], or relationship and personal touch [6] in convincing the stakeholders to agree with the change plan and its implementation. Others focused on winning over resistors through an enumeration of advantages, to convince them of the viability of the change effort [50]. Still, others relied on their bosses' selling efforts in convincing the resistors, consistent with [67] Proposition 1, that in companies employing a top-down leadership style, the use of resistance is more likely to form part of the issue selling process.

In some cases, the bosses voluntarily offered their help as their way of showing support for the change and handling initial resistance. Some examples of this include tacit support for the change via an announcement during a company townhall meeting – "setting the tone that this (need for change) has been happening" (EB, 37) – as well as the boss's giving out of incentives to soften the effect

of the change (ES, 400). These echo findings [32] that top management support in terms of being advisers, judges, and guardians hasten the other stakeholders' acceptance of middle managers' change initiatives.

Concerning the execution of the change plan, an important issue was the presence of high or low levels of autonomy. As noted in the results, there appears to be a distinction between +LMX and -LMX middle managers on the granting of autonomy to them by their superiors. This appears to be consistent with the differential treatment given by bosses to people within their ingroups vis-à-vis those in their in groups [28].

Implications in Management Practice

Our study presents a model that middle managers may use in initiating and sustaining organizational change management efforts. While it is true that there may be differences in the process to be followed by +LMX as compared to -LMX middle managers, the study shows change plans can still be implemented despite the differences, albeit with greater effort for those experiencing -LMX. To aid how the emergent model can be used pragmatically, Figure 2 showcases a flowchart of how middle managers can undergo the process of change implementation given their respective relationship levels with their superiors.

[REFER FIGURE 2]

The findings from our study can be used in training programs for middle management and as additional materials in organizational

behavior courses in graduate-level education. The emergent theory can also provide organizational leaders with a framework on how to handle middle managers who might propose change process interventions. Likewise, it suggests assessment, developmental, and competency building necessities that can be considered as requirements in change management.

Our findings open up other levels of inquiry into change processes initiated by middle managers. Since our particular research focused primarily on middle managers in business organizations, this piques the interest whether there are differences between this model and that used by middle managers in other industries (i.e. government organizations). Similar studies may be conducted on cultures outside Southeast Asia to find out whether there are more similarities rather than differences across middle management practices.

Reflexivities

As researchers, we realize that we are part of the research endeavor rather than objective observers [49]; we acknowledge our lenses that we have brought into the study (Willig, 2001).

In terms of personal reflexivity, having backgrounds in psychology and management allowed us to view the transcripts considering process flows, human behavior, and mental processes. Utilizing face-to-face interviews allowed a personal stance in the data gathering, highlighting individual stories and their respective nuances. The interview questions enabled participants to

pull leader relationships and work experiences as they saw fit within the research protocol, allowing significant personal experiences to surface. The questions also impartially probed both strengths and areas of development from middle managers.

Validity

The data gathering process conformed to [68] conception of validity in qualitative research. Data gathering was sensitive to context, allowing relevant circumstantial information to come from the participants themselves, bringing forward awareness of their respective individual backgrounds. Commitment to research and rigor was demonstrated in the engagement with the participants through gathering data from multiple sources. Complying with the research protocols as required in grounded theory allowed for a measure of transparency. The gathered data was presented back for participant feedback and validation in compliance with the research process.

Conclusion

Middle managers do have a vital role to play in business organizations as change agents. Whether or not they are part of the ingroup of their organizational superiors, however, has less to do with the possibility of their initiating change programs than it does with the process that they have to follow. The emergent model, as presented in this study, gives hope that despite what difficulties middle managers may face in pushing changes through and managing resistance

from stakeholders, they will be able to accomplish these, especially if they manage their relationship with their leaders well.

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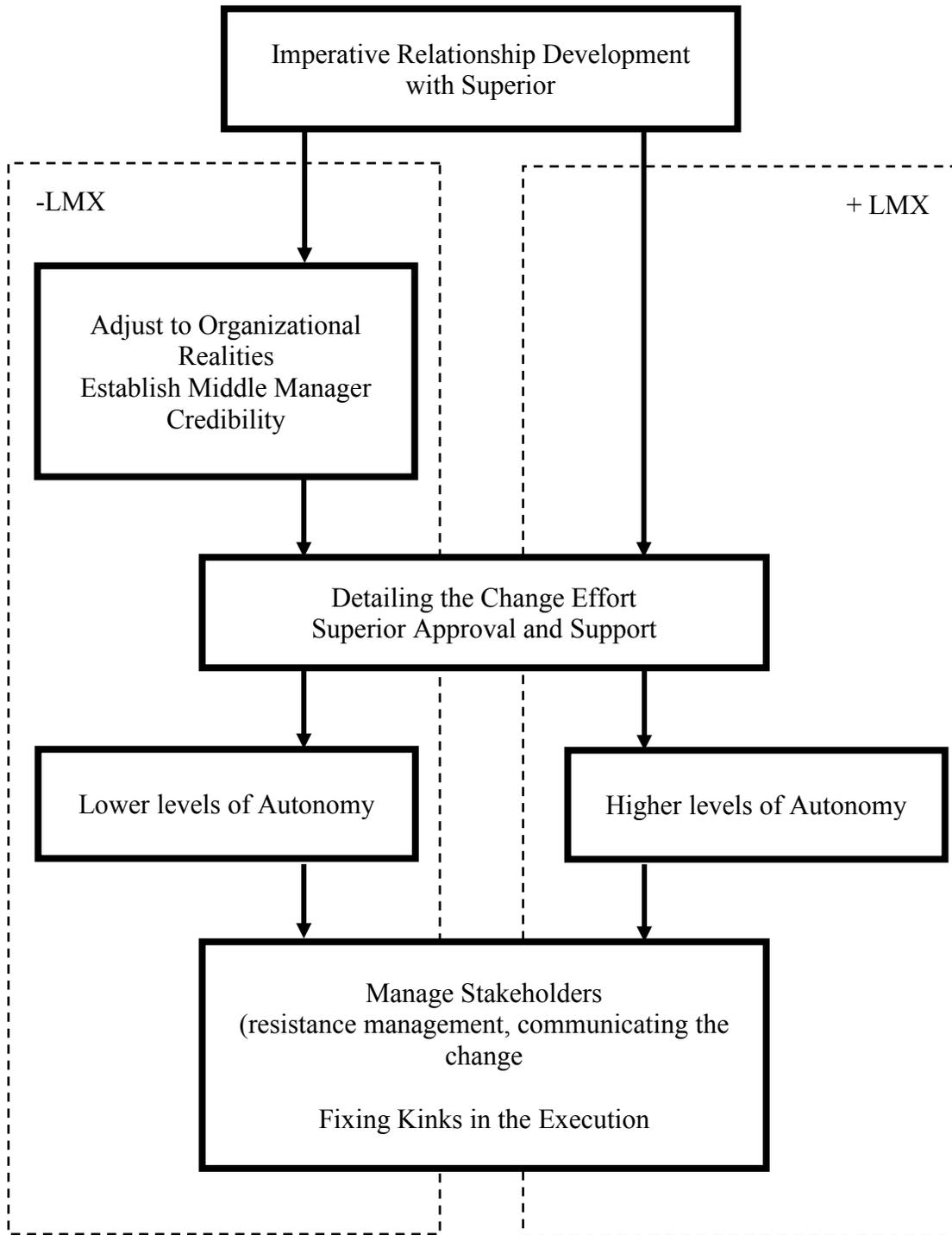
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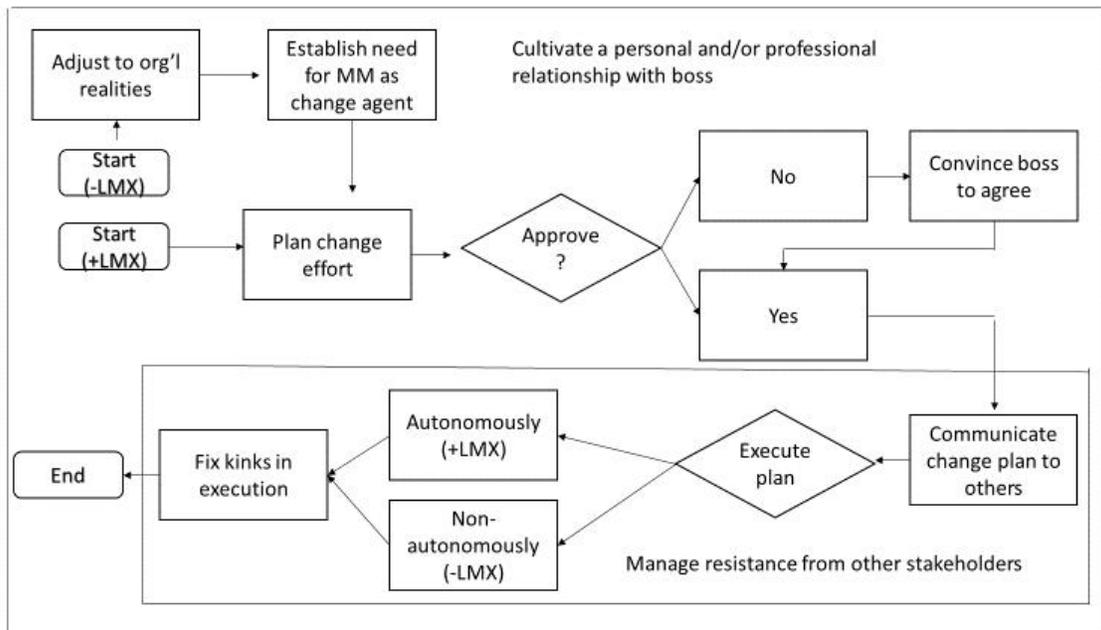
Figure 1.Theorized Middle Manager-Initiated Change Process Model

Figure 2. Flowchart of the Manager-Initiated Change Process Model