

MIDDLE MANAGERS' ROLE AS CHANGE AGENTS

- *variations in approaches and their contributions to the progress of change*

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the various ways in which middle managers approach their role as change agents. Existing research on organizational change has primarily emphasized the implementation of change as middle management's main role during strategic change. I argue that middle managers are facing increasing challenges and expectations and particularly an increased pace of change. I therefore anticipate that the middle manager's role in strategic change may be more diverse than has been suggested in the previous literature. In order to examine how middle managers at various levels approach their role as change agents, I conducted a review of the literature on middle management and change, and carried out two longitudinal case studies of middle managers. Theoretically, I draw on middle management literature and the sensemaking perspective. My findings suggest that middle managers approach their role as implementer in various ways that differ in terms of both role perception and implementation practices. Some middle managers also take on a broader role as change agent that goes far beyond implementing change. The specific approach middle managers take to their role as change agents is important as it influences how change progresses. Consequently, my research contributes to the middle management literature and the strategic change literature by expanding our notion of the middle manager's role as change agent and by illustrating how middle managers contribute to securing the progress of change.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I believe in the value of creating new knowledge in the interface between organizational units and people. I believe that nobody has the entire answer and that valuable knowledge is co-created. I believe that leaders bring about change in the same way conductors bring life to music, together with their musicians and by listening to each other. *“To me, listening is the most important thing; to listen to each other, to listen to what people say, to listen to music”* Claudio Abbado (Conductor 1933-2014).

These beliefs are a consequence of my family background, as well as my experiences both as a middle manager in the finance industry for more than 12 years and as musician in an internationally acclaimed brass band. These experiences have given me the passion for leadership, innovation, change, and the value of multi-disciplinary skills connected to an open mind which seeks to explore possibilities. In addition to this, it is the support of inspirational people which has led me into and kept me focused throughout this demanding PhD journey.

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Though these may be the final words of my PhD, this is also a new beginning. I am looking forward to exploring and creating in the interface between knowledge and people, and to look for new possibilities: “*If I were to wish for anything, I should not wish for wealth and power, but for the passionate sense of the potential, for the eye which, ever young and ardent, sees the possible*”. (Søren Kierkegaard)

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“You are the cog and the beltline of the bureaucratic machinery itself... and such power as you wield is a borrowed thing. Yours is the subordinate’s mark, yours is the canned talk, you are the servant of decision, the assistant of authority” (sociologist C. Wright Mills 1950, describing middle managers in his pioneering work on the rise of white-collar workers. Osterman 2008)

INTRODUCTION

Research on strategic change has traditionally emphasized how senior management plan and initiate strategic change, while middle managers have been perceived as linking pins (Likert 1961) of limited value beyond ensuring the execution of orders from the senior management (Floyd & Wooldridge 1994). Since the 1980's, however, there has been increased focus on how different levels in organizations translate and interpret strategic initiatives from the senior management team (Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991). The middle managers play a central role in this context. They are critical mediators who connect the operational core with the upper echelons and thereby influence the strategic direction (Rouleau & Balogun 2007).

Because of their intermediate position, the influence of middle managers is both vertical, connecting top and operational levels (Likert 1961; Thompson 1967; Burgelman 1994), and horizontal, between different business units or other organizations (Balogun 2003; Nonaka 1994; Balogun & Johnson 2005; Rouleau 2005; Rouleau & Balogun 2011). While early research reveals that middle managers may act as advocates of the status quo and even sabotage change processes (e.g., Guth & MacMillan 1986; Floyd & Wooldridge 1994; Fenton-O'Creevy 1998), a growing stream of research has recognized middle managers as important change agents (Balogun 2003; Balogun & Johnson 2004, 2005; Balogun 2006, Balogun 2007; Stensaker & Langley 2010; Rouleau & Balogun 2011). For instance, middle managers translate strategic change initiatives into operational practices within their units (Huy 2001a; Huy 2002; Balogun & Rouleau 2018).

Middle managers are typically defined as managers one level below the senior management group and one level above line workers and professionals (Huy 2001a). Within contemporary organizations, the term refers to a broad and heterogeneous group of managers operating at different levels (Wooldridge, Schmid & Floyd 2008). Consequently, middle managers are both high-level managers who have direct access to the senior management team,

e.g., subsidiary and divisional leaders, and managers who are responsible for employees on the customer front (first-line leaders). However, despite the presence of middle managers at several different levels and in different contexts (Rouleau, Balogun, & Floyd 2015), so far the current literature has mainly portrayed middle managers as one homogenous group (see, e.g., Balogun, Bartunek, & Do 2015).

While they are recognized as important change agents, due to the increased pace of change (Kotter 2012), middle managers are liable to experience a new and complex organizational landscape, with parallel and overlapping changes taking place simultaneously (Meyer & Stensaker 2006; Ven & Poole 1995; Pettigrew & Whipp 1991). A key task for middle managers in this multiple change context is to develop capacity for change, meaning the ability to implement multiple, large-scale organizational changes while efficiently handling day-to-day operations (Meyer & Stensaker 2006). Middle managers need to be able to implement multiple changes at a minimum cost and thereby to continuously balance focus and resources between large-scale change and day-to-day operations. As a result, a multiple change context requires capabilities and skills at the middle management level.

The overall purpose of this dissertation is therefore to develop new insight into how middle managers approach their role as change agents and the consequences thereof. The research question that guides this dissertation is: *“How do middle managers take on the role as change agent and how does this influence the progress of change?”* Based on two longitudinal case studies of strategic implementation processes, this dissertation pinpoints two research results. Firstly, I find that middle managers take different approaches to their role as change agent. Each of these approaches entails a specific understanding of the role, combined with particular implementation practices. Secondly, I show how middle managers contribute to the progress of change, and, further, how middle managers develop temporary capacity for change in a multiple change context through strategic sensemaking activities and by reassembling change initiatives. I

thus contribute to the literature on middle management by identifying differential roles and practices among middle managers during strategic change. In addition, I add to the literature on strategic change processes by exploring how middle managers contribute to the progress of change and to developing capacity for change within a multiple change context. Overall, my findings contribute to a more detailed and nuanced picture of middle managers' role and practices as change agents during strategic change.

This dissertation consists of one conceptual and two empirical articles. It is organized as follows: I will first provide a brief outline of the theoretical background that has informed the research questions and research perspective in these articles. Secondly, I will discuss methodological choices and present the research design. Thirdly, I will give a short presentation of each article. Thereafter, I present the overall theoretical contribution and practical implications, before finally discussing any significant strengths and limitations of the studies, as well as suggestions for future research.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This research is located within the literature on middle management. In this section, I provide an introduction to the most significant streams of literature on which I draw, and define key concepts, such as strategic change, change agent, a multiple change context and change capacity, and middle managers' role as change agents.

Strategic change

This dissertation explores strategic change, which can be understood as planned change initiatives formulated at the senior management level. Whether because of increased competition, decreased profitability, new technology, or industry restructuring, senior management tends to initiate strategic change to increase organizational performance (Burnes 2004; Caldwell 2003). Thus, strategic change can be defined as an attempt to purposely alter organizational processes,

systems, and structures, as well as the way individuals in organizations act and think, in order to improve organizational performance (Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991). Moreover, strategic change implies a qualitative change in dimensions such as capabilities, resources, and positions (Huy & Sonenshein 2015). In this way, strategic change requires a “cognitive reorientation” (Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991). Strategic change thus entails a “paradigm shift” that challenges employees’ current assumptions about the organization (Bartunek 1984).

To remain relevant to their customers and to ensure that their businesses are sustainable, managers have to be able to implement strategic change, both incremental and revolutionary change (Tushman & O’Reilly 1996), and strike a balance between short-term profitability and long-term competitiveness and growth (O’Reilly & Tushman 2004). Consequently, the ability to execute planned change will be an important competitive advantage for leaders and organizations.

Previous research on strategic change has described challenges during the implementation phase due to resistance to change at the individual, team, or organizational level. This resistance may be based on psychological, social, structural, or political reasons, such as established routines, culture, or powerful stakeholders (see, e.g., Ford, Ford & D’Amelio 2008; Huy, Corley, & Kraatz 2014). Thus, an organization's history, past decisions, rules, and culture affect attitudes toward change in organizations (Schreyögg & Sydow 2011). Whatever the scale of the change, there will always be a potential for resistance (Burnes 2004).

To cope with these challenges, the change literature has described and prescribed how change should be managed through various sequences and steps (e.g., Lewin 1947; Armenakis, Harris & Mossholder 1993; Kotter 1996). The focus is on how leaders can manage a change process, for example through change leadership (Kotter 1996), creating readiness (Armenakis, Harris & Mossholder 1993), communication and framing (Rouleau & Balogun 2011), or involvement and participation (Lines 2005). Moreover, to handle resistance and to

secure the implementation of planned change initiatives, the concept of change agent (Lewin 1947, Burnes 2004) has been introduced. I will discuss this next.

Change agents

Traditionally, the term change agent was used about external experts who supported organizations during incremental or long-term change processes (Caldwell 2003), while senior managers were depicted as the main internal change agents (Huy, Corley, & Kraatz 2014). Senior managers used their formal decision-making authority and control over significant resources to formulate and implement strategic change (Romanelli & Thusman 1994; Denis, Lamothe, & Langley 2001). Previous literature paints a picture of these internal change agents as charismatic heroes and strong leaders who transformed organizations based on their extraordinary character and skills (Kanter 1984; Caldwell 2003).

However, due to the emergence of flatter and more dynamic organizations during the 1980's, the term change agent has become the label that is now used to describe the change agency and role held by different types of actors (Caldwell 2003). Consequently, managers at different levels, functional specialists, internal and external management consultants, or teams consisting of a variety of these different actors, may take on the role of change agent. Thus, a change agent can be defined as an internal or external individual or team "responsible for initiating, sponsoring, directing, managing, or implementing a specific change initiative project or complete change programme" (Caldwell 2003, pp. 139-140). The change agent may be responsible for one isolated change initiative (such as the implementation of a new IT system) or play a more strategic change agent role as head of a change program. While the first role can mainly concentrate on delivering one project at a time, the second role is responsible for coordinating and managing several change initiatives, such as new work processes, new product or services, competence development programs, and IT systems (Caldwell 2003).

Previous research on change agents has identified how these actors need to handle three different dimensions. They are: (1) the skill to juggle different change agendas (content, control, and process) (Buchanan & Boddy 1992), (2) awareness of how their actions influence the legitimacy and progress of change (e.g., Huy, Corley, & Kraatz 2014), and (3) knowing how to approach different types of change differently (Huy 2001b). Below, I elaborate on these three dimensions.

Firstly, a change agent needs to address three different agendas — content, control, and process — in order to achieve successful implementation of a planned change (Buchanan & Boddy 1992). The content of the change initiatives refers to the capability to clearly define the goals and the process of change. For instance, if the change is a technological change, the change agents should possess technological competence. Thus, the change agent is expected to be competent and experienced in the change topics. Next, the change agent must have the capability to control the change process. This entails the capability to monitor the process, plan and schedule different phases and tasks, and to involve those who are going to be affected. In addition to the content and control dimensions, the change agent needs to manage the process dimension. This dimension requires interpersonal capabilities such as communication skills, listening skills, and the ability to build effective relationships and teams. In addition, it entails the ability to be sensitive to the political and cultural context, and to convey the message to the internal recipients of the change. The term internal change recipients refers to employees or middle managers who have not been involved in the change decision (see, e.g., Balogun & Johnson 2004; Bartunek, Rousseau, Rudolph, & DePalma 2006).

Secondly, a change agent needs to be aware of how their actions influence the legitimacy and progress of change. For instance, Pettigrew (1985) emphasizes the significance of being able to ensure management of meaning in order to develop legitimacy. More specifically, Pettigrew (1985) shows how change agents manage and influence organizational members' perceptions of

the change and the change message through ritual and symbolic actions, negotiations, power and political skills, and the use of context-specific language. Thus, the change agent's legitimacy within an organizational context influences the progress of change. Moreover, Huy, Corley, and Kraatz (2014) show how the legitimacy of change agents (in this case senior managers) changes over time. How the change recipients judge the change agents' actions influences the level of legitimacy. These researchers show how change agent behavior can lead to resistance to change even though there is initial acceptance of a radical change.

Finally, recent literature emphasizes that a change agent needs a wide repertoire to be able to handle different types of strategic change initiatives. Huy (2001b) argues that to realize large-scale change, it is necessary for capable change agents to mindfully juxtapose multiple intervention ideal types. Among other factors, he explores how a change in organizational structure can be attained by issuing clear orders, imposing political and economic sanctions, and using coercive means. In contrast, others types of organizational change, for example a change of mindset, beliefs, and values, may require a longer period of implementation and more focus on events that symbolize the change.

To sum up, previous research has identified different dimensions change agents need to be able to handle as they implement strategic change. However, the organizational change landscape has become more complex due to the increased pace of change and the emergence of a multiple change context. The abovementioned research does not provide answers to how a multiple change context can be handled and the challenges that arise when changes overlap, take place in parallel, or are even in conflict with each other.

A Multiple Change Context requires Change capacity

Contemporary change agents need to handle a landscape of change in which multiple changes occur simultaneously (Pettigrew & Whipp 1991; Ven, & Poole 1995; Meyer & Stensaker 2006). Changes do not happen one at a time, as much of the change literature emphasizes (e.g., Lewin's

three-phase model [1947] and Kotter's [1995] eight steps for successful change), but seem to be multiple, parallel, overlapping and often costly processes. Multiple changes occur at the same time, and new changes are initiated before others are completed. This has been referred to as a multiple change context (Stensaker et al 2002; Meyer & Stensaker 2006). For instance, within an organization, a number of changes may take place at the same time, such as cost cutting, lean processes, global integration, rebranding, restructuring, and competence developing projects. While there has been considerable research on strategic change, most studies of change have focused on one particular change initiative. This has resulted in a growing body of literature on how to carefully manage each change process. We know less, however, about how to build capacity for change in an organizational setting where the changes take place in parallel and overlap.

Change capacity is defined as the ability to implement change without compromising day-to-day operations or subsequent changes (Meyer & Stensaker 2006, p. 218). In addition, to implement one particular change, leaders need to make sure that day-to-day operations or future (or parallel) change projects are not unduly affected (Meyer & Stensaker 2006). As such, change capacity is inherently tied to a multiple change context.

A key task for change agents within a multiple change context is to balance the resources used in change processes and day-to-day operations, while also prioritizing capacity between different change processes. This idea parallels the notion of creating an ambidextrous organization (Thusman, Smith, Woody, Westermanz, & O'Reilly 2010) that is able to deal with both exploration and exploitation. However, the research on multiple changes is more directly tied to various types of change that are pursued in an organization rather than emphasizing the ability to explore and be innovative. In addition, an ambidextrous organization design may be an efficient solution to building capacity for product or service innovation (e.g., a digitalized platform for newspapers). However, it could become more complicated when the innovation or

change involves integration, restructuring the existing organization, or interaction between the traditional and the new work processes or new business model – for instance, automation of work and information processes across different distribution channels that involve the implementation of both new work processes and downsizing. Hence, ambidextrous organization theories primarily focused on structural solutions and the role of the senior management group. Change capacity supplements this literature by being more concerned with processes and practices that create capacity for various types of change.

From previous research, we know that change capacity can be developed by reallocating existing resources or temporarily adding new resources, or by developing long-term change resources in organizations (Meyer & Stensaker 2006). Further to this, Meyer and Stensaker (2006) explore different key activities leaders need to adopt in order to build change capacity. They argue that how leaders frame the rationale for the change (framing), allow organizational members to participate in planning (involving), and at what tempo changes are introduced (pacing and sequencing) are important to creating understanding, motivation, and energy for change initiatives. To create change in operational capabilities and reduce the workload, leaders should emphasize routinizing (using organizational routines to implement change) and recruiting (hiring personnel permanently or temporarily) to handle multiple changes (Meyer & Stensaker 2006, pp. 222-223). These techniques are quite general, however, and not specific to the middle management level. In addition, existing research that links change capacity to multiple change does not provide empirical evidence or document practices that middle managers actually employ as change agents in order to develop capacity for large-scale multiple change.

Middle managers' role as change agents

As discussed, the label middle manager may can be used to denote very different leaders at various levels, such as project leaders, line leaders at different levels, and first-line leaders. Moreover, due to globalization and integration, leaders who used to be perceived as senior

managers now tend to be categorized as middle management. Rouleau, Balogun, and Floyd (2015) argue that leaders of subsidiaries, who were used to having autonomous profit responsibility for their isolated market, have become middle managers within large corporations. Consequently, the term middle manager has been extended to include an even more heterogeneous group of leaders within contemporary organizations. However, in contrast to this heterogeneous picture, the research literature has typically treated middle managers as one homogenous group of leaders.

Floyd and Wooldridge identify how middle managers exert four different roles; Synthesizer, Champion, Facilitator, and Implementer (Floyd & Wooldridge 1992, 1996). According to Floyd and Wooldridge (1992), middle managers are important strategic assets who synthesize information, champion strategic ideas, facilitate adaptability, and implement change. By synthesizing information, middle managers gather and convey information to senior management that supports the current strategy. Further, middle managers champion strategic ideas upwards to the senior management that are in contrast to the current strategy. In addition, middle managers facilitate adaptability, for instance by taking initiatives for cross-unit collaboration to find new solutions that may be in contrast to the current strategy. Lastly, middle managers ensure the implementation of strategic initiatives from senior management, downwards to employees within their own unit.

Inspired by Floyd and Wooldridge, researchers have explored how middle managers take on the role of change agents during strategic change. This research has revealed that middle managers are not merely recipients of strategic initiatives from senior management, but actively shape the strategic outcome through how they interpret and handle the change initiatives (see, for example, Balogun 2003; Balogun & Johnson 2005; Rouleau & Balogun 2011). Moreover, the literature has identified how middle managers' role as change agents is characterized by duality,

multiple expectations, and the need to juggle and balance different interests and practices to secure the implementation of change, while at the same time overseeing day-to-day operations.

Firstly, middle managers have a dual role, as both change recipients and change agents (Balogun 2003; Balogun, Bartunek, & Do 2015), meaning that they are both a target and an agent for the implementation of change (Fenton-O’Creevy 1998). Unlike senior management who communicate strategic initiatives they have decided themselves, middle managers need to take on change agency for decisions made by senior management (Balogun 2003; Stensaker & Langley 2010). Middle managers are thus expected to implement strategic change initiatives from the senior management that may be in contrast to their own opinions or involve changes in their role and way of working. Therefore, middle managers need to interpret the change and its consequences, and be able to change themselves as well as helping their employees through changes, which are formulated and executed by the senior management level (Balogun 2003). Moreover, previous research has shown that middle managers’ interpretation of strategic initiatives from the senior management can lead to unintended consequences. For instance, Balogun and Johnson (2005) identified how middle managers, through lateral, informal social processes of interaction between themselves, interpret the change initiatives from senior management and contribute to a new, negotiated group understanding. These informal inter-recipient processes turn top-down intended change into an emergent and unpredictable process, creating both intended and unintended results. Thus, how middle managers take on change agency and what they do during strategic change is vital to the outcome of strategic change processes.

Secondly, as change agents, middle managers need to handle different expectations and juggle different tasks and interests. For instance, while senior management expect changes to be implemented according to plan, employees might expect the middle managers to take account of individual needs or special characteristics of the local market. Previous research has shown how

middle managers balance conflicting concerns, which influences the progress of change (Stensaker & Langley 2010). In addition, research has shown how middle managers secure the implementation of change initiatives by creating a shared understanding across multiple interests and stakeholders (Stensaker & Falkenberg 2007). They can do so, for instance, by communicating practices such as *setting the scene* (bring the right stakeholders together in the appropriate forums) and *performing the conversation* (using language and social cues that tap into others' interests) (Rouleau & Balogun 2011). As change agents, middle managers need to strike a balance between the implementation of change initiatives and day-to-day business (Huy 2001a, 2002; Balogun 2003; Balogun & Johnson 2004, 2005; Rouleau 2005; Stensaker & Falkenberg 2007). Due to their position closer to the frontline, middle managers tend to emphasize the importance of operative functions and to be more concerned with how changes might affect day-to-day business. In line with this, Huy (2001a) describes the middle manager as a tightrope artist who needs to implement change while taking care of day-to-day business and employees' morale. However, previous theories do not answer the question of how middle managers play their role as change agents in a multiple change context.

Summary

To summarize, the literature has identified how middle managers' role as change agents is characterized by duality, multiple expectations, and the need to juggle and balance different interests and practices to secure the implementation of change, while at the same time overseeing day-to-day operations.

There is a broad range of literature showing that middle managers are important and active change agents during the implementation of strategic change. However, what is missing is an understanding of how middle managers at different organizational levels approach their role as change agents. In addition, there is a gap in current knowledge about how different approaches to the middle managers' role as change agents might influence their contribution to the progress of

change and how they build capacity for change in contexts characterized by many overlapping initiatives. We therefore have limited insight into how middle managers perceive their role as change agents and into what practices middle managers need to follow when handling a multiple change context.

This thesis addresses these gaps and aims to achieve two main objectives: 1) to contribute to knowledge of contemporary middle managers' roles and practices during strategic change, and 2) to provide additional insight to previous knowledge on strategic change processes by exploring how middle managers contribute to the progress of change and develop capacity for change.

METHODOLOGICAL CHOICES

In this section, I will discuss the philosophical perspective and methodological choices that underlie this dissertation. Moreover, I will present my research design and elaborate on the data quality of the dissertation.

Research paradigm

When deciding on a research approach, I have reflected on assumptions about the philosophy of reality (ontology) and philosophy of knowledge (epistemology). Is there an objective reality? How is knowledge about reality obtained? These are fundamental questions and the answers have guided my philosophical perspective and methodological choices.

Positivism has been the dominant paradigm within social science. It perceives reality as objective and can be accurately described and causally explained. Constructivism, on the other hand, views reality as social and subjective, something that is created as human beings interact. This implies a multiple set of realities.

My point of departure is the social construction approach, which asserts that the meaning of the cultural world and of the context is created through human social interaction (Alvesson 2003). In light of my philosophical orientation, I believe in theorizing with a strong emphasis on

interpreting how the subjects ascribe meaning to their own behavior (Welch, Plakoyiannaki, & Paavilainen-Mäntymäki 2011). I also emphasize the interplay between agency and structure and view the subjects, in this case middle managers, as products as well as producers of the context they are operating within (see, e.g., Alvesson 2003). Social structures condition their actions, and through their actions they produce these social conditions.

In line with the interpretive sensemaking approach (Welch, Plakoyiannaki, & Paavilainen-Mäntymäki 2011), the goal of my study is not to establish cause–effect relationships and generalizable explanations. More specifically, I aim for particularization (Stake 1995), that is, to understand the uniqueness of the case and how the social context imbues human action with meaning.

Research design and cases

The methodological implication of the social constructive research approach is to seek to understand an action through the actor’s subjective experience of it. The collection of rich data is essential. Case studies are central to theory building and enable a rich contextual description, which is essential to our understanding of human behavior (Guba 1981). Consequently, as the overall research objective here is to explore the middle manager’s role and practices during strategic change, and additionally to build new theory, an explorative qualitative case study is appropriate (Yin 2003).

This dissertation contains two separate longitudinal, qualitative case studies. In the first case study, I followed middle managers at two different levels in real time during a strategy implementation process in a finance organization. In the second case study, I followed high-level middle managers, a subsidiary’s management group, in real time during their radical transformation efforts in a telecom company.

Data were primarily collected through interviews with middle managers at different levels in these two organizations. The middle manager is therefore the primary unit of analysis.

Moreover, I supplemented the interviews with observation and documents. By collecting data at multiple middle-management levels and using multiple sources of data, I was able to undertake multiple types of comparisons, across organizations, units, and time periods (Langley & Stensaker 2012).

Selection of cases and data

Case 1: Strategic change in a finance company

The site of the case study was the corporate business unit of a multinational finance company with headquarters in the Nordic region. The company was selected because of its ongoing strategy implementation process and its focus on middle managers' role as *implementers* of strategic change initiated at the senior management level. The company has a centralized organizational structure, which is reflected in the strategy implementation process, where strategic changes are formulated and announced at the senior management level.

Overall, 38 interviews were conducted with 22 respondents, two of whom were senior managers in addition to 20 middle managers. The senior managers, head of the corporate business unit and head of strategy respectively, were interviewed in advance in order to gain background information on the strategy implementation process, such as plans, goals and change initiatives.

The middle managers were selected from two different middle-management levels and four different regions within the Corporate business unit. Four middle managers operate as heads of regions, reporting to the top manager of the Corporate business unit (Level 3), while sixteen are middle managers who are first-line leaders with responsibility for employees (Level 4). Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which were supplemented by document reviews. The interviews with the middle managers were conducted from September 2014 to November 2014, with follow-up interviews in September 2015.

Case 2: Strategic change in a telecom company

The subsidiary of the multinational telecom company, located in the Nordic region was selected due to its multiple change context, where corporate changes were being implemented while a radical transformation was initiated at the local level. Historically, the company has based its business on the assumption that every market is unique, and its respective CEOs, heads of subsidiaries, have been given a high degree of local autonomy. In addition, the headquarters' role has historically been limited and there have been few global functions. That is now about to change. The change context in the subsidiary consists of both locally initiated changes and corporate change initiatives from headquarters.

Together with a research team, I conducted 34 interviews, of which 13 were in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the subsidiary's management group, over three time periods from May 2013 to February 2015. In addition, 21 interviews were conducted with employees (such as middle managers at Level 3 and staff from HR, branding, business development, and the project management team).

Data analyses

In both cases, I carried out an inductive and data-driven analysis (Langley & Abdallah 2011). I built data structure by progressive abstraction, starting with informant first-order codes and building to second-order themes and aggregate dimensions (Langley & Abdallah 2011). In addition, as is common in qualitative research, I performed repeat iterations between theory and data (Langley 1999). Through my analyses, I developed two data-driven frameworks: one that describes different approaches to the implementer role (Case Study 1, Article 2) and the second, which illustrates how middle managers develop capacity for multiple change (Case Study 2, Article 3).

Data quality

Guba (1981) has suggested four criteria for evaluating the trustworthiness of qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability.

Credibility refers to the correlation between participants' views and researchers' interpretations. In addressing credibility, I attempt to demonstrate that a true picture, in the eyes of the participants, is presented. However, every researcher's individual interpretive repertoire reinforces the possibility of interpreting data in certain ways (Alvesson 2003). To cope with this limitation, I focused on reflexivity, or, in other words, on being fully aware of and constantly viewing my data from different angles. Several steps were taken to ensure credibility and reflexivity. First, multiple sources of data were applied when exploring the middle manager's role and practices. A combination of interviews, documents, and observations allowed me to test the consistency of the findings. Furthermore, interviews were generally carried out twice with my interviewees, and a broad range of participants were interviewed in both case studies. This allowed me to test my interpretations and viewpoints, and experience was verified against others' experience or between different time periods, providing a vivid picture of those under scrutiny (Shenton 2004).

In addition, in both case studies, I conducted interviews with key informants prior to the studies, where I gained an understanding of the organizations and their change process, and established a relationship of trust. Furthermore, frequent debriefing sessions and member checks were carried out to allow for feedback on in-progress interpretations and emergent theories.

Transferability refers to the degree to which the researchers' findings can be applied in other contexts (Merriam 1998). To enable transferability, the researcher needs to provide rich descriptions of the data set to give other researchers an opportunity to make judgements about whether the findings can be applied in another setting (Guba 1981). I have attempted to establish transferability by providing deep contextual descriptions. In addition, I have presented my in-

progress emergent theories and findings through more than fifty talks and workshops with participants from both public and private companies. Their responses have given face validity to my in-progress findings. For instance, my findings on four different approaches to the change agent role have been perceived as interesting and valuable in relation to their perceptions of their roles as change agents in their own organizational change processes.

To ensure *dependability*, the research process should be reported in detail to enable other researchers to repeat the work. However, a core assumption in qualitative research is that timing and context do matter. Consequently, a repetition of the study will not necessarily produce the same result (Shenton 2004). To address dependability, I have presented my overall research design and its implementation by describing methodological choices. In addition, all the interviews were transcribed verbatim, which ensured that the accounts were documented as originally stated. I used Atlas.ti (software program) or Excel to structure my coding process, which enables others researchers to assess my coding. Further observations were recorded in field notes, and these and emergent theories and interpretations were discussed with other researchers. Finally, I ensured dependability by documenting the research process, and thereby the selection of the cases and participants.

To achieve *confirmability*, researchers must demonstrate that their findings emerge from data and not from their own predispositions (Shenton 2004). I have ensured confirmability in several ways: by using a clear research design, emphasizing rich descriptions of my data and explicitly providing the reader with quotes from the data material in my analysis. These steps have ensured transparency by showing how I have interpreted the participants' accounts.

PRESENTATION OF THE ARTICLES

In the following, I will present the three articles that constitute this dissertation. Particular emphasis is placed on the main findings in each article. Although the articles can be read

independently of each other, they address the overall research question on middle managers' roles and practices during strategic change processes from different angles. Please refer to Table 1, which provides an overview of the three articles.

Insert Table 1 about here

Article 1: Middle managers' role during strategic change: One size does not fit all

The purpose of Article 1 is to review the most influential literature on middle management in order to identify different roles and practices of middle managers during strategic change. The literature review is based on Floyd and Wooldridge's classical framework from 1992, which identifies four different roles middle managers take on during strategy processes; Champion, Synthesizer, Facilitator, and Implementer. I use this classical framework to organize the existing literature on strategic change, and I find that previous empirical research on the role of middle managers as change agents during strategic change processes has mainly focused on the Implementer role.

Based on the literature review, three key challenges are identified that I claim could affect the middle manager's role during change processes. The challenges are rooted in both the research design of previous studies and trends that have emerged within contemporary organizations, but which have not been explored in previous studies. I argue that the existing research is unclear as regards the level at which middle managers operate. Consequently, there is a lack of knowledge about possible differences related to expectations and roles at different levels. I then argue that the existing literature does not address the emergence of new types of high-level middle managers, e.g., heads of subsidiaries who become middle managers due to increasing globalization or possibilities for extensive collaboration as a result of new

technological advances. There is therefore a need for increased insight into how middle managers handle organizational contexts where changes do not take place one at a time, but are multiple and overlapping. The final part of the article presents suggestions for theoretical and methodological approaches to studying these phenomena. The literature review lays the foundation for the two empirical studies.

Article 2: The Implementers: How middle managers approach their role as Implementers of strategic change

The goal of Article 2 is to develop new insight into how middle managers perceive their role during strategic change. I conduct an inductive study of a corporate division of a finance company whose headquarters are located in the Nordic region. I explore the middle managers' role perception and related implementation practices during a strategic implementation process by following 20 middle managers at two different levels and during two time periods. Theoretically, I draw on the sensemaking perspective in line with previous research that has unpacked the Implementer role (Balogun 2003; Rouleau 2005; Rouleau & Balogun 2011).

My analyses reveal that the middle managers' approaches to the implementer role differ along two dimensions. Firstly, the *scope of the role* (i.e., whether they perceive it as broad or narrow) and, secondly, the extent to which they perceive the change as *challenging their current mindset*. The interplay of these two dimensions led to four main approaches to the implementer role: Market Protector, Executer, Renewer, and Co-Creator.

Based on classical theories about organizations (Selznick 1948; Cyert & March 1963) and management (Thompson 1967), we can assume that middle managers at various levels see their roles differently. However, in contrast to this assumption, the case study shows that the level does not affect how middle managers perceive their role. In fact, three out of four approaches to the role as implementer are found at both levels in my case study (Case 1). Surprisingly, the broadest approach to the implementer role (the co-creator) is found at first-line leader level. My analyses

show that the middle managers in this study take one of the four roles and maintain this approach over time. The implications of the different approaches for the progress of change and change capacity are discussed.

Article 3: Mission Possible: How divisional leaders reassemble change initiatives to develop capacity for multiple change

The goal of Article 3 is to develop an understanding of how middle managers at senior management level (high-level middle managers) develop capacity for multiple change. To examine this, a longitudinal explorative case study was carried out. Together with a research team, I followed a radical turnaround in a subsidiary of a multinational telecom company for three years. A total of 34 interviews were conducted with the subsidiary's management team and other employees at three different points in time. In contrast to some of the most well-known change management models, which depict change as a linear and stepwise process, our study empirically illustrates how middle managers are required to handle overlapping, parallel and multiple change initiatives. We observe that the subsidiary's management draws on the multiple change context to assemble and reassemble change initiatives. Further, the subsidiary's management group takes a broad approach to its change agent role and manages upwards in relation to the senior management at headquarters, horizontally in cooperation with another subsidiary, and downwards in relation to their employees. The study shows how the subsidiary's management, by reassembling change initiatives and strategic sensemaking activities, assembles resources and develops change capacity within a dynamic and multiple change context.

DISCUSSION

In this section, I discuss the overall theoretical contributions of my thesis before reflecting on practical implications and limitations and, finally, making suggestions for future research directions. Taken together, my three articles show that the middle manager's role as a change

agent in strategic change is more differentiated than previous research indicates. My findings contribute to the middle-management literature and strategic change literature in two important ways: firstly, by contributing new knowledge about how middle managers take on their role as change agents, and, secondly, by identifying how different approaches to the role of change agent influence the progress of change. Below, I elaborate on these two theoretical contributions.

Theoretical contributions

How do middle managers take on their role as change agents

Previous research on middle managers' role as change agents has unpacked the Implementer role and its related practices. As Implementers, middle managers are both change recipients and change agents (Balogun 2003; Balogun, Bartunek, & Do 2015) who engage in practices such as: interpreting change initiatives (Balogun 2003; Balogun & Johnson 2004, 2005), supporting others through change (Huy 2001a; Balogun 2003), juggling different interests and expectations (Stensaker & Langley 2010), and simultaneously implementing change and taking care of day-to-day operations (Huy 2001a, 2002, Balogun 2003, Balogun & Johnson 2004, 2005, Rouleau 2005; Stensaker & Falkenberg 2007). Although current literature has fleshed out middle managers' roles and practices as Implementer, the role has been presented in a rather homogenous way, in a sense suggesting that all middle managers do (or should do) all of the above.

My findings nuance and advance current knowledge of middle managers' role during strategic change by showing how they perceive and approach their role as change agents differently. The four approaches differ along two dimensions: (1) scope of the role (i.e., whether they perceive it as broad or narrow), and (2) the extent to which middle managers' perceive the change as challenging their current mindset. While the Market Protector and Executer take a narrow approach to the role, focusing on either current customers or their own team, both the Renewer and Co-creator take a broader approach to their implementer role, emphasizing the entire organization. Further, the Executer and Co-creator both perceive a need to challenge their

current mindset as a consequence of the change. In contrast, the Market Protector and the Renewer do not perceive a similar need to challenge their mindset. Thus, my findings show that the Implementer role is not a uniform task, but can rather be performed in various ways depending on how middle managers make sense of their role as Implementers.

Secondly, I find that middle managers emphasize different practices depending on the approaches they adopt to the change agent role. For instance, the Market Protectors direct their attention toward current customers and pay less attention to supporting others through change (Huy 2001a; Balogun 2003), or juggling between different interests (Stensaker & Langley 2010). In contrast, the Executors engage in most of the practices described in previous research, but draw tight boundaries around their own team. Overall, the four different approaches broaden the insights from current literature by showing that how middle managers perceive and take on the Implementer role involves prioritizing between the different practices described in the current literature.

Thirdly, my findings show that some middle managers take a broader approach to their role as change agents that goes well beyond the limits of the Implementer's role. While lower middle managers fit the Implementer role better (although they approach it in different ways), high-level middle managers appear to expand the traditional notion of the middle manager's role as implementer of strategic change decided at the senior management level. High-level middle managers initiate their own radical change process. Thus, instead of receiving change initiatives from the senior management group that they are expected to loyally execute, (Balogun 2003; Balogun & Johnson 2005; Stensaker & Langley 2010), high-level middle managers bring something new to the table. Moreover, these high-level middle managers take action in relation to the senior management by connecting their strategic initiatives to the corporate agenda. This upward-oriented practice resembles the Champion role identified by Floyd and Wooldridge (1992), where middle managers communicate new strategic ideas that are in contrast to current

strategy upwards to the senior management. However, unlike the Champion role, high-level managers do not try to sell ideas that are separate from the current strategy. On the contrary, they emphasize the need to link their strategic change initiatives to the current corporate strategy in order to be able to launch their own change journey. In addition, these middle managers emphasize cross-unit collaboration during the implementation of change. This resembles the Facilitator role within the classical framework of Floyd and Wooldridge (1992). However, in contrast to the Facilitator, these middle managers take initiatives that fall within the boundaries of current strategy.

In summary, my findings extend our knowledge of the role middle managers take on during strategic change by showing how they approach the role of change agent in a more nuanced way than empirical research has been able to show to date. Below, I elaborate on the consequences various approaches to the change agent role have for the progress of change.

How middle managers contribute to the progress of change

Previous literature has argued that both intended and unintended outcomes may result from how middle managers interpret change initiatives (see, for example, Balogun 2003; Balogun & Johnson 2005). My study suggests that middle managers contribute to the progress of change in different ways, depending on their approach to the implementer role. For instance, the Executer builds capacity for change by ensuring concrete behavioral changes in their team. The Co-creator does this as well, but also works across teams. The Market Protector, on the other hand, attends to current business, and thus primarily contributes to day-to-day operations, while the Renewer focuses on new insights and market drivers and thereby contributes to change. My study thus expands current knowledge by showing how each approach to the change agent role contributes in a specific way to the progress of change, by emphasizing either day-to-day operations or the implementation of change.

Moreover, my study shows how middle managers develop capacity for multiple change. While they did not explicitly study multiple changes, Rouleau and Balogun (2011) showed that middle managers work at the individual level to develop a shared understanding among different stakeholders. They do this through sensemaking activities such as setting the scene and performing the conversation. My findings extend current knowledge by illustrating that similar activities take place at the collective level. In addition to these well-known sensemaking activities, middle managers build capacity for change by reassembling change initiatives. While the existing literature has suggested that managers can develop change capacity by various means (Meyer & Stensaker 2006), the specific implementation practices carried out at the middle management level have not been documented.

Implications for practices

This dissertation has several practical implications for both middle managers and senior management as regards how to understand and develop the middle manager as a change agent. Firstly, senior managers and middle managers should be aware of the different approaches to the implementer role and how middle managers, both individually and as a team, can contribute to the progress of change. Secondly, senior managers and middle managers should be aware of how middle managers can contribute to change capacity within a multiple change context. These implications are outlined in the following paragraphs.

Firstly, middle managers should be aware of the role they take on as change agents and how this affects the practices they prioritize and the progress of change. Awareness of different approaches to change agency can contribute to middle managers' ability to interact effectively and constructively with their peers during strategic change. By knowing the strengths and implications of different approaches, middle managers can be aware of how they contribute to the progress of change, individually and as a team.

Furthermore, the framework can be used by senior management as a tool to raise awareness of which role approaches exist in an organization. Based on this knowledge, senior management can develop their middle management staff to take an approach to the change agent role that supports and matches the need for strategic change in the organization. Moreover, when organizations implement large-scale changes, the senior management must ensure that they have middle managers who approach the change agent role in a way that is effective in relation to succeeding with the change. For instance, if the senior management strategy focuses on improving the total customer experience, they need middle managers who are focused on the interplay between different units in the organization. It would therefore be more beneficial for them to mobilize middle managers who adopt a broad approach to change agency. Thus, senior management should establish a middle management team that comprises approaches that are aligned with the strategic change they want to achieve. In addition, senior management can contribute to collaboration and increased understanding of the middle manager's role as change agent by creating awareness of elements, such as what role their middle managers prefer to take on or how different role approaches develop capacity for change, and building on the strengths of each role approach. The implications of the findings in my dissertation therefore emphasize how important it is for senior management to facilitate the recruitment and development of, and interplay between, middle managers who take different approaches as change agents in order to ensure the progress of change progress and increase the capacity for change within their organization.

Secondly, in contrast to theories on change management and change that claim that change unfolds as a linear and stepwise process, this study provides valuable insights for both senior management and middle managers into how to handle dynamic and multiple change contexts. The process model for how to develop capacity for multiple changes illustrates how change agents can provide resources and allocate and reallocate resources between different

change initiatives, as well as striking a balance between change and day-to-day business. The framework further suggests that middle managers can develop capacity for change by assembling the necessary resources to handle many parallel changes while continuing day-to-day operations. This can be done by communicating, negotiating, and interacting with internal and external stakeholders.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

As described in the chapter on methodology, it is a basic assumption in qualitative research that timing and context influence findings. It is therefore not the intention of this study to generalize or establish cause-effect relationships. My aim is to understand the uniqueness of each case and how the social context imbues human action with meaning. Through the complimentary rich descriptions of my data set in Article 2 and Article 3, I have attempted to give readers of my study an opportunity to judge whether the findings are applicable in another setting (Guba 1981). Other researchers might therefore interpret the data differently based on, for example, their theoretical lenses. However, when context and timing influence findings, it is interesting to reflect on how this affects my interpretation and findings, as well as the implications for future research. Below, I elaborate on how context and timing may have influenced my studies.

Firstly, both of my case organizations are primarily sales organizations. In the financial company, the participants in my study were middle managers with responsibility for sales teams at two organizational levels. I found that 16 of 20 middle managers played the role of either Market Protector or Executer. Furthermore, the high-level middle managers in the telecom company had, as in the subsidiary's management, ambitious sales goals to achieve in a competitive market situation. The question can be raised of whether a different type of context, such as another industry, different organizational cultures, or other kinds of units (e.g., product managers) within the same organization, would have implications for how middle managers approach their role as change agents.

As regards timing, both of my cases were real-time studies of ongoing change processes. Real-time studies have the advantage of showing how the respondents experience the change rather than presenting neatly organized stories based on retrospective rationalization (Langley & Stensaker 2012). Consequently, it can be asked whether my findings would have been different if I had studied middle managers' role as change agents at a later point in the strategic implementation processes.

These limitations provide direction for future research. Firstly, my research offers insight into how middle managers approach their role as change agents differently in strategic change processes. Although I assess the implications for the progress of change, I do not measure capacity for change in a systematic manner. Future studies should therefore develop effective scientific measures for the progress of change and change capacity. Moreover, there is a need to explore, more specifically, why middle managers take on the role as change agents differently. One suggestion would be to examine how middle managers' competence profile and/or experience influences their choice of approach to the change agent role. For instance, by using work life studies and examining middle managers' careers, researchers could explore how this affects their perception of their role.

Furthermore, my findings show that high-level middle managers have a larger repertoire of roles (Champions, Facilitators, Implementers) than lower-level middle managers (for the most part Implementers). Therefore, future research on the middle managers' role during strategic change should be aware of and explicitly describe which organizational level is being examined because of the influence this has on middle managers' change agency. However, future research should explore in more depth what leads middle managers at different organizational levels to take on different change agent roles. One possible explanation could be divergent organizational contexts. As presented in the methods chapter, the high-level managers operated within a company that has historically been characterized by a highly decentralized organizational

structure, emphasizing the uniqueness of each market, including a high degree of local autonomy for subsidiary management teams. These high-level middle managers experience a high degree of autonomy, mobility, and room to maneuver in their own market. It could therefore be argued that this organizational context characterized by a decentralized structure allows the middle managers to take on an expanded change agent role, including more acceptance for initiatives from middle managers. In contrast, a centralized organizational context appears to imply a more limited change agent role for middle managers. The lower-level middle managers take on a more limited change agent role in line with the role of implementer described in previous research (see, for example, Balogun 2003; Balogun & Johnson 2005; Stensaker & Langley 2010; Rouleau & Balogun 2011). Consequently, future research should look into how different organizational contexts influence what role middle managers take on during strategic change and why some act as proactive, committed change agents.

An interesting avenue could be to build on the work of Mantere and Vaara (2008), which shows how the participation of middle managers in implementation processes is influenced by discourses within the organization. According to Mantere and Vaara (2008), there are six different discourses linked to different approaches to participation by middle managers in strategy processes. For instance, while “disciplining” (focus on hierarchies and command structures) leads to a low degree of participation, discourses such as “self-actualization” (that is, focus on engagement and objective seeking processes from people at all levels) promote participation in these processes by middle managers (Mantere & Vaara 2008). Thus, future research could explore how different discourses influence middle managers’ room for manoeuvre and their repertoire of roles in change processes.

Consequently, future studies should explore what kind of capabilities are required to fulfil the role of change agent in a multiple change context. Moreover, research should examine what kind of capabilities are needed at the middle-management level to develop change capacity within

a multiple change context characterized by parallel and overlapping initiatives that take place simultaneously.

Finally, future research might benefit from using alternative methods to collect data, such as interactive discussion groups (e.g., focus groups) or self-reporting (e.g., diaries), in addition to more traditional methods, such as interviews and observations, to gain more insight. Future research could also benefit from being based on engaged research (Van de Ven 2007), emphasizing strong collaboration between practitioners and researchers in order to increase the probability of contributing to both practice and theory.

CONCLUSION

This doctoral dissertation contributes to the literature on middle management and strategic change processes by expanding our knowledge of how middle managers take on the role of change agents during strategic change processes. By exploring middle managers at different levels and organizational contexts and, additionally, within a multiple change context, my findings add to the traditional picture of middle managers as implementers of change initiated at senior management level. Moreover, in contrast to previous empirical research, which has hitherto primarily portrayed middle managers as one homogenous group, my studies nuance our knowledge of middle managers' role as change agents.

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Table 1: Overview of articles

	<i>Article 1</i>	<i>Article 2</i>	<i>Article 3</i>
Topic	Middle managers' roles and practices during strategic change	Middle managers' perception of their role as implementers of change	How middle managers develop change capacity within a multiple change context
Type of research	Literature review	Longitudinal qualitative case study	Longitudinal qualitative case study
Research question (RQ)	What do we know from the existing research concerning different roles and practices of middle management during strategic change?	How do middle managers perceive their role as implementers and what is it that they do to implement strategic change?	How do divisional leaders contribute to developing capacity for multiple change?
Theoretical lens	Middle management literature	Sensemaking theory	Sensemaking theory
Research design and data collection	Review of the most influential research on middle managers from the early 1990's onwards. This includes middle management literature and strategy process literature, particularly papers dealing with organizational change where middle management is the unit of analysis.	Single case study of a change process in real time within one division of a finance company. Overall, 38 interviews were conducted where 20 middle managers at two organizational levels were interviewed at two different points in time.	Single case study of a change process in real time within a foreign subsidiary of a multinational telecommunications company. Overall, 34 interviews were conducted, 13 of which were with high-level middle managers while 23 were lower level middle management.
Findings	<p>Most empirical studies on strategic change depict the middle managers' main role as comprehensive, yet quite homogeneous. Middle managers are primarily viewed as implementers of change initiatives initiated by the senior management group.</p> <p>The review indicated that seminal research on middle management included various others roles, leading me to question the rather narrow and homogeneous conceptualization of the middle manager's in the implementer role.</p>	The study demonstrates four distinct patterns for how middle managers approach their role as implementers. The analyses of interview data reveal differences in, firstly, the scope of the role (i.e., whether they perceived it as broad or narrow) and, secondly, the extent to which they perceive the change as challenging their current mindset. The interplay between these two dimensions leads to four different approaches to the implementer role: Market Protector, Executer, Renewer, and Co-Creator.	The study shows how divisional leaders develop temporary capacity for change through assembling and reassembling change initiatives and strategic sensemaking activities.
Contributions	The study identifies middle managers' role and practices during strategic change described in previous research. Three unexplored phenomena are identified: the need for more knowledge about different middle manager levels, the emergence of new (high-level) middle managers and how to develop change capacity in a multiple change context.	The paper develops a framework that illustrates various approaches to the implementer role among middle managers.	The paper develops a model on how middle managers temporarily develop change capacity by mobilizing the multiple change context.

MIDDLE MANAGERS' ROLE DURING STRATEGIC CHANGE:

ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL

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ABSTRACT

Middle managers' capability of facilitating strategic change is critical to effectively handle the increased pace of organizational change. This article reviews the middle management literature to identify middle managers' roles and practices during strategic change. Previous research has emphasized the role of implementer as the main responsibility for middle managers during strategic change. Through different practices, middle managers ensure implementation of change initiatives in their own unit. However, I argue that new sets of challenges have arisen in contemporary organizations that require middle managers' to take a more expanded role during strategic change. The purpose of this article is to shed light on the implications of the characteristics of contemporary organizations for middle managers' roles and practices during strategic change. Suggestions for future research conclude the article.

Keywords: Strategic roles, Strategic change, Middle managers

INTRODUCTION

The strategic change literature stresses the importance of senior management commitment and focus to secure the implementation of strategic change. Through organizational restructuring, new governance structure, leadership, and competence development, senior management strives for movement in and renewal of corporate mindset, beliefs, and values. Although strategic change tends to include a top-down element, previous research has shown that strategy is shaped not only by top executives but also by a broader spectrum of managers at multiple levels in the organization (Balogun & Johnson 2005; Rouleau 2005). Strategic change initiatives are being interpreted and translated within different organizational contexts (Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991), resulting in various unintended consequences (Balogun & Johnson 2005). Consequently, middle management plays a vital role in strategic change processes initiated by senior management.

This article reviews the middle management literature with the aim to identify different roles and practices of middle management during strategic change. The literature review is based on the classical framework of Floyd and Wooldridge (1992) on middle management roles in strategy, which identifies four different roles (Champion, Synthesizer, Facilitator, and Implementer). However, whereas that framework focuses on middle managers' roles within strategy processes, the focus of the current work is on middle managers' roles during change. Thus, I use their framework to categorize the most influential middle management literature with the intent to reveal insight into middle managers' roles and practices during strategic change.

According to the literature review, the middle management literature tends to focus on middle managers' upward activities during strategy formulation processes and downward activities during strategy implementation processes. Furthermore, the change literature on middle managers' roles and practices during strategic change mainly centers on middle managers as implementers of change initiatives and how they enable their employees' adaptability to change.

Yet, after taking the findings from the literature review into account, I argue that three main subjects require further exploration, due to research designs in previous studies and new trends that have emerged in contemporary organizations that affect middle managers' roles during change. First, existing research is unclear on what level middle managers operate at and therefore omits insight into possibilities for different expectations and roles at different levels. Second, the literature does not take into consideration implications of increased globalization or new technology, which puts new expectations on middle managers and neglects the emergence of a new type of high-level middle manager responsible for cross-geographic units (Rouleau, Balogun, & Floyd 2015). Third, knowledge on how middle managers handle change contexts in which changes are multiple and overlapping is lacking. In the Discussion section, this article presents suggestions for theoretical and methodological approaches to explore these subjects.

MIDDLE MANAGERS' ROLES DURING STRATEGIC CHANGE

The term "middle management" has been defined in different ways in the literature (Wooldridge, Schmid, & Floyd 2008), largely because this group of managers has a broad range of responsibilities at all levels of the organization. In this article, I define the term "middle managers" as any manager one level or more below the senior management team and at least one level above frontline workers and professionals (Huy 2001). Thus, I conceptualize some middle managers as having direct access to the top executive group and others as having responsibility for customer-facing employees (first line leaders).

A broad range of research has explored how middle managers contribute to strategy from their intermediate position in organizations (Burgelman 1983a; Burgelman 1983b; Wooldridge & Floyd 1990; Burgelman 1994; Balogun 2003; Balogun & Johnson 2005; Wooldridge, Schmid, & Floyd 2008; Stensaker & Langley 2010; Rouleau & Balogun 2011). Their involvement, especially in implementing strategy, has a positive impact on firm financial performance

(Wooldridge & Floyd 1990), goal congruence (Ketokivi & Castañer 2004), and organizational learning (Lines 2005; Beck & Plowman 2009). It also helps enhance middle managers' priorities, goals, and coordination during implementation (Vilà & Canales 2008).

In the strategic change literature, especially early research emphasized middle managers as advocates of the status quo and depicted them as the main problem in change processes (e.g., Guth & MacMillan 1986). Studies have also shown that middle managers may delay or even sabotage the implementation process (Guth & MacMillan 1986; Hope 2010). However, the 1990s witnessed a shift to a more positive view, in which middle managers were recognized as important within strategy processes (Floyd & Wooldridge 1992, 1997) and as change agents during strategic change (Huy 2001, 2002; Balogun 2003; Bryant & Stensaker 2011; Rouleau & Balogun 2011).

As mentioned, according to Floyd and Wooldridge (1992), middle managers may adopt different strategic roles to affect strategy processes (please refer to Figure 1). Their typology of middle management influence is based on a cognitive and a behavioral dimension. The cognitive dimension illustrates middle managers' active thinking in strategy, described as either divergent from or integrative of current strategy. In a divergent approach, middle managers have considerations that differ from those of senior management. Under an integrative strategy, middle managers have similar perceptions of initiatives to those of senior management and thus integrative attitudes toward strategic initiatives. Furthermore, the behavioral dimension pertains to middle managers' active participation in strategy, described as oriented either upward to senior management or downward to peers and employees. The intersection of the cognitive and behavioral dimensions leads to four strategy roles: Champion, Synthesizer, Facilitator, and Implementer (Floyd & Wooldridge 1992, 1996).

Insert Figure 1 about here

Champion is an upward and divergent role in which middle managers try to draw attention to and secure resources for their own projects. Middle managers may act as Champions for initiatives developed at the operating level. For example, the operating level may suggest initiatives for new services or products that need to receive strategic priority at the senior management level. Synthesizers give upward integrative input to support current strategy; however, the input is based on their view of the information, which may influence mindsets in the senior management team. Thus, Champions and Synthesizers promote understanding of important issues related to improving the performance in their unit the senior management level (upward activities). Conversely, Facilitators and Implementers (downward activities) handle important issues together with other colleagues and their employees. Facilitators create room for flexible and innovative initiatives to emerge through downward activities, such as task force groups, or promote cooperation between different organizational units. These strategic initiatives may be in conflict with or divergent from existing strategic plans developed at the senior management level. Finally, Implementers align organizational actions with strategic intentions.

Drawing on Floyd and Wooldridge's (1992) framework, which explores middle managers' roles within strategy processes, I identify the roles and practices of middle managers during strategic change. To do so, I review existing research on middle managers' roles and practices in each of the four strategy roles in Floyd and Wooldridge's framework. The review consults the most influential research on middle managers mainly from the early 1990s and onward. I draw on research from middle management literature and strategy process literature particularly papers dealing with organizational change; thus, the review excludes research on middle managers' more general job requirements and status.

Middle managers' role as Champions

Bower (1970) was the first to recognize the contributions of middle managers in strategy work by arguing that middle managers try to influence top managers to implement new strategic initiatives. Other studies have offered rich descriptions of how middle managers create and develop (bottom-up) strategy, arguing that organizational performance is influenced more by middle management than by the senior management team (Bower 1970; Burgelman 1983a; Wooldridge & Floyd 1990). Table 1 summarizes prior research that concerns middle managers role as Champions.

Insert Table 1 about here

Dutton and Ashford (1993) show that middle managers influence the strategic agenda by prioritizing and deciding which topic should be brought to the attention of senior management in the strategy process. Through the lenses of three different theories (i.e., social problem theory, impression management, and upward influence), they develop a conceptual framework to account for the practices of middle managers to get attention and resources from the senior management. They report that middle managers engage in meaning-creation practices such as upward influence and impression-management activities. Dutton and Ashford also recommend that senior management develop middle managers' competence in issue selling and empower those at all levels to create a more adaptive organization. Dutton et al. (1997) find that the social context influences issue-selling processes and that these processes are more politically and contextual embedded (see also Dutton et al. 2001). In addition, Ling, Floyd, and Baldrige (2005) find that subsidiary managers are influenced by their national culture, which affects their choice of issue-selling strategy. Burgelman (1994) further emphasizes the important role of middle managers as Champions in a case study of Intel, in which he shows how middle managers' divergent behavior

may signal important environmental changes; he also reports that middle managers' influence may lead to an important redefinition of the official strategy set by the senior management.

Additional research focusing on the middle manager role as Champion also indicates that middle managers need to act strategically in their upward activities to obtain necessary attention and resources from the senior management level. That research identifies the importance of middle managers' adhering to what is in the organization's interests. This means that managers need to concentrate on providing in-depth synthesis of strategically relevant information and consider the overall business, not just a particular subunit or function (Floyd & Wooldridge 1997; Mantere 2008).

Moreover, middle managers' internal and external social network positions influence their level of divergent strategic activity (Pappas & Wooldridge 2007), and middle managers in so-called boundary spanning subunits (e.g., product managers) report higher levels of strategic influence activity than other managers (Floyd & Wooldridge 1994, 1997). These middle managers are often in contact with external actors such as customers and suppliers. As such, putting middle managers into regular contact with the environment is important to develop their capability of serving as strategic change agents (Floyd & Wooldridge 1994, 1997, 2000; Nonaka 1994).

Previous research has also shown the importance of senior management in enhancing middle managers' strategic competence and involvement in strategy. For example, Westley (1990) emphasizes the importance of involving middle managers in a two-way conversation with top managers, with the purpose of increasing organizational responsiveness and innovation in strategy. Burgelman (1994) also claims that top managers play an important role in creating an organization that allows for discussion, opinions, and involvement at different levels. Thus, senior management can improve middle managers' strategic competence by prioritizing the

establishment of a strategic context, organizational structures, and reward systems that encourage middle managers to think strategically (Wooldridge & Floyd 1990).

In summary, research focusing on middle managers' role as Champions has shown the importance of middle managers within strategy processes. Middle managers' divergent upward initiatives are important for senior management to get a better and more complete picture of the challenges and possibilities in the external or internal business environment. As such, research has mainly focused on middle managers' contribution in the initial stages of the strategy process.

Middle managers' role as Synthesizers

In the role as Synthesizers, middle managers interpret information from external or internal events (Westley 1990) and channel it to the senior management team through upward integrative practices to support strategic initiatives. An example is reporting on the results from key performance initiatives and challenges in current business operations. Historically, research on strategy limited middle managers' role to giving input on strategy formulation, in which strategy making was assumed to involve only the top manager or senior management team (Wooldridge, Schmid, & Floyd 2008). Table 2 provides an overview of literature concerning the middle manager's role as Synthesizers.

Insert Table 2 about here

Over time, senior managers' interpretation of different issues based on middle managers' interpretation and communication of selected information (Ranson, Hinings, & Greenwood 1980; Dutton & Jackson 1987) may lay the foundation for strategic change (Floyd & Wooldridge 1992). However, existing research is limited with regard to middle managers' roles and practices during strategic change.

Middle managers' role as Facilitators

Facilitators enable learning that makes organizations more flexible and encourage organizational actors to engage in new experimental thinking and practices; however, these behaviors may diverge from official expectations (Floyd & Wooldridge 1992). An example of this is middle managers who take initiatives to establish interdisciplinary/interorganizational groups with the purpose of discovering both efficiency initiatives and new service and product possibilities. Table 3 provide an overview on previous research on middle managers role as Facilitators.

Insert Table 3 about here

Several studies have explored how middle managers enact this role. Bartlett and Ghoshal (1993) reveal that middle managers who allow for horizontal integration and facilitate the distribution of knowledge-based resources within the organization are important facilitators for initiatives at the operating level. Martin and Eisenhardt (2010) show that middle managers can establish effective cross-border collaborations. In addition, research has found that middle managers contribute strategically to organizational renewal and capability transformation through knowledge search (Tippmann, Mangematin, & Scott 2013).

Nonaka (1994) claims that middle managers should be considered the true knowledge engineers in knowledge-creating organizations. Owing to their position and unique access to senior management, frontline employees, and their peers, they are able to convert these knowledge sources into new knowledge through bottom-up and horizontal network knowledge search processes. Furthermore, middle managers are often experienced, having a wealth of functional knowledge of the business, which makes them fertile ground for new ideas of growth and change (Floyd & Wooldridge 2000). Huy (2001) refers to this role as the entrepreneur in his

analytical framework, which describes the different roles of middle managers in the strategic implementation process. The entrepreneur is associated with middle managers' position near the front lines, which helps them consider new possibilities in both problem solving and opportunity detection.

In summary, research focusing on middle managers' role as Facilitators has identified these managers as important change agents and innovators through their efforts to connect different levels, build and integrate new knowledge, and create new organizational solutions or products/services. However, research has mainly contributed to the burgeoning literature that argues that organizational performance is influenced more by the middle management level than by the senior management level (Burgelman 1983a, 1983b; Floyd & Wooldridge 1992, 1994, 1996,1997, 2000; Dutton & Ashford 1993; Huy 2001), thus focusing less on strategic change.

Middle managers' role as Implementers

Finally, middle managers contribute to strategic processes as Implementers of strategic decisions of the senior management team. As Implementers, middle managers use their position to execute the strategy throughout the organization (Floyd & Wooldridge 1990). While early research on middle management was normative and focused on what tools middle managers should use to implement strategy (e.g., Guth & McMillan 1986), later studies have focused on middle managers' more active and interpretative roles. Table 4 compiles prior research on middle managers role as Implementers.

Insert Table 4 about here

In general, the empirical research on strategic change has mainly focused on middle managers' role as implementers of change initiatives they do not devise themselves (Balogun 2003; Stensaker & Langley 2010). Furthermore, research on middle managers' role as

Implementers has mainly used the sensemaking perspective to explore managerial practices and how these practices influence strategic outcomes (Rouleau, Balogun, & Floyd 2015). While some studies are grounded in the Weickian view of sensemaking and examine how middle managers build shared meanings and interpretations (e.g., Balogun & Johnson 2004, 2005), others have focused on activities (e.g., Balogun 2003) micro-practices (Rouleau 2005), and skills and efforts (Lüscher & Lewis 2008; Rouleau & Balogun 2011).

The literature has primarily focused on what middle managers do during strategic change. Previous research has found that middle managers interpret the change and undergo personal change, help others through the change, secure implementation by communicating and balancing practices due to different concerns, and take care of change initiatives while ensuring the continuation of daily business (Huy 2001, 2002; Balogun 2003; Balogun & Johnson 2004, 2005; Rouleau 2005; Stensaker & Falkenberg 2007; Stensaker & Langley 2010). I discuss these practices next.

First, middle managers make sense of the change initiative and then undergo personal change (Balogun 2003). Personal change pertains to how they interpret the implications of the change in terms of “how they think about and carry out their work” (Balogun 2003, p. 75). To achieve personal change, middle managers may use their peers as sparring partners and, through dialogue, interpret the change initiatives from the senior management team. Through their horizontal networking (Balogun & Johnson 2005), they contribute to a new negotiated common understanding and find support for and common sense of both strategic initiatives and challenges related to the implementation of these initiatives (Balogun & Johnson 2005). This horizontal interaction between middle managers often unfolds as lateral informal processes that may lead to both intended and unintended strategic change (Balogun & Johnson 2005). In their study of strategic change in three business units in a multinational oil company, Stensaker and Falkenberg (2007) find five interpretative responses at the individual level that had consequences at the

organizational level: convergent responses, divergent responses, unresolved sense making, creative responses, and noncompliance. In this manner, interpreting change and then undertaking personal change can help inform middle managers' actions and sensegiving activities toward their employees (Balogun 2003), leading to the desired change processes.

Second, middle managers are also vital in helping others through change (Balogun 2003). Change can lead to employee fear and uncertainty about the change, and thus middle managers need to try to handle these reactions. Huy (2001) describes this middle manager role as a therapist who identifies and then works to sooth employees' emotions. Middle managers can handle employee reactions by engaging in dialogue (Stensaker et al. 2011) and tailoring communication so that it suits each recipient (Huy 2001). Opening a dialogue with subordinates may get them on board and may also expand the middle managers' own perspectives on the change process (Stensaker et al. 2011), which they can use to further understand their employees and thus speak to them in ways that create increased energy and motivation for change. However, middle managers who are positive and passionate about the change will also face situations in which their employees do not share their opinions. Huy (2002) shows that middle managers who provide both emotional commitment to personally championed change projects and support for their employees' emotions can create balance to facilitate organizational adaptation.

In addition, Lüscher and Lewis's (2008) study of the restructuring of the Danish Lego company shows how middle managers solved implementation challenges and made sense of the change by working through three paradoxes. These are performing (in terms of conflicting management demands towards their manager role), belonging (in terms of their relationships with others such as peers versus their own team) and organizing (in terms of conflicting organizational objectives). By working through these paradoxes, Lüscher and Lewis (2008) find that middle managers establish a more workable certainty which enables change. Another way middle

managers can deal with emotional reactions is to create distance from the change by adhering to formal guidelines for discussion and decision (Stensaker et al. 2011).

The third managerial practice identified in the literature is securing implementation by translating and negotiating the change initiative into language and metaphors that make sense to subordinates and peers. Huy (2001) describes this practice as middle managers' communicator role. Rouleau and Balogun (2011) find that middle managers use two discursive activities to create change: 'setting the scene' and 'performing the conversation'. These activities are underpinned by middle managers' discursive competence, or their ability to draw from symbolic and verbal representations and the sociocultural systems within which they are situated. Setting the scene refers to knowing who to contact and who to bring together to implement the necessary change. Huy (2001) argues that middle managers often have a widespread web of contacts in the organization, and through this, they know whom to contact to get things done. Through this web of contacts, they are able to spread the word about the changes and secure support for the initiative. However, setting the scene also involves knowing whom to use to help influence things, such as subordinates, peers, and senior managers. Performing the conversation refers to the way middle managers are able to 'craft' and 'diffuse' the message they want to communicate and, thus, to influence the recipients in the desired way, using the right words and the appropriate metaphors and symbols. Through these discursive activities, middle managers can help others make sense of the change and facilitate a common understanding on how to implement changes efficiently while balancing different concerns. In addition, middle managers may draw on their tacit knowledge, their history, and experience to sell strategic change to key stakeholders through communication and action in daily routines and conversations (Rouleau 2005).

Furthermore, middle managers often confront and thus need to handle different expectations from different actors in the organizations (e.g., Mantere 2008) during implementation of change. Stensaker and Langley (2010) show how middle managers navigate

among three concerns during implementation of a strategic change initiative: relational (relationships with employees), substantive concern (goal attainment), and political (corporate demands). Doing so involves an understanding of how to speak to different audiences (employees, peers, and senior management). Research has also argued that middle managers' interactions with senior management are formal interventions in design while their interactions with other middle managers are informal (Balogun & Johnson 2005). Finally, previous research reveals that middle managers need negotiation capabilities to handle competing roles (Bryant & Stensaker 2011).

Fourth, middle managers' position between senior management and the operative level often gives them the responsibility for both implementing corporate strategic changes and ensuring that business as usual is maintained (Balogun 2003; Stensaker et al. 2011). Huy (2001) compares this role to that of a tightrope artist, in which middle managers need to balance attention to both the actual change implementation and the day-to-day business operations. Omission of either of these issues can lead to underperformance.

DISCUSSION

Middle managers' role in contemporary organizations and change

The middle management literature provides insight into the roles and practices of middle managers. Through their position (between senior management and the operational level), middle managers contribute to strategic change processes through both upward and downward activities. As the literature review indicates, empirical studies on middle managers' roles and practices have primarily focused on two of the four roles of Floyd and Wooldridge's (1992) framework: the champion role and the implementer role. As such, previous research has focused on middle managers' contributions as Champions in the early strategy formulation phase and as Implementers in the implementation phase. Yet the change literature on middle managers' role

during strategic implementation has focused on middle managers as implementers of change initiatives initiated from the senior management group. Therefore, research on strategic change has provided rich insight into middle managers' practices during implementation of strategic change.

Although a wealth of research has discussed middle managers' role during strategic change, several important challenges remain unexplored. First, the term 'middle managers' reflects a large and heterogeneous group of leaders (Wooldridge, Schmid, & Floyd 2008) in contemporary organizations. The label may represent different leaders at various levels from project leaders to heads of subsidiaries of large corporate, global organizations. However, research is unclear on the level at which middle managers operate.

Second, prior research suggests that new types of middle managers are emerging, which indicates that leaders may experience changes in expectations of their role. Globalization and integration of different units has led to changes in middle managers' span of control and level of autonomy (Rouleau, Balogun, & Floyd 2015). For example, Rouleau, Balogun, and Floyd (2015) claim that leaders of subsidiaries, who previously had autonomous profit responsibility for their isolated markets, are becoming middle managers in large corporations.

Third, changes are not happening one by one, as much of the change literature suggests (e.g., Kotter 1995), but appear to be multiple, parallel, overlapping, conflicting, and often costly. I argue that this phenomenon has an impact on middle managers' roles and what practices they are expected to undertake within strategic change processes. In the next subsections, I address each of these three characteristics of contemporary organizations, focusing on what they consist of and why and how they may be a challenge regarding knowledge of middle managers' roles and practices within strategic change processes.

The various levels of middle managers

In contemporary organizations, the label ‘middle managers’ consists of leaders operating within many different contexts and at various levels (Wooldridge, Schmid, & Floyd 2008). According to Rouleau, Balogun, and Floyd (2015) organizational hierarchies are growing more complex rather than flattening. For example, the term ‘middle managers’ can refer to both leaders who are responsible for one department or project and leaders who have cross-unit or cross-geographic responsibilities in large and global corporations. Therefore, the more archetypal middle managers’ profile in traditional bureaucratic organizations is being challenged and expanded, with various types of middle managers operating at new levels (Rouleau, Balogun, & Floyd 2015).

A well-known phenomenon in organizational theory (Selznick 1948; Cyert & March 1963) is that people in the same organization view the world differently. In addition, people in organizations may have different mental maps or so-called schemata that serve as a frame of reference for organizational activities (e.g. Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991). Furthermore, literature on leadership claims that there are different expectations of leaders at different levels in an organization.

Middle managers face what Thompson (1967) describes as the administrative paradox, due to their position within a field of tension between demands for efficiency and demands for legitimacy. On the one hand, they need to focus internally and secure efficiency at the operating level. On the other hand, the administrative level needs to promote implementation of change and, by this, secure the organization’s legitimacy. This description fits that of the more traditional middle manager in bureaucratic organizations who is responsible for one department (Floyd & Wooldridge 1997). However, middle managers operating as heads of business units may confront expectations of more strategic behavior, which includes external communication and

negotiations; according to Thompson, these are the responsibilities of the institutional level and senior management.

An implication is that middle managers operating at different levels may view the world differently than senior management and thus have different expectations of their role. This again has implications for their perception of their role as middle managers. For example, middle managers at a higher level in the organization (e.g., heads of business units) might try to spend more time and focus attention both externally and upward, while lower-level middle managers might try to act more strategically by implementing the decisions taken by the senior management.

The emergence of new middle managers

Another unexplored phenomenon in current organizations is the emergence of a new type of middle manager. According to Rouleau, Balogun and Floyd (2015), increased globalization and new technology for cross-unit communication and collaboration have transformed the role of more senior managers from autonomous country-based subsidiary managers to middle managers in large corporations, for example. These leaders, who used to have a high degree of autonomy, are now being exposed to a new set of expectations, due to their new role as middle managers. As middle managers, they are both change agents who must initiate locally driven changes and change recipients of corporate strategies in charge of implementing large corporate initiatives (Balogun, Bartunek, & Do 2015). Such trends and assumptions challenge existing research, such as Floyd and Wooldridge's (1992) framework, which presents middle manager as implementers of strategy. Thus, although these middle managers become implementers of strategic change decisions at the corporate headquarters level, their competence profiles, which include both past experience and the necessary qualifications for leading a subsidiary, offer a new understanding of their role during strategic change.

In addition, organizational forms such as matrix organizations may have implications for middle managers' role during strategic change. For example, middle managers in contemporary organizations may have cross-unit responsibility for both units and processes, in which they are in charge of both horizontal and vertical implementation activities that may or may not include formal authority. Although previous research has discussed the different skills and resources middle managers use when they lack formal authority (Rouleau & Balogun 2011), the cross-unit responsibility during strategic changes in new organizational structures is an unexplored phenomenon. This also includes how middle managers perceive their role, given the new types of responsibilities and the consequential practices they undertake during strategic change.

The emergence of a multiple change context

As noted previously, in contemporary organizations, changes are not happening one by one (e.g., Kotter 1995) but are multiple (Meyer & Stensaker 2006). An example is an acquisition or merger, which may include different strategic initiatives and change processes, such as the establishment of new organizational units, new common IT systems, new joint brands, leadership development programs, and product innovations, as well as downsizing. Here, multiple changes occur at the same time, and new changes are started before others are completed (Meyer & Stensaker 2006). A multiple change context creates increased complexity, and different change initiatives trigger different internal decisions and activities (e.g., new organizational structure, training programs) that risk crowding out daily operational activities such as monitoring competition and managing portfolios (Meyer & Stensaker 2006).

An important activity for leaders within a multiple change context is building the organizational capacity to handle multiple changes while also handling daily operations (Huy 2001; Balogun 2003). Middle managers are particularly susceptible to multiple changes, due to their intermediate position in organizations. A key task for middle managers within a multiple change context is to balance the resources used in change processes and daily operations and to

prioritize capacity between different change processes. Multiple changes must be managed efficiently, and at the same time, the day-to-day activities must be performed effectively, be constantly improved, and be delivered with the expected quality. A multiple change context increases the complexity within the change process. First, there will be many changes for middle managers to reflect on and make sense of. Second, the changes they believe in and those they need to implement may differ. Finally, a multiple change context means that middle managers must make sense of many different change initiatives that may be in conflict with one another.

According to Rouleau, Balogun, and Floyd (2015), knowledge on how middle managers handle the complexity of their role in fast-changing environments is lacking. On the one hand, a multiple change context can create stress and reduce room to maneuver. On the other hand, a multiple change context can create new possibilities and strengthen the role of middle managers as strategic change agents. Thus, there is a need for more knowledge on how a multiple change context influences middle managers' understanding of their role and what practices they should implement to handle such complexity during strategic change.

Suggestions for theoretical and methodological approaches in future research

The aim of this article was to review the middle management literature with the purpose of identifying middle managers' roles and practices during strategic change. I found that most of the literature in this area is focused on the Implementer role. This research has shown the valuable roles and practices of middle managers during strategic change (Huy 2001; Balogun 2003; Balogun & Johnson 2005; Rouleau & Balogun 2011; Stensaker et al. 2011). However, I argue that middle managers operate at many different levels and must handle emergent and multiple change contexts during strategic change in contemporary organizations.

I claim that there is a need to expand knowledge on how characteristics of contemporary organizations influence middle managers' strategic roles and practices during strategic change. Floyd and Wooldridge's (1992) framework is an important starting point; however, they

developed their framework to describe middle managers' roles within strategy processes, and thus it is not specifically related to strategic change. As such, the question of how a change context in contemporary organizations influences middle managers' roles in that framework remains unanswered. Consequently, future research should explore the relevance of all four roles in the framework and also examine the possibility of revealing new strategic roles and practices that middle managers undertake during strategic change in organizations.

Theoretically, future research could draw on a sensemaking perspective to understand how middle managers at different organizational levels perceive their role and how their role perceptions influence their practices during strategic change. Further research using a sensemaking lens could focus on how middle managers experience a multiple change context and how and if middle managers use sensemaking practices to build capacity for change under these circumstances.

Methodologically, research on these unexplored subjects and examination of middle managers' roles and practices could take a real-time and longitudinal case study approach. Moreover, the research design should contain middle managers at various organizational levels to explore how managers at different levels understand their role as implementer during change. Further research should be performed within organizations which experience parallel and overlapping changes, in order to understand how middle managers develop change capacity within a multiple change context.

CONCLUSION

This article draws on the middle management literature to identify middle managers' roles and practices during strategic change. The review reveals that empirical studies on strategic change have primarily focused on middle managers as implementers of change initiatives. Furthermore, I argue that middle managers' roles during strategic change are also changing from increased

globalization, new organizational forms, and multiple change contexts, and therefore their role repertoire needs to be redefined. That is, there is a need to revisit Floyd and Wooldridge's (1992) framework to examine whether and how other roles are enacted at various levels of middle management. Only then can researchers improve their understanding of how middle managers approach their role and how they can build capacity for change to enable adaptability.

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Figure 1: A Typology of Middle Management Roles in Strategy
(Floyd and Wooldridge 1992)

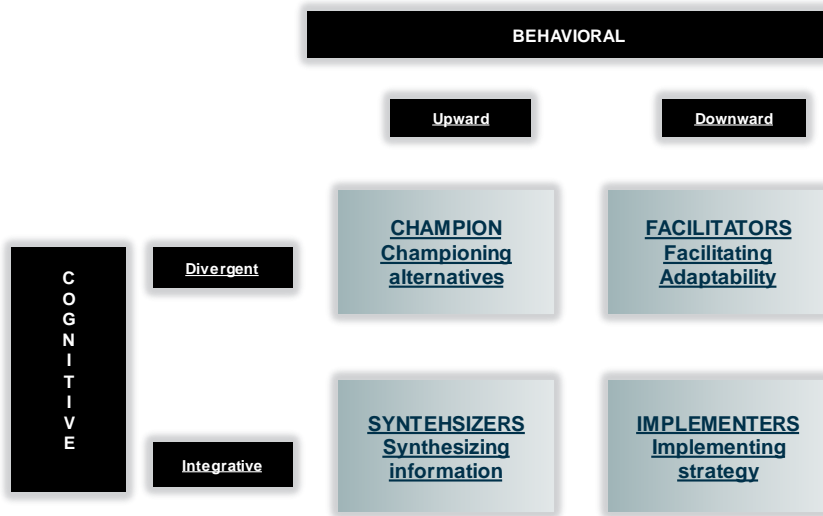


Table 1
Literature review: Middle managers' role as Champions

Studies/Year	Theoretical lenses	Methods	Research focus and empirical context	Interaction types and level: Middle managers	Core findings: Middle managers' practices and consequences
Dutton and Ashford 1993	Upward influence; social problem theory; impression management	Conceptual	Issue selling from middle management to senior management	Middle managers defined as those who operate at the intermediate level of the corporate hierarchy Unclear level	Meaning-creation process: upward influence, claiming, impression-management activities
Burgelman 1994	An intra-organizational ecological perspective	Case study Longitudinal	Profit (telecom)	27 key leaders, and in addition 10 leaders from middle or lower level (their definitions). Unclear level	Implications for senior management practices: develop a capacity for strategic recognition
Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill, Hayes, and Wierba 1997	Upward influence; impression management	One Inductive qualitative study and one Survey	A regional telecommunication company in the Midwest	Study 1: sample consisted of 30 randomly middle managers out of a population of 187 Study 2: 118 middle managers out of a population of 187 Unclear level	Middle managers' decisions to sell issues are related to their interpretation of the overall supportiveness of the organizational context
Dutton, Ashford, O'Neil, and Lawrence 2001	Upward influence; impression management	Inductive case study	Nonprofit hospital	13 (of 15) middle managers reporting to senior management group and randomly selected subsample of the department directors (29 of 62)	The article refines issue-selling theory: Linking the initiative to organizational legitimacy, value, and relevance to increase selling success. Packaging was more complex, but sellers did not use emotional appeals, and impression management concerns seemed less relevant

Floyd and Wooldridge 1997	Role theory; organization ecology; boundary spanning	Survey	25 organizations in multiple industries	259 middle managers 16% one level below the top manager of the firm or division, 66% two levels below, and 17% three levels below the top	Middle managers' strategic influence comes from their ability to mediate between internal and external selection environments
Pappas and Wooldridge 2007	Social network theory	Social network analysis	Nonprofit U.S. urban hospitals	89 middle managers Unclear level	Strategic renewal depends on middle managers' divergent activity and capabilities in terms of idea generation, initiative development, and strategic reintegration
Mantere 2008	Role expectations, conflict, managerial agency	Inductive case study	12 European organizations	262 middle management Unclear level	Role expectations both enable and constrain middle managers' strategic behaviour
Floyd and Wooldridge 1994	Middle manager role	Survey	Middle managers' strategic role in reengineered organizations	Middle managers in 25 organizations	Middle manager importance and strategic role increased from new organizational business forms – from hierarchical to more horizontal business structures
Ling, Floyd and Baldrige 2005	Issue selling and cultural embeddedness	Extensive literature review	Issues selling in multinational organizations	Local subsidiary managers – upward relationships with multinational managers	Issue selling practices are embedded in national cultures
Westley 1990	Microsociological theory	Conceptual	Strategic conversations; large, bureaucratic organizations	Communication between senior and middle level	Middle managers feel included and energized about strategic when (1) Involved in framing rules in a strategic conversation and 'general' informal and formal strategic discussions

Table 2
Literature review: Middle managers' role as Synthesizers

Studies/Year	Theoretical lenses	Methods	Research focus and empirical context	Interaction types and level: Middle managers	Core findings: Middle managers' practices and consequences
Westley 1990	Microsociological theory	Conceptual	Strategic conversations large bureaucratic organizations	Communication between senior and middle level	Middle managers feel included and energized about strategic when (1) involved in framing rules in a strategic conversation and 'general' informal and formal strategic discussions
Ranson, Hinings, and Greenwood 1980	Change organizational structure	Conceptual	Production and re-creation of structural forms through time	Unclear	Structural forms change over time, due to the outcome of a complex interaction of interpersonal cognitive processes, power dependencies, and contextual constraints
Dutton and Jackson 1987	Interpretive view of organizational decision making and cognitive categorization theory	Conceptual	How the meanings attached to strategic issues by decision makers are translated into organizational responses	Unclear	Interpretation of external and internal events: threat and opportunity affect how senior management interprets different issues

Table 3
Literature review: Middle managers' role as Facilitators

Studies/ Year	Theoretical lenses	Methods	Research focus and/or empirical context	Interaction types and level: Middle managers	Core findings: Middle managers practices and consequences
Nonaka 1994	Knowledge creation	Survey (Confirmatory factor Analysis)	Test models of knowledge creation Japanese firms	105 managers from the headquarters of a similar number of Japanese firms located in Tokyo. Unclear level	Bottom-up and horizontal knowledge searches and new knowledge creation
Bartlett and Ghoshal 1993	Organizational learning	Longitudinal field study	Private company	Unclear level	Coaching and supporting the frontline entrepreneurial activities to create strategic initiative. Implications for senior management focused more on managing the entrepreneurial process (e.g., developing broad objectives, setting performance standards)
Martin and Eisenhardt 2010	Information processing; transaction cost economics; social network theory	Multiple case study	Six publicly held software companies	NA	Business-unit centric process to cross-business- unit collaborations
Tippmann, Mangematin, and Scott 2013	Knowledge search and problematic search	Multiple case studies. Focus on middle manager knowledge practices at a micro level	Investigating 38 knowledge search processes observed in selected case organizations	NA	Four knowledge search practices: isolating, overcoming knowledge distribution challenges, socializing, and mastering solution development
Huy 2001	Change	Conceptual	Middle managers' valuable contributions to the realization of radical change at a company	Define middle managers as any managers two levels below the CEO and one level above frontline workers and professionals	Middle managers as entrepreneurs who see new possibilities and encourage growth
Floyd and Wooldridge 1999	Evolutionary theory; knowledge theory; social networks	Conceptual	Analyzes the structure and dynamics of the selection- retention process	NA	Corporate entrepreneurship is conceptualized as a multi- layered process with middle managers as key actors who build and integrate knowledge domains, social networks, and resources

Table 4
Literature review: Middle managers' role as Implementers

Based on Rouleau, Balogun and Floyd (2015)

Studies/Year	Theoretical lenses	Methods	Research focus and empirical context	Interaction types and level: Middle managers	Core findings: Middle managers' practices and consequences
Balogun 2003	Sense making and change	Longitudinal case study	Restructuring of core business division within recently privatized utility	Lateral and downward Middle managers below head of business division but unclear regarding levels	-Undertaking personal change -Keeping the business going -Helping others through change -implementing change through departments
Balogun and Johnson 2004	Sense making and change	Longitudinal case study	Restructuring of core business division within recently privatized utility	Lateral social relations Middle managers below head of business division but unclear regarding levels	Shared/clustered/differentiated sense-making schema development
Balogun and Johnson 2005	Sense making and change	Longitudinal case study	Restructuring of core business division within recently privatized utility	Lateral social relations Middle managers below head of business division but unclear regarding levels	Sense-making processes lead to both intended and unintended change outcomes
Rouleau 2005	Sense making and knowledge	Longitudinal case study	Strategic reorientation of small Canadian manufacturing company	Selling from directors to customers	- Translate the orientation; overcoding the strategy; disciplining the client; and justifying the change
Lüscher and Lewis 2008	Sense making, change, and paradox	Action research examining and supporting managers' sense making	Restructuring of a large Danish company	Production managers Manufacturing division downward to employees Unclear level	Paradox of performing, belonging, organizing as lens for sense making
Rouleau and Balogun 2011	Strategic sense making	In-depth interviews (and focus groups)	Restructuring in a public organization and organizational change in a	A production manager and its coordinator in the production unit; a	-Performing conversation -Setting the scene

			multidivisional firm	functional line manager and a project manager	
Stensaker and Falkenberg 2007	Sense making	Longitudinal case study	Strategic change in three divisions in multinational Norwegian oil company	Middle managers below head of business division but unclear regarding levels	Five interpretative responses at the individual level: convergent responses, divergent responses, unresolved sense making, creative responses, and noncompliance
Huy 2001	Change	Conceptual	Middle managers valuable contributions to the realization of radical change at a company	Define middle managers as any managers two levels below the CEO and one level above frontline workers and professionals	Communicator: spread the word and get people on board Therapist: address employees' well-being during times of radical change Tightrope artist: balance change and continuity
Huy 2002	Emotion management	Longitudinal case study	Radical change process within profit UK information technology IT service firm	Middle managers defined as managers two levels below the CEO and one level above first-line supervisor. unclear levels	Middle managers balance between emotional commitment to personally champion change projects and support their employees' emotions
Stensaker et al. 2011	Change	Conceptual Challenges and how to handle these challenges		Unclear	Dual role of change recipient and agent; balancing change and daily operations; handling conflict, negotiations, and political battle; and emotional balancing Horizontal networking, create distance to change, engage in dialog with subordinates. Senior management to middle management: instrumental support, informational support and appraisal support
Stensaker and Langley 2010	Contingency perspective on change management	Longitudinal comparative case study	Strategic change in three division in multinational Norwegian oil company	Head of division, middle managers, and employees. Unclear level	Change agents: balance three concerns: goal attainment (substantive concern), employee relationships (relational concerns), relationships at the corporate level (political concerns)
Mantere 2008	Role expectations, conflict, managerial agency	Inductive analysis	12 European organizations	262 middle management Unclear level	Role expectations both enable and constrain middle managers' strategic behaviour

**THE IMPLEMENTERS: HOW MIDDLE MANAGERS APPROACH
THEIR ROLE AS IMPLEMENTERS OF STRATEGIC CHANGE**

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ABSTRACT

A growing body of research shows the crucial role of middle managers in the implementation of strategic change; yet knowledge on how middle managers themselves perceive and approach their role as change implementers is limited. Drawing on sensemaking theory and data from a qualitative case study, this paper examines how middle managers at various organizational levels make sense of their role as implementers of strategic change and how this interacts with their implementation practices. The analyses uncover four distinct patterns through which middle managers approach the role as change implementer: Market Protector, Executer, Renewer and Co-creator. Implementation practices vary depending on how middle managers view the *scope of the role* (i.e., whether they perceived it as broad or narrow) and the extent to which they perceive the change as *challenging their current mindset*. The four patterns appear to cut across hierarchical levels. These findings extend current knowledge on middle managers' role during strategic change by delineating how middle managers perceive their role as implementers and by explaining the link between this perception and implementation practices, which ultimately influence the progress of change.

Keywords: Strategic role, Strategic change, Middle managers

INTRODUCTION

A wealth of research has shown that middle managers play an important role during strategic change by implementing strategic initiatives from their intermediate position in organizations (Wooldridge & Floyd 1990; Floyd & Wooldridge 1992; Balogun 2003; Balogun & Johnson 2005; Rouleau 2005; Stensaker & Falkenberg 2007; Rouleau & Balogun 2011). According to prior research, implementing change requires that middle managers support others through change while changing themselves (Huy 2001; Balogun 2003; Rouleau 2005), manage multiple interests and stakeholders (Mantere 2008; Stensaker & Langley 2010; Rouleau & Balogun 2011), and implement change while running daily operations (Huy 2001; Balogun 2003). Thus, studies have provided valuable insights into what middle managers can do to implement strategic change initiatives initiated at the senior management level. However, this literature has two important shortcomings.

First, research on middle managers' role during strategic change typically portrays middle managers as a relatively undifferentiated group of leaders. Yet the term "middle manager" captures a broad and diversified group of leaders (Wooldridge, Schmid, & Floyd 2008) in contemporary organizations. Middle managers can be general line leaders, functional leaders, and project-based managers (Rouleau, Balogun, & Floyd 2015) with varying responsibilities and operating at multiple organizational levels. However, research has not explored whether or how middle managers approach the task of implementing change differently or discussed the implications of different approaches for the progress of change.

Second, middle managers are facing new and increasing demands. For example, they must balance between control and operational flexibility in organizations that are becoming increasingly customer oriented (Sharma & Good 2013; Bryant & Stensaker 2011; Fauré & Rouleau 2011). In addition, they must interact with people both within other departments and outside their organizations (Rouleau & Balogun 2011; Laine & Vaara 2007; Frow, Marginson &

Ogden 2005) and ensure execution of parallel and overlapping change initiatives (Meyer & Stensaker 2006). These demands are liable to influence what they do when charged with implementation of change and how this may affect the progress of change in their organizations. However, although most middle managers are expected to work within increasingly complex organizations and tackle change contexts, little is known about the different ways they handle these issues. As such, a deeper understanding of how middle managers perceive their role as implementers of change within contemporary organizations is necessary.

In this paper, I aim to explore *how middle managers perceive their role as implementers and what they do to implement strategic change*. Consistent with other scholars who have unpacked the role of middle managers as implementers (Balogun 2003; Rouleau 2005; Rouleau & Balogun 2011), I draw on sensemaking theory and strategy-as-practice research to expand knowledge on middle managers' role as implementers. However, whereas previous research has examined how middle managers make sense of change, I explore how they make sense of their own role during strategic change and how this affects their practices. The sensemaking perspective provides a valuable theoretical lens, with its focus on the interdependency between cognition and action (Weick 1995), as it facilitates my exploration of the recursive interplay between role perception and implementation practices.

Through a longitudinal case study, I follow the implementation of change in a multinational finance company. I examine middle managers operating at different levels of the hierarchy within one specific business unit and explore their implementation practices during strategic change. I find that middle managers take on four different approaches to the implementer role: Market Protector, Executer, Renewer, and Co-creator. Each of these implementation approaches contains a specific understanding of the role, combined with particular implementation practices. The different approaches involve tradeoffs that have consequences for the progress of change.

This study contributes to the research on middle managers' role during implementation of change by providing a deeper and more nuanced understanding of their role as implementers and the implications for progress of change. More specifically, the study advances current knowledge by empirically demonstrating how middle managers' understanding of the implementer role differ along two dimensions: (1) how broadly they perceive their role and (2) the degree to which the change challenges their current mindset.

The organization of this paper is as follows: I first review the middle management and strategic change literature to identify implementation practices before introducing sensemaking as my theoretical lens. Then, I present the research methods, analyses, and findings. Finally, I discuss how this study contributes to theory and managerial practice and provide directions for future research.

MIDDLE MANAGERS' ROLE, IMPLEMENTATION PRACTICES, AND SENSEMAKING DURING STRATEGIC CHANGE

Floyd and Wooldridge (1992) argued that middle management played an important role in strategy processes. Until their study, the literature had primarily focused on senior management's role in strategy. Floyd and Wooldridge developed a framework that illustrates how middle managers influence strategy processes through four different types of strategic roles: Synthesizer, Champion, Facilitator, and Implementer. *Synthesizers* gather and give upward input to senior management on, for example, threats and opportunities, to support current strategy. *Champions* try to obtain support and resources for their own projects, such as innovative ideas or new business opportunities. *Facilitators* initiate cooperation between different organizational units to create new work processes, products, or services. Finally, *Implementers* ensure implementation of strategic initiatives, from senior management to employees within their own unit.

Since then, the strategic change literature has explored different dimensions of the middle manager's role as *implementer* of strategic change (Balogun 2003; Rouleau 2005; Balogun & Rouleau 2011). During strategic change, organizations expect middle managers to take on change agency for decisions made by senior management (Balogun 2003; Stensaker & Langley 2010); yet they are also change recipients (Balogun 2003; Balogun, Bartunek, & Do 2015), as they have not initiated the change themselves. Still, middle managers are expected to loyally execute strategic change initiatives that may be contrary to their own opinions.

Prior research has examined what middle managers do to implement change initiatives launched by the senior management. I refer to such actions as implementation practices. In line with the strategy-as-practice perspective, I focus on micro-practices of what people do and how their activities influence strategic outcomes, rather than focusing on strategy as something firms have (Jarzabkowski 2004; Jarzabkowski, Balogun & Seidl 2007; Jarzabkowski & Seidl 2008; Stensaker & Falkenberg 2007; Whittington 2006, 2007).

Implementation practices

I present three overarching implementation practices identified in the literature on middle managers: (1) supporting others through change while changing themselves (Balogun 2003, Huy 2001, Rouleau 2005, Rouleau & Balogun 2011), (2) managing multiple interests and stakeholders (Mantere 2008; Stensaker & Langley 2010), and (3) implementing change while running daily operations (e.g., Huy 2001; Balogun 2003). Please refer to Table 1 which illustrates middle managers' implementation practices during strategic change.

Insert Table 1 about here

Supporting others through change while changing themselves

Middle managers must mobilize others and, in particular, help their subordinates through the change. To do so, they are expected to take on agency to implement behavioral changes within their unit while perhaps also changing their own mindset.

First, during strategic change, middle managers must motivate, support, and facilitate change within their unit (Balogun 2003, 2007). For example, they are responsible for communicating the change initiatives to their employees (Huy 2001; Stensaker & Langley 2010; Rouleau & Balogun 2011) and understanding the implications of the change on behaviors and everyday working practices (Balogun 2003). Huy (2001) shows that middle managers can establish a positive attitude throughout the organization toward the proposed changes by translating the change message into a language their employees can understand. Yet, quite often, the change causes fear and uncertainty among employees. Balogun (2008) labels middle managers as shock absorbers who must deal with emotional responses from their employees. Thus, middle managers need to identify and handle different emotional reactions from their employees (Huy 2001).

Further, as middle managers are supporting others through change, they are also subject to change themselves. As recipients of change, middle managers must make sense of the change and interpret how the change initiatives will influence their own role and responsibilities. Balogun (2003, p. 75) argues that middle managers are required to undertake personal change during strategic change “in terms of the way they both think about and carry out their work.” In addition, Balogun (2003) argues that undergoing personal change and helping others through change are practices that may defer attention, due to time pressure and demands for ensuring that tasks get done during change.

Furthermore, like their employees, middle managers may experience insecurity, confusion, anxiety, and stress (McKinley & Scherer 2000) regarding the consequences of the

change initiatives on their own work situation and current business processes. Consequently, as implementers, middle managers may experience a demanding situation that requires them “to engage in ‘emotional labour’, to induce or suppress their own feelings in order to maintain the outward countenance that produce an appropriate state of mind in others” (Balogun 2008, p. 248)

Managing multiple interests and stakeholders

Middle managers often experience multiple and different expectations from organizational stakeholders (e.g., Mantere 2008) during implementation of change. In other words, they need to handle multiple interests and stakeholders. Doing so involves balancing between conflicting concerns and the need to create a common understanding among different stakeholders to achieve a foundation for efficient progress of change. Stensaker and Langley (2010) show how divisional managers in a multinational firm juggle among relational concern (relationship with employees), substantive concern (goal attainment), and political concern (corporate demands) during implementation of a strategic change initiative. They found that the leaders managed these multiple concerns by either sequentially attending to the different concerns over time or using symbolic management to influence how different actors perceived their change agency.

Middle managers are also vital in creating a shared understanding across different interests and stakeholders. They exert influence and move change forward in their organizations by “performing the conversation” and “setting the scene” (Rouleau & Balogun 2011, p. 954). “Performing the conversation” refers to how middle managers can craft and diffuse the message they want to communicate and thus influence the change recipients’ understanding of change in the way desired, using the right words and the appropriate metaphors and symbols. Middle managers may communicate differently depending on whom they are trying to influence. For example, interactions with senior management and i.e., vertical interactions) typically occur through formally designed interventions, while interactions between middle managers (i.e., horizontal interactions) are more often informal (Balogun 2003; Balogun & Johnson 2005).

Rouleau (2005) shows how middle managers, through communication and action in daily routines and conversations, can “sell” strategic change to customers by drawing on their tacit knowledge, history, and experience. “Setting the scene” involves knowing whom to contact and whom to bring together to implement the necessary change. Owing to their often-widespread web of contacts, middle managers have the ability to communicate the change, secure support for the strategic initiative (Huy 2001), and create a common understanding of both the initiative and related implementation challenges (Balogun & Johnson 2005).

Implementing change while running daily operations

During strategic change, middle managers are often responsible for both implementing corporate strategic changes and ensuring that business as usual is maintained by their business units (Balogun 2003; Stensaker et al. 2011). Middle managers coordinate and manage the change initiatives (Balogun 2003) through practices such as formulating more detailed and context-specific action plans and goals (Floyd & Wooldridge 1992, 1997). With their position near the front line, they tend to be more concerned with and aware of operative functions, such as specific business processes, than top managers. While strategic change may accrue long-term benefits to the organization, it may also challenge the reliable efficiency of existing work processes because of reorganization or elimination of specific components of the process (McKinley & Scherer 2000). As such, implementation of strategic change creates challenges for middle managers regarding the priority between daily business and change initiatives. Balogun (2003, p. 78) argues that middle managers experience “constant tension between keeping the business going and implementing the needed changes” during the implementation of a new strategy. Furthermore, Huy (2001) describes middle managers as tightrope artists who need to attend to change implementation while focusing on the day-to-day business and employee morale. Omissions in either issue may lead to underperformance.

In many contemporary organizations, middle managers experience an increased pace of change, where multiple change projects take place simultaneously (Stensaker, Meyer, Falkenberg & Haueng 2002), thus intensifying the tension between balancing daily operations and implementing change. A multiple change context creates increased complexity, in which a key task for middle managers is to prioritize capacity between different change initiatives without compromising current daily operations. Failure to do so will not only harm the progress of the current change but also potentially hamper future change processes.

Sensemaking perspective

In line with research that unpacks how middle managers implement strategic change (Balogun 2003; Rouleau 2005; Balogun & Rouleau 2011), I draw on sensemaking theory. However, in contrast with previous studies, I explore how middle managers make sense of their role as implementers rather than how they make sense of the change. Next, I present the key concepts within this theoretical perspective.

Sensemaking is the activity in which individuals try to understand what is going on as they interpret and create meaning of events and experiences (Weick 1995). It is both a cognitive and a social activity. Research on strategic change has shown that implementation of strategic initiatives leads to sensemaking activities at different levels in organizations (Balogun & Johnson 2005; Stensaker & Falkenberg 2007; Mantere, Schildt, & Sillince 2012), in which the involved parties seek to “develop a meaningful framework for understanding the nature of the intended strategic change” (Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991, p. 442). Thus, people attempt to understand, interpret, and create sense of a changing organizational context and environment (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). These sensemaking activities may lead to intended as well as unintended consequences (Balogun & Johnson 2005). Hence, research has identified sensemaking as a critical aspect of change in organizations (Isabella 1990; Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991; Gioia et al. 1994; Balogun & Johnson 2004, 2005; Maitlis 2005; Balogun 2007).

When faced with a surprising, new or unexpected event, individuals search for cues to help them make sense of what they heard or experienced (Weick 1995). Individuals' identity within a context and their mental models influence what cues they notice, how they interpret those cues, and what actions they choose from their interpretation (Sandberg & Tsoukas 2015). Furthermore, although clearly a cognitive process, sensemaking is also an ongoing social process in which people engage in conversations and sensemaking practices, such as the exchange of stories, gossip, rumors and past experiences, discussions and negotiations to make sense of the new organizational reality (Balogun & Johnson 2005; Balogun 2007).

Sensemaking theory is based on social constructionism where people enact the environment they face (Weick 1995). That is, through their actions, people enact reality. According to Weick (1995) sensemaking tends to be retrospective, meaning that people retrospectively try to make sense of what has happened through social activities such as conversations with others (Sandberg & Tsoukas 2015).

Although the sensemaking perspective contains both cognitive, social and action dimensions, previous research on middle manager practices during strategic change has primarily focused on the cognitive and social dimension of sensemaking (Maitlis 2005; Balogun & Rouleau 2018) often presuming that during change, people first make sense and then take agency. However, sensemaking is a recursive process between cognition and action, where action shapes cognition and visa versa in a reciprocal relationship (Rouleau & Balogun 2011). Consequently, understanding can be gained through both cognition and action (Weick 1995; Stensaker, Falkenberg, & Grønhaug 2008).

Informed by the sensemaking perspective, I explore the interplay between role perception (cognition) and implementation practices (action). Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to assess the implications of middle managers' meaning construction of their role as implementers of change. I examine how they approach their role as implementers and what practices they

undertake during implementation of change. For instance, I investigate whether middle managers attend to all three overarching implementation practices and perceive them as equally important or if they deem some of the practices more important than others. Furthermore, I explore potential patterns in the way they perceive their role as implementers and which implementation practices they choose to emphasize during strategic change. Thus, I aim to reveal the extent to which middle managers adopt a narrow or broad range of the implementation practices identified in previous research during strategic change and how this affects progress of change.

METHODS

To address my research questions, I carried out a qualitative case study (Yin 2003). The case study site was the corporate division of a multinational finance company with headquarters in the Nordic region. I refer to the finance company as Credit Com. I selected this company because of its ongoing strategy implementation process and focus on middle managers' role as *implementers* of strategic initiatives planned and decided at the senior management level. As such, I used the context as a design criterion to gain deep insight into an understudied phenomenon (Langley & Abdallah 2011) how middle managers at different levels approach their role as implementers.

In January 2013, the senior management team of Credit Com launched a new strategy that I refer to as CreditGo. The strategy was initiated in response to an increased pace of change in the environment, new demands for profitability and capital, and shifts in customer behavior, with increased use of self-service and digitalization of work processes. The overall aim was to improve results within three areas; profitability, market share (with a special focus on entrepreneurs and small and medium-sized enterprises), and customer satisfaction.

The CreditGo strategy consisted of three main themes: capital (new risk measurement of customers), customer (total customers; offering and selling additional products such as insurance and saving services in addition to more traditional credit products), and culture (more proactive

customer approach and more collaboration within the company). In addition, Credit Com’s senior management made structural changes to support the strategy. Within the Corporate Segment business unit, the organization was divided into two customer segments (commercial and relational), with different service approaches and internal work processes. The commercial customer segment consisted of small and medium-sized companies, in which the goal was to increase market share through a proactive sales approach of standard products geared toward entrepreneurs and established companies, as well as increased product width. The relational segment consisted of large-scale companies, in which the goal was to increase product width through more professional and tailored customer advising and application of multi-disciplinary customer teams (see Figure 1 which illustrate the organizational structure of the corporate segment). The changes in the commercial segment were more extensive than those in the relational segment.

Insert Figure 1 about here

I followed Credit Com’s strategy implementation process within the “corporate segment” business unit. To explore middle managers at different levels, I conducted 38 interviews with 20 managers from two organizational levels and four different regions. Four of the middle managers operated as heads of regions reporting to the top manager of the corporate business unit (level 3, responsible for both segments), and 16 middle managers were first-line leaders with responsibilities for employees (level 4, responsible for either commercial, relational or both segments). The middle managers at level 3 were appointed by the head of the business unit, while the middle managers at level 4 were selected by their respective level 3 leaders (Please see Figure 2 for a presentation of the research design).

Insert Figure 2 about here

Data was collected through interviews primarily conducted on location at the middle managers' offices. In addition, I conducted on-site observations in connection with the interviews and obtained secondary data (strategy documents). The interviews were carried out at two periods in time: from September 2014 to November 2014 and one year later, in September 2015. The interviews lasted from 60 to 90 minutes. Two of the respondents from the first interviews transitioned into new jobs; thus, the second round of interviews included 18. In addition, I held conversations with two senior managers in August 2014, before the interviews with the middle managers, to attain background information on the strategy implementation process, plans, goals, and change initiatives (see Table 2 for an overview of the interviews).

Insert Table 2 about here

I collected the data by using a semi-structured interview guide. The questions were framed in an open-ended way, with a focus on how middle managers perceived the change processes, change initiatives, their own role as implementers, the implementation practices they initiated, and interactions with their leaders, peers, and employees. To facilitate self- reflection, I presented a drawing that showed the middle managers in relation to their leaders, peers, customer, and employees and asked them to reflect on their expectations of others, and vice versa, within these relationships.

After completing each interview, I wrote up short summaries of my impressions from the field, including my thoughts on aspects such as offices, other employees, and the informal feedback. I transcribed all interviews verbatim and then coded each interview with a focus on how the middle managers described their role and their implementation practices. The coding was based on the informants' language.

Analyses from the first interviews led to the development of four different approaches to the implementer role, which I described as Market Protector, Executer, Renewer, and (at first) Joker. The four approaches described the role content and the key implementation practices related to the role. I renamed the last approach to Co-creator after data collection, to be more in line with the content of the approach.

To validate and further refine my understanding of the four approaches, I presented them at the end of the second round of interviews. The middle managers were asked to select which approach best described their preferred role and to reflect on the implications of this. Overall, they placed themselves within the approach I expected, though two managers placed themselves in a different category—that is, one middle manager viewed himself as an Executer, while I perceived him as a Co-creator; the other manager viewed herself as a Co-creator, while I perceived her as an Executer. This exercise created an opportunity to discuss and reflect together with respondents. After taking the total impression and the analyses of the interviews from both periods into account, I decided to keep these managers in the categories I had originally selected. Furthermore, two of the middle managers left the organization before the follow-up interviews. I asked their leaders at level 3 to reflect on them, to give me insight to place them within the Executer and Market Protector approach consistent with my opinion. In addition, I asked the level 4 leaders about how they perceived their own (level 3) leaders' practices and the implication of these practices on facilitating change. Their conception of their leaders largely corresponded to both my own and their leaders' own perceptions of their approach to the strategy implementation

process. In addition, level 3 and other respondents at level 4 confirmed my interpretation and categorization of the leaders at level 4 and their approach to their role as implementers.

FINDINGS

Four approaches to the implementer role

My analyses from both periods revealed that the middle managers' approach to the implementer role differed along two dimensions: (1) how middle managers defined their role (a broad or narrow scope) and (2) the extent to which they perceived a need to challenge their current mindset because of the change. First, middle managers experienced their role as either broad or narrow in terms of their stakeholder orientation and strategy scope. A broad scope was characterized by a focus on several stakeholder groups and both current and future strategy, while a narrow scope entailed few stakeholders and attention to current strategy.

Second, the middle managers differed in terms of the extent to which the change challenged their current mindset. According to previous research (Sonenshein 2010), change recipients may interpret the same change initiative as small, as a minor adjustment, or as a major transformation. In line with that work, I found that some middle managers regarded the changes as small; these managers did not perceive a need to challenge their mindset. In contrast, other middle managers interpreted the changes as extensive; these managers challenged their current mindset regarding how to execute their role and work processes. A few middle managers interpreted the changes as extensive but did not challenge their mindset because the changes were already in line with this mindset.

Connecting these two dimensions led to four different approaches to the implementer role: Market Protector, Executer, Renewer, and Co-creator. The approaches represent the different ways of approaching the implementer role, with implications for implementation practices (see Figure 3).

Insert Figure 3 about here

In the following subsections, I describe the nature of each of the four approaches in terms of understanding of the implementer role and the associated to implementation practices. I draw on the three implementation practices described in the theory section; (1) supporting others through change while changing themselves (Balogun 2003; Huy 2001, Rouleau 2005; Rouleau & Balogun 2011), (2) managing multiple interests and stakeholders (Mantere 2008; Stensaker & Langley 2010), and (3) implementing change while running daily operations (e.g., Huy 2001; Balogun 2003).

The Appendix (Tables A1–A4) presents additional quotes from respondents in each of the four approaches. Figure 4 depicts the presence of the different approaches in the four different organizational regions. Three of the four approaches could be found at both level 3 and level 4. While one region consisted entirely of Executers, the other regions had a mixture of different approaches.

Insert Figure 4 about here

Market Protector

Market Protectors view the implementer role rather narrowly. They perceive the changes as small, and they do not perceive a need to challenge their current mindset. The perceived consequences for current customers constitute the criteria for implementation practices. Thus, Market Protectors put emphasis on prioritizing, sorting, and adjusting the strategy and creating

local customized solutions. As such, their main focus is on securing attention to current customers and daily business practices during strategic change.

Limited challenge to current mindset

As mentioned above, Market Protectors perceive small changes in their work, especially as it pertains to customers in the relational segment. *“Customer behavior has not changed so much, what should I change. I do not have any fewer meetings now than I had in 1998.... In the segment I work in, the relational segment, the market reacts least to behavioral changes.”* (Leader region 4, L4). Furthermore, these managers have a strong focus on traditional banking services. *“We are very credit-oriented, we are credit people, it is still a handcraft, and a process, which you cannot digitalize.”* (Leader region 3, L4). However, several of the Market Protectors also find the changes to be small within the commercial segment. *“It's the same people who work with commercial clients - who before worked with small business customers. We have given them a name and a new department. Then it's still small customers they work with. So the reality is to see that the job is quite unchanged.”* (Leader region 3, L4).

Market Protectors also claim that they have experienced equivalent processes before and that the changes are just an adaptation and a slight refocus. *“There is no change of course, it's more a strengthening of what we've done before and awareness.... For the Customer Account management, the job [is] mostly the same. I call it fine tuning.”* (Leader region 4, L4). *“These change journeys are more like small adjustments, than sort of like a dramatic new direction.... So that much of what is produced with new roles and new strategies, it is just new words for things. As we have done before. For us who sit as bank managers in the various cities, the job remains basically the same.”* (Leader region 3, L4). Hence, the Market Protectors argue that the changes are mainly adjustments to their way of working towards their market and customers.

Narrow role scope

Market Protectors have a narrow scope regarding their role, with their main concern targeting current customers. Middle managers adopting this approach have strong external relationships in the industry and with customers within their region and put great emphasis on maintaining them. Their main concern is catering to current customer relationships during change, and their driving forces include the industry and customer relationships within their market area. *“What is important is to keep the focus on the customer. And having all the focus there.”* (Leader region 1, L3). In Credit Com, this focus was especially on the new demands for capital, which meant implementing new approaches to prevent risks and improve profitability. An important issue for the Market Protectors was the need to handle the new measurements and demands from the senior management in a way that did not lead to any wrong decisions, which could cause profitable customers to leave the company. *“You need to use it (the new strategy) wisely. It's often the case that when the governance signals are coming from the top, they are so tough. You have to use your head.”* (Leader region 1, L3).

Implementation practices

Market Protectors emphasize the importance of securing daily operations and current business when changes are implemented in the organization. Several Market Protectors argue that they need to have a long-term perspective of the local market and to act properly toward their customers. They describe this as opposite to the “gas-and-brake” attitude or dynamic governance perspective emphasized by the senior management. *“When we establish our customer relationships, we establish them with eternity as perspective. We cannot discuss possible changes all the time. We must be predictable.”* (Leader region 4, L4). This action involves paying special attention to how to communicate the changes or the implication of the changes to customers. *“I feel that the way we take a message out to our customers is important due to whether they will continue to be customers of ours or not and our reputation in this local market.”* (Leader region

4, L4). Furthermore, Market Protectors adjust their strategy by creating customized solutions.

“You need to make local adaptations to be effective.” (Leader region 3, L4). In addition, Market Protectors try to protect employees to avoid a decreased focus on customers. *“I manage to sift a bit, so that not everything is pushed on to the customer account manager.”* (Leader region 1, L4). As such, Market Protectors prioritize and determine the content and timing of the implementation of the change initiative to secure their relationships with current customers.

Linking implementation practices to theory

In this section, I link my findings to the three implementation practices described in the theory section. Rather than paying attention to all three implementation practices, Market Protectors carefully select and prioritize what they deem necessarily and important. The way they make sense of their role is closely linked with what they do during change. Firstly, unlike extant literature that suggests that middle managers should support others through change (Huy 2001; Rouleau & Balogun 2011; Stensaker & Langley 2010) while also changing themselves (Balogun 2003), Market Protectors spend limited time supporting employees and do not see the need to change themselves. Their main focus is on how they and their unit can ensure attention to customers; they pay much less attention to how to motivate their employees to work differently.

Secondly, their focus on current customers sometimes leads to a reduced focus on other stakeholders. In other words, Market Protectors do not juggle between different interests (Stensaker & Langley 2010), or work toward finding a common understanding between different interests (Rouleau & Balogun 2011), as suggested by theory. Rather, they are highly involved in formal and informal relationships with one particular stakeholder group - the customers.

Finally, Market Protectors focus on running daily operations at full speed during change. Therefore, they might delay or even neglect change initiatives that might influence current customers negatively. Moreover, they prioritize, sort, and adjust the strategy to create local customized solutions. Thus, Market Protectors emphasize the importance of having a long-term

perspective and being predictable in the way they communicate to and launch changes for their customers. In doing so, they ensure that the changes do not negatively affect current customers and the branding position. However, this approach might lead to a lack of drive in the changes, as Market Protectors might claim that their local market has special characteristics that need local solutions, thus conflicting with the corporate strategy.

Market Protectors' Key Characteristics

One of the middle managers at level 3 took on this implementer's role as did five middle managers at level 4. A common characteristic of the Market Protectors was a long-term career in the bank and responsibilities for either one or two customer segments. The majority of the Market Protectors were responsible for both segments. However, most of their employees worked within the Relational segment. The changes within this segment were smaller than those in the commercial segment.

Executer

Executers take on a narrow role by emphasizing behavioral changes within the boundaries of their specific unit and in line with current business strategy. They argue that the changes are large, stress the consequences of new customer behavior, and emphasize the importance of new mindsets and new work processes. Consequently, the change challenges their current mindset. The perceived consequences of the strategic initiatives for their unit become the criteria for implementation practices, and their focus is on how to execute the strategy and secure concrete behavioral changes within their unit.

Extensive challenge to current mindset

Executers adopt the strategy from the senior management perspective, with an aim to both understand the change and handle their own emotions. *"I might feel resistance within myself,*

emotional resistance ... but I need to understand the strategy and what is being decided, from the level it is decided on. If I had been in the job (at a leader level above), is it logical?" (Leader region 2, L3). Executers interpret the change with a focus on new customer behavior. *"You actually start with yourself, for why should we change now again? What is happening now on the customer side. Are we somehow rigged to meet it? You must own the change journey."* (Leader region 4, L3). In addition, Executers claim that the changes are many and comprehensive. *"It's a different type of customer interaction than it has been previously. Which then in turn requires a different type of setup, mindset and behavior of the people who work in the organization and meet customers."* (Leader region 2, L3). The changes within digitalization are considered major and are expected to lead to the emergence of competitors from new industries. *"I do not think our main competitors are called savings banks. It is not certain that we can even name them. A type of Google and Apple and those who run the pace of digital change at a completely different pace."* (Leader region 4, L3). Thus, Executers challenge their current mindset and undergo a transformation in how they perceive customer behavior and work processes.

Narrow role scope

Executers approach the implementer role by taking responsibility for behavioral changes within their specific unit. *"As long as we have this strategy we shall execute the strategy. That is my job, to execute the strategy and that is our focus."* (Leader region 2, L3). Therefore, the main focus is on understanding the consequences of the strategy for their unit. *"What does it actually mean for us. Now it is decided that it will be such. How should we deal with it and what does it mean for us? We spend time on this."* (Leader region 4, L4). Thus, Executers have a narrow role perception, as their focus is on implementing the strategic initiatives from the senior management within their own unit.

Implementation practices

Executers focus on implementing concrete changes in daily work processes to create better performance and results. *"The faster you can implement and adopt new things, the better it is."* (Leader region 2, L4). They work systematically with communication and show how the different changes are connected, to provide an understanding of the larger strategic picture. In addition, they try to link the changes to daily work processes. *"I put [the change] in context. I take one thing at a time and try to put it in context. And try to make it as everyday-like as possible in relation to what we otherwise work with."* (Leader region 2, L3).

Next, Executers continuously emphasize strategic goals by repeating and selling the strategic message. This includes spending time with their employees to reflect on the consequence for their unit and work processes during daily operations. *"You need to spend time. You have to be consistent over time and it is absolutely essential that there is consistency in the organization. I have to be stubborn about it. When I ask what the profitability is in every credit case they [employees] realize that the next time they come with a case, they must focus on profitability."* (Leader region 4, L3). *In addition, Executers focus on the change implications for each employee and the team. "So you have to return to the one-to-one to get the changes, to come to the details of the changes, you need to come down to the bits and bytes."* (Leader region 4, L4).

Furthermore, Executers collaborate with their peers, with an aim to become more efficient in executing the strategic change within their units and to understand the content of the new strategic initiatives. *"Quite often I discuss with my peers Ann and Paul, since we have a similar job situation."* (Leader region 4, L4). Executers may take the initiative to strengthen collaboration between units to achieve better results within their unit in line with the new strategy. One example is the so-called speed date concept that one Executer facilitated, which describes a meeting point between customer account managers and internal finance product suppliers to discuss the potential for customer sales.

Finally, Executers stress the value of daily training, carrying out measurement (key performance indicators), and providing the efficient competence profile to create changes in work processes. *"We benchmark, and we follow the strategy through the behavior that we then trigger from the measurement structures we establish."* (Leader region 2, L3). If necessary, Executers will make changes regarding the competence within the team. People who are not a good fit with the strategy are relocated, whereas those who have competence that supports the new strategy are recruited. *"A quarter of the team has been changed or replaced. And I think so far that it seems very promising."* (Leader region 4, L4).

Linking implementation practices to theory

Executers challenge their current mindset in accordance with their interpretation of the radicalness of the changes. Furthermore, they have a narrow scope of their role, as their main focus is on ensuring execution of change initiatives within their own unit. As the analysis demonstrates, their role perception is tightly linked to their implementation practices. First, in line with existing literature (e.g. Huy 2001; Balogun 2003; Balogun 2007), they support others through change while also changing themselves. They emphasize the need to understand the change initiatives and implement the necessarily changes in their way of thinking about and carrying out their daily work processes. They pay attention to practices (e.g., target communication) and support their employees through changes. Thus, their focus is on how to communicate and execute the strategy into concrete behavioral changes within their teams.

Second, Executers strive to reach the overarching goals of their team. They do not juggle between different interests, as suggested by extant literature (Stensaker & Langley 2010). Rather, they collaborate with their peers and other units with an aim to create behavioral changes and improve the results within their own unit. Consequently, they connect with different stakeholders to develop a common understanding, but their focus remains on achieving better results within their unit.

Finally, as extant literature (Huy 2001; Balogun 2003) suggests, Executers balance between implementing changes and keeping a focus on daily operations by ensuring that the changes are being incorporated in daily operations. In other words, their main focus is on the efficient implementation of change initiatives by securing visible behavioral changes within their own units. Through this, they ensure progress of change by giving the change initiatives both attention and resources.

Executers' Key Characteristics

The Executer was the most common approach of the implementer role in this study. Ten of the 20 middle managers took on the Executer role and it was found in every region and at both levels (2 at L3, and 8 at L4). Four of the middle managers at level 4 were responsible for only the relational segment, whereas the Executers at level 3 and one at L4 were responsible for both segments. Three of the executers at level 4 (3 out of 8) were responsible for the commercial segment in which the changes were perceived as larger than in the relational segment. Some of the Executers had work experience from the private customer segment, though the majority had a long-term career from corporate business segments.

Renewer

Renewers take a broad approach to the implementer role. The middle managers in this category emphasize the entire organization rather than limiting themselves to their own region or team. As such, their main drive is to continuously renew and develop the entire organization both within and beyond the frames of current strategy and their own unit. Renewers do not perceive a need to challenge their current mindset to align with their future-oriented change approach or continue to search for incremental improvements. Rather, the perceived consequences for the entire organization beyond current strategy become the criteria for implementation practices.

Limited challenge to current mindset

Renewers have an eager approach to change. *“How can we renew ourselves, how can we change things so that things are easier and better. I think I always try to look for new smart ways of doing things and not in a way, just saying that is the way we have always done them.”* (Leader region 1, L4). They also often express positive energy toward the strategic changes. *“I think that I, when there are new things I take it in a way with energy and go a little ahead and I try to focus on the positive things.”* (Leader region 1, L4). Furthermore, they often question the prevailing truths. *“I see myself as one who just goes into some depth by asking some questions or digging a little more than anyone else has done.”* (Leader region 3, L3). With this natural tendency to go with the change, they do not express a need to challenge their current mindset. As one Renewer remarked: *“Actually, CreditGo has just increased the elements which I have started to work on.”* (Leader region 1, L4).

Broad role scope

Middle managers that adopt this implementation approach have a perceived responsibility and drive to develop the entire organization with a special focus on the interaction between different units to create better customer experiences. *“If the bank only knew what the bank knew. The day we really manage to exploit all the information flow coming into this bank, when we manage to exploit the expertise and for example, a retail employee joins a colleague within the corporate segment and they go together to meet the customers then, then this bank delivers. And that's what I've been trying to get to. So that has been my focus.”* (Leader region 3, L3). This quote illustrates Renewers' concern with collaboration and efficiency in the entire organization beyond the consequences for their team, their region and the current strategy.

Implementation practices

Renewers tend to focus on implementing the new strategy and using both team meetings and one-to-one meetings to secure execution of the new strategy within their team. Yet their

implementation practices are based on their loyalty to the entire region and company, with emphasis on how the strategic initiative can be implemented in the interface between different business units. *“It was a lot of negative talk when new initiatives were launched. I have challenged them on several occasions”*. *“We need to decide and have horizontal power in the entire organization.”* (Leader region 1, L4). Furthermore, Renewers use success stories as an aid to ensure that the changes influence the mindset and work processes in other units. *“It’s all about highlighting the story behind cases which has been successful. It might inspire and motivate others.”* (Leader region 3, L3). They also address challenges that reside at the interface between different business units and their strategies. *“When these two strategies are not aligned, it creates conflicts within the organizations. Obviously that is something I need to handle.”* (Leader region 3, L3). Thus, Renewers often engage in dialogue with leaders from other regions, including middle managers at lower levels who report to their peers, to understand their perspectives, find common solutions, and, through this, facilitate and support change. *“If there is anything we decide at the management level which is in contrast or get difficult at the next organizational level, we cannot just delegate to the first line leaders and expect them to find solutions. Sometimes I experience leaders who do not know about challenges one level below and then I talk to their first line leaders. Quite often I see myself as one who should support the first line leaders to be able to do an efficient job.”* (Leader region 3, L3). Their approach to change also appears in their attitudes toward measurement and control systems. One Renewer chose to deprioritize goals that do not promote interaction: *“All scorecards should really be reflected so that it promotes interaction. It is not always so, you fail to achieve it. And those times where I feel something is going on that contrasts with interaction, I ignore it.”* (Leader region 3, L3). However, Renewers’ own initiatives for renewal may meet with resistance because of the focus on the current strategy or political issues in the organization. For example, one Renewer

remarked: *“My experiences is that our leader group consist of leaders who represent their own unit.... We do not [wear an] overarching hat.”* (Leader region 1, L4).

Finally, Renewers focus on empowering their employees to increase their own space and time for leadership. *“If you get stuck in meetings with customers you may lose an overarching perspective.”* (Leader region 1, L4). In addition, they emphasize creating a team spirit and collaboration so that employees help and support each other often. *“They used to have their own customer portfolio and were responsible for their own customers. If their colleague had an excessively work load it was his problem. I have worked to tell them that this is our responsibility and we need to allocate resources and optimize our daily work processes.”* (Leader region 1, L4). Furthermore, Renewers focus on executing change in their teams by ensuring that members have the right approach for new work processes, including the right attitudes toward implementing changes in their daily work processes. This process may include relocating team leaders or members who do not fit the new strategy or do not have a change-oriented approach.

Linking implementation practices to theory

In summary, Renewers take a broad approach to their role but do not express a need to challenge their current mindset. As the analysis illustrates, the way Renewers make sense of the role as implementer influences their implementation practices. More specifically, they do not emphasize all three implementation practices presented previously. Firstly, Renewers are eager to focus on the entire company beyond the boundaries of their own team, region or current strategy. Although they execute practices to implement the strategy in their own team, their main focus is on practices geared toward creating a common understanding of how to collaborate on and create the total customer experience. Moreover, they experience the strategy to be in line with their mindset and concern for continuous improvements in the interface between different regions as well as other business units. Hence, they pay attention to how they can support both their employees through the changes and employees from other regions. Thus, in line with theory (Balogun 2003,

2007) they support others through change. In contrast with theory, however, they do not perceive a need to change themselves.

Furthermore, with their broad approach to their role, they try to achieve a common understanding of how to work with customers across different regions and business units. As such, they pay special attention to how to connect with different people to create solutions that align the different mindsets and guide common understanding and solutions in line with existing theory (Rouleau & Balogun 2011). Consequently, they juggle between different interests, as previous literature suggests (Stensaker & Langley 2010), interests such as relational concern (relationship with employees), substantive concern (goal attainment), and political concern (corporate demands). However, their main concern is the need for continuously changing and collaborating across the entire organization which thereby increasing the number of interests to juggle.

Finally, in contrast with existing theory (Huy 2001; Balogun 2003) Renewers do not balance between change and daily operations; rather, they mobilize most of their attention on how to implement changes. With their goal to develop the entire organization both within and beyond the frames of current strategy and their own team and region, they have a willingness to collaborate to increase the results and implement the changes in the entire organization. Hence, they may experience challenges regarding the execution of changes within their own team due to their concern for the entire organization. In addition, they may experience less attention from some of their peers, especially Market Protectors and Executers, who do not take a broad approach to their roles. Thus, despite their keen interest in change, a lack of change of progress may occur, if progress depends on collaboration with other business units and new strategic initiatives.

Renewers' Key Characteristics

Only two middle managers perceived their role as Renewers, one at level 3 and one at level 4, within two different regions. The level 4 leader was currently responsible for the relational segment and the level 3 leader was responsible for both segments. Both Renewers were middle managers whose careers include work experience from different companies or different business units within the company.

Co-Creator

Co-creators have a broad scope in terms of their role as implementer. Their focus is on the entire organization, their team, and the market, and thus they perceive changes as large and as challenging their current mindset. The perceived consequences for the entire organization, the market, and current and future customers become the criteria for implementation practices.

Middle managers in this approach try to implement the strategy quickly within their units. They work to co-create an understanding of the implications of the new strategy together with their employees. This process generates results and legitimacy. Co-creators become a voice, which others, both inside and outside the company, perceive as significant. Co-creators focus on collaboration as a tool to create results and co-create with their leaders, employees, customers, and colleagues to implement both current strategy and new strategic initiatives.

Extensive challenge to the current mindset

Co-creators perceive the changes as extensive. As such, they thoroughly analyze the changes to take ownership and develop their own way of pushing the change initiatives. *"The strategic change was based on a recognition that our finance company was for the large-scale companies.*

[We were] perceived as a solid but maybe inefficient company spending long time on organizational changes and decisions. A company with focus and expertise on big companies, especially international companies. The market share among the small companies was decreasing and that was also the case for Credit Com total market share. Further companies

experience that while for instance in 1983, 85% of the market leaders would remain market leaders for the next five years, in 2013 only 15% are likely to remain market leaders five years ahead. That required work on company brand due to changed customer behaviour.” (Leader region 3, L4). Co-creators go beyond the strategic message from the senior management to understand the background of the strategic change, understand their market, and create pride in their responsibilities. *“I think it's about obtaining insight into both the background for the change, like trends within the bank industry, and understanding the market. And creating pride in our work. Because when I understood how tough it is to be an innovator, then it was a bit like that; here we can actually make a difference.”* (Leader region 3, L4). From these statements, I argue that Co-creators challenge their current mindset.

Broad role scope

Co-creators take on the responsibility to develop the entire organization and the market. Their focus is broad. They aim to lead their team, the company, and the market in the right direction to attain improvements through proactive initiatives in co-creating activities. Thus, these middle managers continuously emphasize results and make improvements through co-creating activities with internal and external actors. *“Credit Com aimed to take a grip on the smaller firms to increase market share, increase awareness. And you cannot say that, you must show that. And then it became my job to show it in our in our market area. We had 34% market share when I started and now we have over 55%. And it certainly demonstrates that attention, focus, leadership and activities towards customer make results.... I got into boards in entrepreneurs firms and established network. I took a position out there in the market.”* (Leader region 4, L4).

The middle managers in this approach operate with a broad repertoire of a differentiated group of stakeholders, including leaders, employees, colleagues, and current and future customers.

Consequently, they have a broad scope of their role. Their interpretations of the change stem from

their desire to understand what the consequences are for the entire organization and who is influenced by the strategy (e.g., the market, current and future customers)

Implementation practices

Co-creators implement the changes in their daily work (new types of meetings and customer services) from the first day. They free up time and work on activities to become more effective in the new regime. *“We have two choices really. We can spend a very long time and be quite frustrated about something we do not know what we really get. Or we can go into a setting more like the band aid effect. Take more of a clean cut. Moving customers. We do everything very neatly from a given date. We use the time to plan what [we can] do of activities with the new reality.”* (Leader region 3, L4). In addition, Co-creators place their own signature on the change initiatives through their own stories. *“It is the capital card, customer card, and culture card. And then I introduced a new card, which goes on involvement. I made it myself. I say there's always a joker in a deck ... and in our case so it is ... about me succeeding in achieving engagement.”* (Leader region 3, L4).

Co-creators emphasize involvement. Rather than undertaking informational monologues, they spend a great amount of time with their employees discussing the consequences of the new strategy. Moreover, they work with structure and predictability and implement locally developed goals to follow up on the change initiatives over time. They focus on having fun and celebrating when the team succeeds.

Co-creators participate in new customer service work processes to better understand the market and their employees' situation. *“When my employees had vacation or were away, I took a part of the job to check the temperature of the market. Calling out to hear a little what the customer experienced and ... then it's much easier to discuss with my colleagues the problems they experience when you have experienced them yourself.”* (Leader region 4, Level 4). Co-creators also work both horizontally and vertically to make good decisions for the entire

company. *"We should try to optimize at all levels and then ... and I believe it is our responsibility to contribute to this. Strike up – play in, be constructive to make things better."* (Leader Region 4, L4). In addition, they play a central role within both the current market and developing markets. For example, one Co-creator worked to facilitate strategy for three different networks of entrepreneurs to create an efficient and valuable market and opportunities for each network; the person also worked with entrepreneurs in the area where the different networks did not compete to develop differentiated competitive advantages. Co-creators meet colleagues and customers with a style characterized by humbleness, curiousness, courageousness, and confidence. *"Being ... assertive, fearless in a way but with a high degree of humility and respect for employees and customers."* (Leader region 4, L4).

Linking implementation practices to theory

Co-creators challenge their current mindset and take a broad approach to their role as implementer. They have a large repertoire, and they work along several dimensions. Co-creators undertake all three implementation practices presented previously. As such, the way they make sense of their role influences what they do during change. First, in line with existing literature (Balogun 2003), Co-creators support others through change while changing themselves. They expend a great amount of effort to communicate and motivate their employees through change. In addition, they challenge their own mindset by delving into the reasons behind the strategic change and elaborate on the specific consequences of the change for their role and work.

Second, in line with existing theory they balance between multiple concerns (Mantere 2008; Stensaker & Langley 2010) and create a common understanding between different stakeholders (Rouleau & Balogun 2011). After efficiently completing the implementation within their own teams, they work to create a common understanding between different regions and teams within their region. In addition, they juggle and pay attention to different stakeholders (e.g., employees, peers, current and potential customers).

Finally, as existing literature (Huy 2001; Balogun 2003) suggests Co-creators balance between daily operations and implementation of change by co-creating behavioral changes in daily operations within their own unit. Afterward, they gradually extend their approach, with an eye toward creating a successful implementation platform within their main responsibility (their business unit and current customers). The fast paced implementation and targeted focus generate results on which the Co-creators base their voice and legitimacy to inspire others and take initiative to new strategic initiatives beyond their team, region and current strategy. Through these efforts, Co-creators both initiate and are invited to collaborate on areas between different business regions, as well as initiate new strategic initiatives upward. Therefore, Co-creators facilitate progress of change and performance within their team, region, the entire organization, and the market beyond the boundaries of current strategy.

Co-creators' Key Characteristics

Only two middle managers took on the role of Co-creators. They were identified in two different regions but only at Level 4. Both had responsibility for units within the commercial segments. Similar to the Renewers, a common characteristic of the Co-creators was a career that included work experience at other companies or in other business units within the company.

Table 3 summarizes the analysis and provides an overview of the four approaches.

Insert Table 3 about here

DISCUSSION

Prior middle management research has shown that middle managers are important *implementers* of strategic change (Floyd & Wooldridge 1992; Wooldridge & Floyd 1990; Balogun 2003; Balogun & Johnson 2005; Rouleau 2005; Stensaker & Falkenberg 2007; Rouleau & Balogun 2011). Furthermore, research has identified how implementing change requires that middle managers handle three overarching implementation practices: supporting others through change while changing themselves (Huy 2001; Balogun 2003; Rouleau 2005), (2) managing multiple interests and stakeholders (Mantere 2008; Stensaker & Langley 2010, Balogun & Rouleau 2011), and (3) implementing change while running daily operations (Huy 2001, Balogun 2003). Thus, research has given valuable insights into how middle managers contribute in strategic change implementation.

However, studies have also found that middle managers may face challenges to fulfill and prioritize rather all-encompassing tasks (e.g., Balogun 2003). Yet, previous research has not explored whether or how middle managers might perceive their role as implementers differently and how this informs their implementation practices. Rather than viewing middle managers as a unified group of leaders, this study offers new insight on different implementer approaches middle managers may take on. Thus, the study provides a more detailed and nuanced picture of middle managers' approach to their role as implementers during strategic change.

The current study demonstrates four distinct patterns in terms of how middle managers approach their role as implementers. While some middle managers engage in many of the practices identified in the literature, most prioritize among well-known practices and perceive the content of the practices differently. Their practices are linked to their understanding of the implementer role, which differs along two dimensions: (1) how broadly middle managers perceive their role and (2) the degree to which they perceive the change as challenging their current mindset.

Theoretical contributions

This study enriches the middle manager literature and sensemaking theory by adding three theoretical contributions. First, this study shows how middle managers perceive the scope of their role and delineates how many types of stakeholders their implementation practices are geared to during strategic change. Second, middle managers' approach to the implementer role differs depending on the extent to which the change challenges their current mindset. Third, different approaches to the implementer role may influence the progress of strategic change in units and the entire organization. I discuss each of these contributions in relation to my findings.

Scope of role

First, the findings reveal that middle managers perceive their role differently. Existing research has tended to depict middle management as a unified group approaching strategic change implementation in a similar manner, yet this study shows that some middle managers limit their role as implementers to one main group of stakeholders, while others broaden their attention to multiple stakeholders to facilitate change beyond the boundaries of their own unit. The understanding of the role has important implications in because whether middle managers view their role as implementer narrowly or broadly is connected to what they do during change. For example, Executors involve other stakeholders to increase the results within their own unit (narrow scope of role), whereas Co-creators collaborate with other units to ensure change within the entire organization (broad scope of role). Thus, the study identifies how a broad scope of role typically involves implementation practices characterized by an awareness of multiple stakeholders while a narrow scope involves limited attention to one main group of stakeholders.

In line with sensemaking theory (Weick 1995), I find that middle managers' mental models are tightly connected to their actions. However, this is partly shaped by previous action. The middle managers' past work experience appears to influence how broadly they approach their role and practices as implementers. For example, the analyses reveal that middle managers

with horizontal experiences (experiences from the other side of the table, as customers, suppliers, or colleagues at same level) are more likely to take a broad approach to their role. This result is similar to previous research that finds that middle managers' internal and external social network positions influence their level of strategic activity (Pappas & Wooldridge 2007). Middle managers in so-called boundary-spanning units (e.g., product managers) report higher levels of strategic activity than other managers (Floyd & Wooldridge 1997). These middle managers are in contact with and interact with a broad range of both internal and external actors. In contrast, I find that middle managers who have longer work tenure in one organization, even though the role involves a high degree of interaction with external actors (e.g., customers), are more likely to hold a narrow approach. This indicates that horizontal experience increases the possibility of perceiving the implementer role in a broad sense (i.e., Renewers or Co-creators). Consequently, the findings imply that past experience affects cognition, which in turn affects how broadly middle managers take on their role as implementers during strategic change. Thus, the findings suggest that previous work experience influences middle managers' sensemaking of their role.

Challenge mindset

The second dimension that influences how middle managers approach their role as implementers is the degree to which they must challenge their current mindset during change. According to Balogun (2003), organizations expect middle managers to change the way they think about and execute their work during change. However, my study reveals that some middle managers, specifically the Market Protectors and Renewers, challenge their current mindset only to a limited degree during change, which implies a low degree of change in the way they think about and carry out their work. Conversely, Executors and Co-creators do challenge their current mindset during change. In line with Sonenshein (2010), I find that middle managers interpret same change initiatives differently. For example, the Market Protectors expressed that the changes are small. In contrast, the Executors, Renewers, and Co-creators all argued that the same changes were major.

Consequently, middle managers who claim that the changes are small are more likely not to challenge their mindset during strategic change.

The findings also indicate that current work responsibility can influence the degree to which the change challenges middle managers' current mindset. For example, most of the Market Protectors are responsible for teams where the majority of their employees are working within the relational segment in which the changes are perceived as smaller than those in the commercial segment. In contrast, the Co-creators and three out of eight of the Executors are responsible for the commercial segment. This suggests that middle managers who are responsible for work units in which the changes are perceived as major are more likely to challenge their current mindset during change and take on the role Executer or Co-creator.

However, both the Market Protectors and Renewers indicated the same lack of need to challenge their mindset as a consequence of the change. Both are middle managers with a main responsibility for employees within the relational segment, in which the changes were smaller than those within the commercial segment. Yet, in contrast with the Market Protectors, the Renewers argued that the changes were extensive. Furthermore, they claimed that the changes were in line with their approach to change. This indicates that middle managers who are highly interested in change and continuously initiate change initiatives are more likely not to challenge their current mindset as a consequence of strategic change initiative formulated at the senior management level, even if they perceive the changes to be major. Because of their orientation towards change and the future, they constantly get inspiration to challenge their mindset. As a result, they are ahead of the senior management with respect to the change purpose and change content. Consequently, they do not perceive a need to challenge their mindset during strategic changes that are initiated at the senior management level.

The link between different approaches to the implementer role and progress of change

This study reveals how the different approaches have different capabilities to advance progress of change within their units and between different units in the organization. Thus, the third contribution consists of novel insights into what influences the progress of change. While existing research suggests that middle managers either facilitate (e.g. Balogun 2003; Balogun & Johnson 2005; Balogun 2006 Rouleau & Balogun 2011; Stensaker et al. 2011), or obstruct change (e.g., Guth & MacMillan 1986; Floyd & Wooldridge 1994; Fenton-O' Creevy 1998), my findings provide a more nuanced picture illustrating how various approaches contribute in different ways to change progress.

At an overall level, my findings suggest that a variety of approaches to implementation may be valuable as they attend to different important aspects. While progress of change within organizational units requires Executors and Co-creators, the Market protectors maintain continuity and customer focus. Moreover, the study shows how Renewers and Co-creators, who have a broad scope of role, are more likely to contribute to progress of change in the entire organization as opposed to merely within their own unit. However, with their continual work on increasing performance and collaboration in the entire organization, Renewers tend to lack enough attention to spearhead the progress of change within their own unit. Furthermore, Market Protectors' and Executors' narrow scope of role might hamper their ability to achieve implementation of cross-unit changes initiated by either the senior management team or the Renewers and Co-creators. For example, this case study found only two Renewers, who struggled to achieve their intentions to increase the quality of collaboration or new ideas in the division or entire organization. In addition, the Executors focus on collaboration only to achieve better results within their own units, thus inhibiting the progress of change in initiatives that aim to increase collaboration or provide a better total customer experience.

Practical implications

The findings provide several practical implications both for middle managers and senior managers. Firstly, middle managers should be aware of how they approach their implementer role and how this contributes to the progress of change. Secondly, middle managers should seek to both understand as well as gain inspiration from how their peers approach their role as implementers. Thirdly, senior managers should be aware of which types of approaches to the implementer role are present in their organization and set up a middle manager team which is suited to implementing the change they aim to achieve. These practical implications will be discussed below.

Firstly, the findings indicate that middle managers should be conscious of their approach to their implementer role and how this influences their ability to create progress of change both within their own team and in the entire organization. For instance, the Market Protector's emphasis on current customers are important to secure enough attention towards daily business when changes are implemented. However, these middle managers should be aware of how their focus may hamper the progress of change. Furthermore, the Executer must pay attention to how their focus on implementing changes in their own team may be a challenge for collaboration between different business units. The Renewer should however be aware of how their future-oriented approach on the entire organization may be perceived as innovative or proactive to their peers. This may especially be the case if their colleagues are in the Market Protector or Executer categories. Finally, the Co-creator should be aware of how they can inspire their peers, to take on a broader approach to the change if they imply increased collaboration to achieve a better customer experience.

Secondly, middle managers should work to enhance their capability of understanding and collaborating with their colleagues, who may take on different implementer approaches in order to contribute to progress of change. For instance, the findings show that while Market Protectors

focus on current customers, the three other approaches focus on the implementation of change. Consequently, if a middle manager is a Market Protector, a main concern should be on how to learn from peers who take on approaches which emphasize implementation of change. In contrast, the Market Protectors' concern for current customers are important lessons for middle managers who may lose their focus on existing customers due to their eagerness to implement changes. Furthermore, middle managers with a narrow scope of role, such as Market Protectors and Executors, may be inspired to gain a broader perspective on the value of collaboration by discussing the implication of the changes with colleagues with a broad approach to the implementer role (Renewers and Co-Creators). In addition, Renewers can gain significant insight from the Executors and Co-Creators on how to implement changes in their own unit. Consequently, middle managers should place an emphasis on understanding how their peers approach their role as implementers as well as inspire each other. Thus, by collaborating using the strength from each approach, middle managers can contribute more efficiently to change progress. Moreover, by sharing perspectives on the implementer role, they can achieve a better balance between daily operations and change as well as contribute to the progress of change in the entire organization.

Thirdly, senior managers should be aware of how they facilitate recruitment of divergent approaches as well as collaboration between different approaches to achieve change progress in their organizations. For instance, when organizations go through extensive changes, the senior management must ensure balance between implementation of change initiatives and daily operations. If current operations require a change in mindset, the Executors, Renewers and Co-creator may be central to bringing the organization into alignment with the change. In addition, Renewers and Co-creators are best suited to increase collaboration and to devise new thinking in the different units due to their broad scope of role. To achieve the balance between daily operations and change, senior management should set up a middle management team which

consists of a broad mix of different approaches which are appropriate for the organizational change they want to achieve.

Furthermore, if the strategic change is aiming to increase cross unit collaboration and a unit is dominated by one type of approach such as Market Protectors or Executors, the findings indicate that the senior management should support internships within different units or recruit Renewers or Co-Creators in order to develop a broader approach to the implementer role. Conversely, if the changes are isolated to business improvements in each business unit, senior managers should aim for development and recruitment of middle managers who take on the approach as Executors and Market Protectors. As such, senior managers should train their middle manager staff, recruit new approaches and facilitate the interplay and collaboration between different roles by becoming more aware of how the different approaches create change progress in both different units and the entire organization. Hence, senior management could facilitate and encourage collaboration among the different approaches to ensure significant focus on both current operations and implementation of strategic change.

Limitation and future research

This study also has limitations that might inspire future research. First, the established framework, which describes four different approaches to the implementer role, is based on one strategic change process in one particular type of organization. Future research could explore the roles in different organizations. The findings might also be extended by exploring how middle managers approach their role as implementers in other types of organizations or different units.

Second, future research should explore further why middle managers take on different approaches to the implementer role. For example, research could test whether dimensions such as work experience, personality, identity, career, age, organizational characteristics (e.g., culture, organizational discourses, structure, incentives) influence which approach middle managers adopt.

Are these roles inherent in individual managers, or do managers choose to adopt a particular approach?

The middle managers in this study were loyal to the strategic change, and all contributed to the implementation of the change in some way. However, middle managers can also approach implementation more negatively by actively counteracting the strategic initiatives from the senior management (see e.g., Guth & MacMillan 1986; Hope 2010). Future research might benefit by comparing and contrasting the implementer approaches adopted by supportive middle managers versus more resisting middle managers.

CONCLUSION

This paper explored how middle managers make sense of their role as implementers and how their role perception affects their implementation practices. I found that middle managers take on different approaches to implement strategic change. This study contributes to the middle management literature by fleshing out which middle managers approach the task of implementing change and showing how middle managers' role perception is linked to their implementation practices and progress of change.

These findings also provide some useful insights to practitioners by showing how middle managers contribute differently to advance progress of change within their own units and in the entire organization, based on how they make sense of their role as implementers. Therefore, this research advances both theoretical and practical knowledge on middle managers' role as implementers during strategic change in contemporary organizations.

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Figure 1: Organizational structure of Credit Com, Corporate Segment

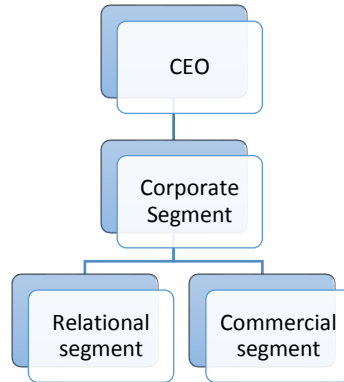


Figure 2: Research design: two levels of middle managers (L3 and L4)

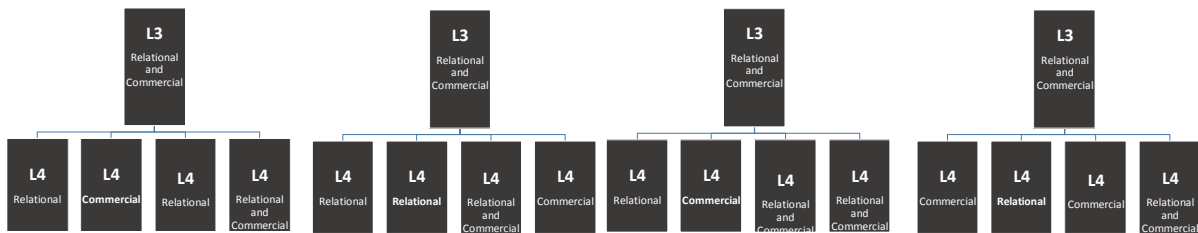


Figure 3: Four middle management approaches to the implementer role

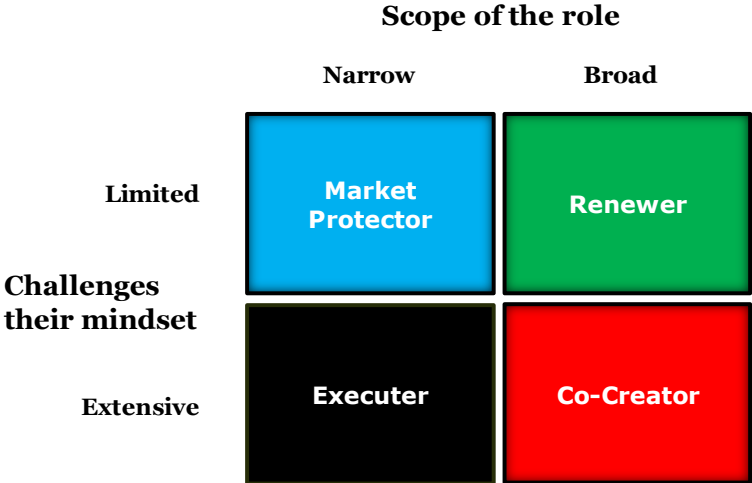


Figure 4: Overview different middle management approaches to the implementer role



Table 1: Middle managers' implementation practices

<i>Implementation practices</i>	<i>Description</i>
<i>Supporting others through change while also changing themselves</i>	Take on agency to implement behavioral changes within their unit while simultaneously changing their own mindset <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Supporting others through change:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o <i>Target communication</i> o <i>Motivate subordinates</i> o <i>Handle different emotional reactions</i> - <i>Changing themselves:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o <i>Change how they think about and carry out their work</i> o <i>Handle own emotional reactions</i>
<i>Managing multiple interests and stakeholders</i>	Balance between multiple concerns and create a common understanding among stakeholders <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Managing horizontal versus vertical stakeholders</i> - <i>Communicating on formal versus informal arenas</i>
<i>Implementing change while running daily operations</i>	Balance attention between change implementation and daily business <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Formulating more detailed context specific action plans</i> - <i>Coordinating and managing multiple change projects</i>

Table 2: Interviews overview

Interviews/Time	Aug 2014	T2: Sept–Nov. 2014	T2: Sept. 2015
L3		4 middle managers	4 middle managers
L4		16 middle managers	14 middle managers
Senior managers	2		
Total	2	20	18

Table 3: Middle managers role and practices

Role perception and implementation practices	Content	Market Protector	Executer	Renewer	Co-creator
Scope of role		Narrow	Narrow	Broad	Broad
Challenge current mindset		Limited	Extensive	Limited	Extensive
Supporting others through change while also changing themselves Take on agency to implement behavioral changes within their unit while changing their own mindset	<i>Target communication</i>	(√) (mainly current customers)	(√) (own team)	√ (own team + entire organization)	√ (own team + entire organization)
	<i>Motivate subordinates</i>	---	(√)	√	√
	<i>Handle different emotional reactions</i>	---	(√)	---	√
	<i>Change how they think about and carry out their work</i>	---	(√)	---	√
	<i>Handle own emotional reactions</i>	---	(√)	---	√
Managing multiple interests and stakeholders Balance between multiple concerns and create a common understanding between different stakeholders	<i>Juggle between multiple interests</i>	---	(√)	---	√
	<i>Connect different stakeholders</i>	---	(√)	√	√
Implement change while running daily operations Balance attention to the actual change implementation while focusing on daily business	<i>Balance daily operations and changes</i>	---	(√)	---	√
	<i>Formulate more detailed, context-specific action plans</i>	---	(√)	---	√
	<i>Coordinate and manage multiple change projects</i>	---	(√)	√	√
Key characteristics	<i>Previous work experience</i>	<i>Long-term career in the company/ corporate segment</i>	<i>Long-term career in the company/ private or corporate segment</i>	<i>Different companies / business units.</i>	<i>Different companies/ business units.</i>
	<i>Current job situation</i>	<i>Relational or both segments. Majority of employees are in the relational segment</i>	<i>One or both segments</i>	<i>Relational or both segments</i>	<i>Commercial segment</i>

Table A1: Market Protector

Limited challenge to current mindset
<p><i>“Right now, we have a very strong focus on the smallest businesses, and increasing the bank's market among those, and not least, being well liked among the smallest businesses. This is reality, and then it's just that you emphasize a little more working with it. But you cannot help but continue working with all the other customers either. That's why then, it just gets you, from sort of standing very much on the right foot, which is located among the major customers. Then you also lean a little more toward the left and sometimes more on the left foot that is in the business segment.” (R3-L4)</i></p> <p><i>“We should really focus on this business segment. And in a way, that was the new initiative. By way of supporting it, we've had quite a lot of advertising on TV, and as part of our commitment, we have published this book. We try in different ways, to promote ourselves as an offensive bank in this segment. But you know, people, i.e., those who have been here a long time, they listen to what you say and so on, but the job is quite unchanged. When you get out of the headquarter, these change journeys are experienced as not such major change journeys as their creators believe them to be. They are experienced more as natural adaptations over time. More like small adjustments, than a kind of dramatic new direction.” (R3-L4)</i></p> <p><i>“As such, much of what is presented as new roles and new strategies; it's just new words for things. As we've done before.” (R3-L4)</i></p>
Narrow role scope
<p><i>“With us, not so very much is created behind the scenes. Life is out there with the needs of customers. This has been my priority.” R1- (L3)</i></p> <p><i>“That I have at least been aware of the message too. What is most important, what we prioritize. The most important thing for us is our customers. They are what should be dealt with first.- That's what you prioritize yourself too. That and participating in customer meetings. You should respond to customers. You must provide good customer service. It is more important than satisfying an internal administrative task ... Because we make our living from the customers. We are no internal trade department.” (R4-L4)</i></p> <p><i>“The best contribution you can make to reduce your own insecurities and do such a good job in the market as possible. We must run the store. Many of the changes we make are pure internal massage, so to speak. Customers do not notice all that much of it. You often see a drop in customer satisfaction when we introduce a change process, because we become internally focused and not externally focused. And I usually say that we must focus on running the store as best we can. This is much more important: Yes, shove focus outward and then you can clean up what's behind the scene. At least that's what concerns me.” (R1 - L3)</i></p> <p><i>“We say that we are a relationship bank and that we will therefore be a relationship bank and that we will succeed, and that there is the long term in such a relationship. And it's clear that they challenge some of the measures we are now initiating, at least some of them.” (R1-L3)</i></p> <p><i>“We must not forget that we make our living from our customers, rather it is the customer who pays our salaries and other things” (R1-L3)</i></p> <p><i>“The customers are fundamental in what we do, so we should not be so concerned about the changes that we forget our customers. This is sort of my perception. Our customers are the most important thing we have, we need to take care of them, otherwise the competition will take them. Changes are now happening faster and becoming more demanding, so to speak, but I think, even though changes happen faster, so then fundamentally, one must have good relations and take care of your customers, for me this is the most important thing. It must be the foundation.” (R1-L4)</i></p>

Table A2: Executer

Extensive challenge to current mindset

“But to stand firm in relation to implementation, that is my job” there must also be understanding, and know why the strategy is what it is, and what it means for me in my job, and how I can implement it so that we are able to defend it.” (R2-L3)

“I have one of the focus areas of the bank, on the corporate side. It's really very positive and lots of fun. But, as a consequence, there are many changes in it too.” (R4-L4)

“It's primarily about understanding the strategy and what has been decided from the decision-making. if not, you can often ... think wrong if you think too much based on your own perspective..” (R2-L3)

“Customers are changing at a growing pace, or rather, a rapidly growing pace. Basically this sort of changing customer behavior should and must be the main driver for the internal changes.” (R4-L3)

“I think what we call, and perhaps struggle to take in but to varying degree, is the rapidity of the changes.”(R4-L3)

“I think one must first create an understanding and then incorporate what it means for me to be able to create the commitment.” (R4-L3)

“I assume that many of those who work here, as I say, do not get up every morning and say that now I hope that there is a change today. But what I'm trying to create is an understanding of changes then also to convince myself. If you have worked for many years in the bank, you must first start with yourself?” (R4-L3)

“We see that customers use us differently. In that their behavior has changed must have some impact on the way we approach the customers. How we can organize and dimension the distribution net for example. And customers use phones more, or use online banking more, so we must move a part of our business and resources over to those channels that customers use. We cannot just maintain the physical contact. We must have it too, but we have to change course.” (R4-L3)

Narrow role scope

“Present first with our management meeting and segment meetings, to discuss what is happening and what is coming.” (R2-L3)

“My role was to create understanding and commitment to the strategy - with my subordinate leaders.” (R3-L3)

“And then you must talk across the board, we need to agree on what we should do together. And it may require an extra hour, but the investment is often worth an incredible amount of money. So I think I invest rather more in trying to get a community spirit around what we are going to do than that everything about what is to be implemented is so precisely and effectively communicated.” (R2-L3)

“I'm very concerned about ensuring that the important things are taken seriously in a way, and that they are discussed and understood in the way they should be understood.” (R2-L3)

“Yes, it's about being clear over what is decided and what we can process, because then, it is easier to deal with. But what does it actually mean for us?”(R4-L4)

“Therefore, as the management team, we needed to build a community around it and in that setting put into words what it means to us, and what role we want. So if you want to create a sense of ownership, you must in some ways like what's in it for me and what we want to be ... How we are going to take it out to the division ... and we use the much of the department meeting to understand the changes.” (R4-L4)

“We leaders then sit ourselves together and then we decide what we will do.” (R2-L3)

Table A3: Renewer

Limited challenge to current mindset
<p><i>“We must actually do this and this and it’s probably because it was like that, like we did in XX (previous company, my note) on one occasion.” (R1-L4)</i></p> <p><i>“How there are times when we are faced with a ‘no that is not possible’. I like not like that answer. So it’s about presenting ideas and thoughts on how we can do things smarter and better.” (R1-L4)</i></p>
Broad role scope
<p><i>“We have tremendous expertise in the company. But we’ve been very good at building up these silos so that we do not get the benefit of being big.” (R3-L3)</i></p> <p><i>“ on those occasions when I feel that something is counter active to interaction, I tend to just ignore it. Thus, I’m not addressing it. And it may perhaps be haughty and it may be arrogant or suchlike, but I just try to explain as best I can when I’m sitting there and if not, they can give me a smaller bonus.” (R3-L3)</i></p>

Table A4: Co-Creator

Extensive challenge to current mindset
<p><i>“So then, my thoughts are that... in other words ... I must at least set a good example through the change process. I cannot ... say that I disagree with this or that ... even though I may not always understand why. Then I must sit myself down and create my own understanding of why this is right.” (R3-L4)</i></p> <p><i>“I think it's about ... gaining insight into ... what gives rise to change. Thus, there may be trends as I say. It can be ... that. When we look at international chaos the situation here is ... why have banks gone from like to like in other countries. So it could be one thing. A different thing is the ... pure market situation, and discuss and understand a little of when I was with entrepreneurs, but for me, I think I spent almost a year just to be familiar with the entrepreneurial environment in this region. Who was behind the activities, who was driving the innovation T arrangement? And, then, I capitalized on it afterwards by participating and being physically present when these things happened. The other was, in a way, to understand ... the market well so that I ... for my own part, found a way of creating pride in the job I had. Because then I realized much more how tough it is to be entrepreneurial. Then it was a bit like that; here we can actually make a difference.” (R3-L4)</i></p>
Broad role scope
<p><i>“But I have participated in very many projects. In connection with the new one. They also said that T had succeeded. And then I was invited.” (R4-L4)</i></p> <p><i>“And I also wanted key resources down here to get the pulse of the market. So I've been a little touchy in that respect. I asked them to come down and they've sat here. Maybe for several days and been, and it has been useful to them and it is useful for us. They can get much more insight into the ... the opportunities and issues a decision taken at a high level has for the remotest link... So that one can make a new decision. And when they came down here then, we had collected a number of different possibilities and some challenges so we had a very good discussions about it. And ... they could take this further into their projects in relation to concept development and in relation to all that would be rigged.” (R4-L4)</i></p> <p><i>“It meant that we spent a lot of time together. The local groups asked ... what goals should we set? What is realistic? Because there was an expectation that we would interact with each other. And much better than had we said, ‘This is the goal. You will do this now.’ So ... we have: What do you think we can do now? ... And surprisingly enough it often became a higher ... goal than we had set.” (R3-L4)</i></p> <p><i>“So ... it may make sense to unite workers from other areas too – those who work with corporate. And work a little with that culture and a little with that competence, a little more purely for the employees ... we have created two new arenas, and created again ... it’s about building trust and ... I almost said, relationships across the board... so that there can be just as much ... if one in my team is working with a company in a branch he is not so familiar with. But because we have spent time together, he knows there’s someone in</i></p>

another unit who has worked extensively with that branch. So instead of going to someone else who perhaps knows little, he calls the expert. And this, we have never done before.” (R3-L4)

“I am enormously concerned with involvement. Hugely concerned with involving others and very concerned that at least during the processes of change that there is not a way ... we have different arenas for ... sharing information. But I usually use the Friday meetings, then, we set aside two hours. And it may be, in any case, I remember in that period, it was very important for me to have very few agenda items. And not just using the meeting for information was equally important for me. Thus, information exchange could be 20-30 min and then there was discussion afterwards. And, then I think I am honest and open ... I never thought it was nice to spend a department meeting just giving or receiving information. When you sit there for a half hour and just – either take notes or ... 90% fall out. ... And then there is a little about this or that ... ok ... it was nice to know about that... about this ... but why has no one thought about this. There was no one who answered. But ... it is really so that I've experienced that in those times ... one has been directly involved and felt greater ownership of the process and implementation. Thus, for my own part, I have experienced that I have been more geared up to contribute.” (R3-L4)

**MISSION POSSIBLE? HOW DIVISIONAL LEADERS REASSEMBLE CHANGE
INITIATIVES TO DEVELOP CAPACITY FOR MULTIPLE CHANGES**

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how divisional leaders develop capacity for multiple changes. Through an inductive study, we observe how the leaders of a foreign subsidiary in a multinational telecommunications company implemented a series of parallel and overlapping changes—some initiated locally and others by headquarters. Extant research suggests that divisional leaders are important change agents who can exert influence on key stakeholders through, for example, strategic sensemaking activities. We find that when faced with multiple changes, in addition to discursively oriented sensemaking activities, divisional leaders reassemble change initiatives to manage different capacity-related challenges that surface over time. Doing so provides them with temporary capacity to move change forward. The successful change agency by divisional leaders relies on considerable autonomy and discretion. Our findings contribute to the strategic change literature by empirically illustrating how multiple changes interact over time and by theoretically explaining how this interaction creates both challenges and opportunities for divisional leaders' change agency.

Keywords: multiple changes, change capacity, divisional leaders, change agent, MNE subsidiary, assembling resources

INTRODUCTION

Many organizations experience an increasing pace of change (Kotter 2012), with parallel, overlapping, and sometimes even conflicting changes taking place at the same time. Complex, intertwined processes of change, each with its own momentum, pace, and trajectory, surface at different levels in organizations (Pettigrew, Woodman, & Cameron 2001), thus requiring the capacity to implement and manage *multiple changes* (Pettigrew & Whipp 1991; Van de Ven & Poole 1995; Meyer & Stensaker 2006) that potentially interact and influence one another.

Business units in multidivisional firms are particularly prone to exposure to multiple changes as corporations transform and renew divisional boundaries and charters (Friesl & Silberzahn 2017) in response to technological development and market changes (Galunic & Eisenhardt 1996). This puts demands on divisional leaders to implement strategic changes coming from corporate-level (HQ) management while initiating the necessary changes for their own division.

Extant research suggests that divisional leaders in autonomous business units are liable to resist HQ change initiatives that involve narrowing the boundaries or reducing the charter or autonomy of their division (Martin & Eisenhardt 2010; Balogun, Bartunek, & Do 2015). The literature has focused primarily on how resistance to change can be handled, rather than offering evidence of how organizational members mobilize into creative and committed change agents (Huy & Sonenshein 2015). Similar to the broader group of middle managers, divisional leaders are both change agents and change recipients (Balogun 2003). They are recipients of strategic decisions made by corporate-level management but also need to take on change agency and loyally implement these while simultaneously initiating and championing changes required by the local environment in which they operate. Although a growing body of research has documented how middle management implements corporate-level changes, studies have not sufficiently addressed how divisional leaders handle the dual demands of securing capacity for multiple changes, occurring at both corporate and local levels. Meanwhile, the strategic change literature

has increasingly recognized that change agents beyond the top level in the organization need to be mobilized to successfully manage and implement change, particularly as firms grow in size and complexity (Balogun & Johnson 2004, 2005). In this paper, we therefore examine *how divisional leaders contribute to developing capacity for multiple changes*. We adopt Meyer and Stensaker's (2006: 218) definition of change capacity as "the ability to implement change without compromising daily operations or subsequent changes". As such, our conceptualization of change capacity is inherently tied to a multiple change context.

Theoretically, we draw on middle management literature and sensemaking theory, which indicates that to implement change, divisional leaders need to be exceptionally good at influencing others (Rouleau & Balogun 2011). The ability to influence others in the direction of change requires intimate knowledge and understanding of the specific organizational context in which change is taking place, as well as discursive and political competences (Rouleau & Balogun 2011). Extant literature shows that processes of sensemaking and sensegiving can contribute to creating a shared understanding of change among various stakeholders (Balogun & Johnson 2004, 2005; Rouleau 2005). More specifically, Rouleau and Balogun (2011) identified these activities as *setting the scene*, which means bringing together the right stakeholders, and *performing the conversation*, which means using a language that fits the context. Prior studies have examined sensemaking and sensegiving as cognitive, social, and discursive processes. However, dealing with multiple changes—some initiated locally, others centrally—requires not only a shared understanding but also the necessary *resources and capacity*. While the change literature provides evidence of how the broader group of middle managers exert influence through strategic sensemaking and highlights the skills and capabilities required to do so, less is known about the social activities involved in mobilizing resources and capacity to implement multiple changes.

The empirical context for this study is a foreign subsidiary (division) of a multinational (telecommunications) enterprise (MNE). At the corporate level, the MNE we studied was attempting to globally integrate its foreign subsidiaries by centralizing functions, such as sourcing, IT, human resources, and finance. We initially set out to study global integration from the subsidiary perspective. However, we soon found that this particular subsidiary had plans to embark on a transformation journey of its own, which was rather loosely coupled with the corporate agenda but, in some respects, went far beyond the corporate change initiative. Thus, the empirical context represented a revelatory case in which multiple changes were likely to be particularly prevalent. The subsidiary transformation consisted of a number of change projects aiming to dramatically improve performance. At the same time, corporate HQ was pushing its global integration agenda and several corporate-driven change projects on the subsidiary. To examine how the divisional leaders handled these multiple changes, we collected interview, observational, and documentary data over three years.

Our analyses suggest that rather than resisting change coming from above, divisional leaders may draw on corporate changes to push their own change agenda, even when the changes mean that they may ultimately have to give up some autonomy. As expected, the divisional leaders engaged in strategic sensemaking activities to create a shared understanding, but perhaps more important, they mobilized the multiple change context by assembling and reassembling change initiatives. This allowed them to deal with various capacity-related challenges that emerged over time and thus equipped them with ways to deal with the dual pressures of change.

Our findings contribute to the strategic change literature in three important ways. First, in contrast with linear and stepwise process models focusing on *one specific change*, our study empirically illustrates that multiple organizational change initiatives coexist, interact, and influence one another over time. Second, we develop theory on how divisional-level leaders leverage the multiple change context to achieve their own change goals. More specifically, we

develop theory on how in addition to engaging in strategic sensemaking at the collective and organizational level, they assemble and reassemble change initiatives, which in turn provides them with change capacity. Third, our study shows how different capacity-related challenges emerge over time and that any attempts to handle this remain temporary and can potentially create new capacity-related challenges.

In the next section, we present our theoretical foundation, which is based in the middle management literature and the sensemaking perspective on change. Next, we introduce the research setting and our methodological approach, after which we present our analysis and findings. Finally, we discuss implications for practice and future research.

DUAL CHANGE PRESSURES ON DIVISIONAL LEADERS

Change Agents and Change Recipients

Multidivisional firms often renew and transform themselves by rethinking divisional boundaries and charters (Galunic & Eisenhardt 1996; Friesl & Silberzahn 2017). Such changes are typically driven by technological development and changing market needs. For example, new technology has led to increased globalization and cross-unit collaboration, which in turn has transformed subsidiary managers from senior managers to middle managers within large multinational companies (Rouleau, Balogun, & Floyd 2015). Rather than taking on the senior leadership role of autonomous divisions, subsidiary managers are increasingly expected to loyally implement changes initiated at the corporate level in addition to initiating the necessary changes within their own divisions. These dual demands coupled with a higher pace of change (Kotter 2012) suggest that divisional managers need to handle parallel and overlapping changes initiated from various levels, where one specific change initiative may potentially facilitate, hamper, or even crowd out another.

In addition to the multiple change context, divisional leaders (similar to leaders at all organizational levels) must always balance change with continuity (Huy 2001; Balogun 2003). They must secure substantive change, maintain good relationships with their employees, and maintain credibility from above (Stensaker & Langley 2010). As such, divisional leaders must balance various competing concerns, potentially leading to resource and capacity constraints. The balancing demands put on divisional leaders resemble well-known challenges at the middle management level, who tend to be depicted as both change agents and change recipients (Balogun 2003). Indeed, from a corporate perspective, divisional leaders *are* middle managers, albeit at a high organizational level. In examining divisional-level change challenges, it is therefore relevant to draw from the change literature that addresses middle management's role during change.

Middle managers are positioned below the top managers and above line workers and professionals (Huy 2001). They are the mediators who “connect the operational core with the upper echelons in a way that shapes strategic direction” (Rouleau & Balogun 2007, p. 4). In large corporations, a broad cadre of middle managers span across several hierarchical levels (Rouleau, Balogun, & Floyd 2015); yet the literature has not clearly distinguished between higher-level middle managers (e.g. divisional leaders) and lower-level middle managers.

In their classic middle management framework, Floyd and Wooldridge (1992) introduced four roles middle management may take on in strategy processes: synthesizer, champion, facilitator, and implementer. As synthesizers, middle managers bring together information from below and feed this upward to corporate management. As champions, they try to influence corporate management decisions and prioritization by lobbying for specific ideas. When taking on the role of the facilitator, middle managers attempt to influence their subordinates by creating opportunities for flexible and innovative initiatives, which often require cooperation across organizational units and boundaries. Finally, as implementers, they use their influence to engage lower-level employees in executing strategy. Since Floyd and Wooldridge's study, a burgeoning

body of literature exploring middle management's role as *implementers* of strategic change has emerged. That research suggests that middle managers play an increasingly important role in strategic change and may significantly influence both the change process and outcomes (Balogun & Johnson 2004, 2005; Wooldridge, Schmid, & Floyd 2008). Empirical studies show that middle managers do not passively adopt and pass on strategic documents and plans as formulated by senior management; rather, they actively make sense of and edit such plans, resulting in an "emergent and unpredictable process" yielding both intended and unintended consequences (Balogun 2006, p. 41).

Strategic Sensemaking Activities

One well-documented way that middle managers exert influence is through sensemaking and sensegiving processes. As change recipients, they make sense of the change in terms of what it implies, why it is being made, and how it will affect their division (Balogun & Johnson 2004, 2005), while as change agents, they give sense to the change and thus help others make sense of it (Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991). Sensemaking and sensegiving processes involve both cognitive and social mechanisms (Maitlis & Lawrence 2007). Cognitive mechanisms are mobilized as middle managers interpret and assign meaning to cues in the environment or attempt to make sense of previous actions, while the social dimensions of sensemaking occur through conversations with key stakeholders, in which middle managers engage seniors, peers, and subordinates in change-related activities.

In a study of how individual middle managers create a shared understanding of change, Rouleau and Balogun (2011) found two sensemaking activities that appear particularly important for successfully influencing others: *setting the scene* and *performing the conversation*. As noted previously, setting the scene means bringing the right stakeholders together in the appropriate forums, while performing the conversation involves using language and social cues that tap into the interests of stakeholders. While these strategic sensemaking activities will take different

forms depending on the stakeholder group to be engaged, both activities require intimate knowledge and understanding of the organizational context, discursive capabilities, and political astuteness (Rouleau & Balogun 2011).

In summary, prior research on middle managers' role during change has primarily treated them as implementers of strategic change initiatives they have not initiated themselves (Huy 2001; Balogun 2003; Stensaker & Langley 2010). This line of research has provided valuable insights into the skills and capabilities necessary to influence key stakeholders. However, it has not addressed the dual pressures higher-level middle managers, such as divisional leaders, are expected to handle. Instead, research has typically examined strategic change initiatives in isolation, without acknowledging competing processes and change initiatives. What is missing in the literature is a deeper understanding of how divisional managers can develop capacity for *multiple* changes, covering both changes initiated outside the division, such as by the corporate level, and changes initiated within the division. Capacity to deal with multiple changes while also delivering divisional results will require not only a shared understanding among various stakeholders but also sufficient resources and capacity to move the changes forward.

To explain how divisional leaders develop capacity for multiple changes, we draw on research that suggests that leaders in the middle exert influence and create shared understanding by setting the scene and performing the conversation. However, while previous research has examined the individual-level skills and competences necessary for these activities and explored how a shared understanding is developed mostly through discursive means, we examine such strategic sensemaking activities more broadly to assess if and how they provide divisional leaders with capacity to handle multiple changes.

METHODS

The phenomenon of multiple changes has been discussed in the change literature, but it has not been the explicit focus of empirical studies. We used the multiple change context as a design criterion (Langley & Abdallah 2011) to explore the phenomenon further. Our research question required access to divisional leaders who were exposed to dual pressure for change. We negotiated access to a subsidiary in a multinational telecommunications company that had announced it would globally integrate multiple functions to reap scale-based efficiencies while simultaneously developing new and innovative telecom services. The corporate-level strategy thus consisted of a number of large-scale changes that would influence the subsidiary division. We employed an emergent approach in selecting our case (Langley & Stensaker 2009), as information gained through interviews with leaders at the MNE HQ led us to the subsidiary. In essence, we “followed” one of the corporate leaders into a divisional leader position to examine how the corporate strategy played out at the subsidiary level. Upon arrival at the subsidiary, we soon learned that the divisional leadership team was pursuing a radical turnaround, consisting of several local change projects. The divisional leaders were thus exposed to changes from corporate HQ while attempting to launch local changes within the subsidiary. As such, our research setting constitutes a revelatory case that offers high potential for developing new theory of and insights into an understudied phenomenon (Yin 2003).

Research Setting: The Corporate HQ and Its Subsidiary Telco North

The MNE we investigated is one of the fastest-growing providers of mobile communications services worldwide. It is ranked among the world’s top 10 mobile operators with ownership interests in other telecommunications companies across Europe. Based in the Nordics, the MNE developed from a national monopoly to a successful global player with a strategy and governance model that emphasized local autonomy. Because the MNE treated every market as unique, subsidiary leaders enjoyed a high degree of discretion and local autonomy. Control was primarily

exerted through financial measures and by putting executives from HQ on the boards of foreign subsidiaries. However, when our research project began in 2012, HQ management argued that market conditions had changed, and in an attempt to create global efficiencies and improve customer services, it initiated a series of corporate-wide change initiatives aiming to globally integrate the historically decentralized MNE. The corporate strategy was launched as the “Industrialization Strategy”. Among the many corporate change initiatives, two global integration programs were established in 2012: Global Sourcing and Global Shared Services. Both programs were expected to affect all foreign subsidiaries, as activities would be moved out of the subsidiaries and instead coordinated at a global level.

The foreign subsidiary (Telco North), which is our primary unit of analysis, is located in Northern Europe, with approximately 1800 employees. Although we set out to study the global integration initiatives from a subsidiary perspective, upon entering the field it became clear to us that in Telco North, these corporate initiatives were somewhat overshadowed by the subsidiary’s own transformation strategy. Telco North embarked on a radical transformation in December 2012, triggered primarily by a history of poor results in a hyper-competitive marketplace characterized by intense price wars. We followed the subsidiary’s transformation journey in real time over three years from 2013 to 2015 to observe how the corporate change initiatives over time came to influence and interact with locally initiated changes.

Data Collection

Data sources include strategy documents, PowerPoint presentations, observations, media coverage, and interviews (see Table 1). Our primary source of data was 34 interviews conducted at three different points in time from May 2013 to February 2015. We triangulated and corroborated the interview data against other sources of data, with our interpretations also informed by a larger research project containing data collected over a five-year period at the MNE HQ.

Insert Table 1 about here

We targeted respondents within key divisional leadership positions for each round of interviews. We attempted to speak with the same divisional leaders each time we returned to the field. Key positions had sometimes changed, due to the frequent reorganizations, making it more natural to speak to the newly appointed divisional leaders. In total, we conducted 13 in-depth semi-structured interviews with seven divisional leaders over the three years. Of the leaders, one came from HQ (our key contact), two originated from Telco North, and four had international work experience from other subsidiaries or companies. In addition, we interviewed 21 organization members, primarily middle managers but also staff from different business units, such as human resources, branding, business development, and the project management team. These interviews provided input on how leadership decisions and actions were interpreted more broadly in the division and the extent to which the capacity to move forward was created.

The interviews, which took place at Telco North's international location, lasted from one to two hours and were tape-recorded. Questions were framed in an open manner. We focused on obtaining an understanding of the change content, context, process, and expected outcomes. We also sought to get a sense of the subsidiary history, its relationship to corporate HQs and other subsidiaries, the main tasks, and the challenges as perceived by those involved in planning and executing the transformation. Specifically, we asked divisional leaders to describe their organization, their own role in the organization, and any experience with the current and previous transformation processes in the subsidiary. All data were collected by a team of researchers, which provided an opportunity to cross-check impressions and interpretations after the interviews. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. While the interviews and observations provided information on the experience and perceptions of the divisional leaders, the additional

data (documents and observations of town hall meetings) offered insight into the officially communicated story about the new strategy and the subsidiary transformation process.

Observations of the research site provided included war room maps of change initiatives, charts depicting the progress of change and the number of old IT systems and service offerings that had been “killed”, and implementation activities.

Data Analysis

Immediately after completing each of our three field visits, we wrote up short summaries of our impressions from the field. In addition, we drew from our various data sources to write up a case description (Eisenhardt 1989) primarily covering essential facts rather than our interpretations. Through visual mapping (Langley 1999), in which we plotted the change projects over time, it became increasingly evident that the nature of the changes pursued shifted somewhat over time. There was no period of “sustain”, as new large-scale changes emerged continuously, and therefore we could not draw on well-known change models such as Lewin’s (1947) three phases of change (unfreeze, move, and refreeze). The organizational context (quite naturally) changed over time, and though capacity-related challenges seemed to persist, the type of challenge varied, as did the ways divisional leaders worked to resolve this. We therefore chose to keep the three periods separate and labeled them in accordance with what emerged as key descriptors/characteristics at that particular time. We labeled the first period “multiple changes launched”, the second “excessive change”, and the third “mission (im)possible”. It is important to note that these are not conceptualized as generic phases or general progressions in any way; instead, each period illustrates various characterizations of the multiple change context.

Next, we conducted a first-order analysis, keeping the three periods separate. We coded each interview in a specific period with a focus on the capacity-related challenges and the implementation activities subsidiary managers were describing. We attempted to keep close to the data. In the coding, we drew on informants’ language. We used an interpretive approach in which

our goal was to understand how subsidiary managers were thinking about and planning change during each of the phases. We compared and contrasted challenges and managerial activities across periods to better understand how these evolved over time and how previous decisions and actions might frame future ones.

We then proceeded by carrying out repeated iterations between theory and data (Langley 1999), searching for theory that could help us understand how the divisional leaders were working. The middle management literature was helpful in understanding the challenges of divisional leaders and in explaining some of the strategic sensemaking activities that were going on at the collective level, but it was insufficient in explaining how divisional leaders worked to secure capacity and resources for change. We therefore proceeded inductively to uncover specific activities geared toward increasing capacity for change. Our emerging model shows how divisional leaders created capacity for change through a different type of sensemaking activity, which we label assembling and reassembling change initiatives. In the “Discussion” section, we draw from resource assemblage theory to explain how and why these activities generate change capacity.

CREATING CAPACITY TO MAKE “MISSION POSSIBLE”

In this section, we show how the change context evolved from multiple parallel and overlapping changes (originating from both the divisional leadership team and corporate HQ), to excessive and overwhelming changes, to “mission impossible”. Our analysis shows that divisional leaders ultimately centered on the most difficult and prestigious change initiative—an IT project we label Techno (see Figure 1)—that was initially viewed as extremely high risk and deemed to be “mission impossible”. However, over time, divisional leaders mobilized the multiple change context and developed a capacity to make it *mission possible*, despite the continuously emerging changes and challenges.

Insert Figure 1 about here

The analysis follows a temporal logic to illustrate how various challenges emerged over time. The three periods are labeled according to key contextual characteristics that surfaced at that time: multiple changes, excessive change, and mission (im)possible. For each of these periods, we first describe the organizational context and the capacity-related challenge. We then describe the content of the various change projects that surfaced, to illustrate how these evolved over time during the transformation process. The main focus of our analysis is on the implementation activities divisional leaders engaged in to move the organizational change agenda forward. In addition to working at the collective level at setting the scene and performing the conversation, we show that divisional leaders systematically assembled and reassembled the various change projects over time and across organizational levels. We further argue that through these activities, divisional leaders created not only a shared understanding of and commitment to one particular change but also the necessary resources and capacity for multiple changes.

T1: Multiple Changes Launched

Organizational Context: History of Cost-Reductions in a Hyper-Competitive Market

In May 2013, divisional leaders described the competitive situation in the subsidiary's local market as extremely aggressive, and for many years, with a mature and saturated market involving too many telecom companies fighting for the same customers, this situation had led to continuous price wars causing challenges for all firms. Although the division enjoyed substantial autonomy, Telco North leaders also acknowledged the subsidiary's role in the MNE. They perceived the unit as the black sheep, as the division had failed to show profits for several years. Previous divisional leaders had executed a series of cost-reduction initiatives but had little success in turning the business around to become profitable. Gaining support and commitment for

yet another cost-cutting initiative was therefore deemed as challenging by the divisional leaders. A young new leader without previous CEO experience, but with extensive marketing experience, was recruited from one of the other foreign subsidiaries, and he initiated a radical transformation intended to turn the business around.

Change Content: Subsidiary Transformation Strategy Consisting of Multiple Change Projects

The transformation targeted two main goals: (1) increased profitability and growth and (2) repositioning the firm from a cost-leadership strategy to a strategy focused on customer service and customer loyalty. Several changes were planned (see Table 2). For example, a new divisional leadership team and organizational structure were put in place to strengthen the marketing function. People with a strong marketing background were recruited into divisional leadership positions, with the goal of shifting the subsidiary's position from a cost focus to increased differentiation. Becoming a company that best catered to its customers also required a rebranding initiative. On the technical side, the subsidiary was implementing a "one-screen" method to ensure identical and seamless interfaces between customers and customer service staff. In addition, dramatic changes in product offerings were planned, as the subsidiary wanted to simplify its product offerings. This change, labeled "radical simplification", involved killing off several hundred IT systems and product offerings, thus requiring customers to migrate to new product offerings. The number of employees was expected to be significantly reduced, due to the new changes. Finally, the primary source of revenue (i.e. the business model) was expected to change for the whole industry, and this would require rethinking the product offerings and innovating new types of services for the MNE. Future revenue would be generated primarily through data transmission, rather than talk and texting. Although the new organizational structure would facilitate some of these changes, further structural changes were anticipated because of the need to enter into alliances and collaborations with other firms.

Insert Table 2 about here

In addition to the many change initiatives initiated by the subsidiary, the corporate level had launched corporate changes to gain increased cooperation and coordination between foreign subsidiaries. The new business model was a corporate change issue. Furthermore, the MNE was pursuing an Industrialization Strategy, which consisted of several corporate change initiatives. We focus specifically on the Global Sourcing and Global Shared Services initiatives, as these aimed to ensure efficient operations through increased integration and standardization across subsidiaries and thus would require changes within Telco North. Changes in the MNE governance model were expected to accommodate an increasingly global orientation.

Strategic Sensemaking Activities and Assembling Change Initiatives

The divisional leaders enjoyed considerable discretion and developed the Telco North transformation strategy rather independently of the corporate changes that were planned. However, there was clear understanding of the need to involve other stakeholders both inside and outside the subsidiary. Divisional leaders engaged in strategic sensemaking activities, such as carefully *setting the scene* by bringing together key stakeholders and influencing their meaning making by *performing the conversation*. However, in addition to these well-known strategic sensemaking activities, the divisional leaders *assembled* various change initiatives, which we elaborate on next.

Setting the scene and performing the conversation vis-à-vis HQ. From the very beginning of their transformation journey, divisional leaders created arenas for dialogue with corporate management. For example, divisional leaders invited HQ management to their strategy workshops to explain the specifics of the local “North” market: “*We ‘enlightened’ them [HQ management]. It was not just to create an understanding of the ‘North’ market, but also to get*

support for our transformation. We aim to make radical changes and take on a new market position". The divisional leadership team presented an ambitious transformation agenda emphasizing financial goals and thereby adopted a language that fit the results-oriented culture of the MNE: *"We set ambitious goals, much more ambitious than corporate HQ management expected.... There was more urgency around the transformation agenda from our side than HQ side"*. Because the subsidiary was primarily measured by and controlled through quarterly financial reporting on bottom-line profit and loss, the divisional leaders sought acceptance for temporary dips in performance from corporate HQ: *"We are continuously measured on performance, which means that we need to get corporate HQ support, since at one point or another we will need amnesty from the numbers ... so HQ support is all about getting a bit longer leash"*. Through these strategic sensemaking activities, divisional leaders achieved HQ's understanding of the local market, legitimacy for the transformation strategy, and some financial "slack" when implementation began.

Setting the scene and performing the conversation within the subsidiary. The subsidiary CEO viewed alignment within his own leadership team as essential and emphasized the importance of speaking with one voice. This was achieved by working together to develop "the strategic story" and reflecting on the consequences for the company and the different business units. *"The alignment of the top management team on this common agenda is so important. You have to be one voice.... You have to spend a lot of time as a management together to create that story together and agree on that story. That's what makes sense to them as well."* Furthermore, to create sufficient commitment and ownership in the subsidiary and enable subsidiary middle management to become influential change agents, the divisional leadership team organized strategy workshops together with subsidiary middle management to discuss and further detail the strategy and its consequences. *"It's not a one-way storytelling but it's actually a very interactive workshop agenda where you have people regrouping and elaborating on the challenges, on the*

risks, on the opportunities, on how do we make that happen? How do we execute on it?"

Moreover, the Human Resources Unit at Telco North facilitated a series of workshops aimed to increase the confidence in and passion for change among managers at all levels in the subsidiary.

In an attempt to get employees on board with change, divisional leaders shifted the discourse from a financial orientation to a more emotional appeal. The strategic story was reframed to go well beyond the financial goals that were presented to corporate management, and instead divisional leaders appealed to the heart. *"It is not just hardcore skills development. It is also giving them [employees] the desire to 'run in the rain'. You have to give people a feeling that they are part of something special. We are building something new that is worth it."* The transformation process included ambitions to downsize. Divisional leaders acknowledged the challenges in balancing an honest downsizing message with an attempt to create engagement in and commitment to the changes and argued that even if employees were not guaranteed a job at Telco North, they would be equipped with valuable competences for potential future positions elsewhere: *"These guys have an opportunity the next two years to be a part of something extremely exciting that will increase their qualification and they can use the qualification later on to fight on the labor market for something else. That's the angle to this. How can you take advantage of this process even if you are not there at the end of the day"*. The transformation goals were also communicated by tracking progress and results using charts placed in highly visible areas, such as the cafeteria: *"There are pictures hanging in the cantina showing all of the product services we close down.... We will make visible to people that this time it is serious"*.

Assembling change initiatives by connecting the change agenda with that of others. In addition to targeting various stakeholder groups, both internally in the subsidiary and within the larger MNE, the divisional leaders assembled the change initiatives in particular ways to gain acceptance of and resources for change. First, they allied with another subsidiary to gain resources and attention and to share risk. Second, they connected the subsidiary transformation

strategy with the corporate agenda of global integration. Third, they linked some of the local change initiatives to subsidiary legacy, thus providing support and engagement among employees who had experienced radical change attempts previously.

The Telco North leadership group allied with *another subsidiary*, which we refer to as Telco East, in the transformation journey. Through his previous position, the CEO of Telco North had personal relationships with some of the key people in Telco East. He argued that Telco East had the same sense of urgency and willingness to take on risks as Telco North: *“This is a major change and it involves a lot of risk.... We are challenging some of the traditional telecom logic of building systems. The ‘East’ case has the same sense of urgency.... When we presented this vision to them, they said: ‘Wow! This is actually very similar to the challenges that we see down in East. Why don’t we try to make it work together?’”* The IT project involved thinking radically in terms of the core business and developing an operating model based on an integrated and shared IT infrastructure between subsidiaries. Working together with another subsidiary provided legitimacy and strength to some of the change initiatives in Telco North’s transformation strategy. To get the project started, the CEO recruited a former colleague to lead the IT project. This person was an experienced entrepreneur with know-how from start-ups, and he brought in a new approach to project management.

Next, divisional leaders connected their transformation strategy with the corporate agenda. Rather than viewing the global integration initiatives coming from the corporate level as being forced on the subsidiary, divisional leaders used the corporate agenda to push their own initiatives. They emphasized the corporate potential within the IT project and referred to the collaboration with Telco East as a groundbreaking pilot project that could later be rolled out in the entire MNE: *“Because if you can make it here [in Telco North] and for Telco East, then you can plug any other country into it”*. Divisional leaders argued that the collaboration on the new IT project provided an opportunity to show in practice what corporate HQ had been working on

in theory but not yet fleshed out in detail. *“Telco North thus offered to test out a new and radical strategy, which could then be adopted by other subsidiaries.”* The divisional leaders thus claimed that their IT project, which would be launched together with Telco East, was a concrete example of global integration, which at the time had not yet been put into practice by corporate HQ. Thus, the Telco North leaders emphasized and elevated the division’s significance and importance in the corporate context, by positioning itself as a potential “best practice” from which all other subsidiaries could learn.

Latching on to the global integration agenda at the corporate level and bringing in another subsidiary allowed Telco North to draw on resources from other divisions, such as technological resources and competences in global and regional integration. It set up a collaborative project to work on the new shared IT system with a larger pool of resources and expertise. *“If you create platforms where you push headquarter guys not to remotely observe the process, but to be very actively engaged and present in the process—to be actively collaborating and contributing to the delivery—then ... the dynamics of the transformation change completely.”* Through the collaboration with Telco East and the connection with the corporate change agenda, Telco North obtained necessary capabilities and resources as well as shared risk. *“It’s Telco North experts, Telco East experts and the corporate HQ experts joining the forces on this common thing. It’s not only one country trying to discover the new world, but there’s actually few others joining the forces. So it’s exciting.”*

Finally, the divisional leaders connected the rebranding projects to previous subsidiary strategy, emphasizing customer service. *“[We] used to be perceived to be best in customer service and ... had taken a clear position in the market on customer service. So ... very many of our employees will connect to this, oh yes. Wonderful, now we’ll somehow be allowed to be good again. Until now [previous divisional leaders] have downsized, cut services and the service levels all the time as well ... we have scaled back our ability to train staff to provide service.”*

Divisional leaders stressed that employees had felt that they had been forced to cut back on customer service for many years. Yet the transformation would present an opportunity to again provide excellent services. Thus, the divisional leaders connected current change initiatives to legacy in an attempt to engage employees and ensure high-quality deliveries in result. They hoped that doing so would mobilize employees' historical pride in being a leading company in customer service and loyalty in their market, and indeed our data from the middle management level confirmed such an effect.

In summary, divisional leaders engaged in strategic sensemaking activities in various well-known ways, but they also undertook other activities that were important for stakeholder commitment and capacity to move change forward. Divisional leaders connected their change agenda with various stakeholders within the MNE. These connections provided them with the necessary capacity, in the form of commitment, legitimacy, and support, to launch the ambitious transformation strategy. Table 3 provides an overview of the activities divisional leaders engaged in during this first period as well as the next two periods.

Insert Table 3 about here

T2: Excessive Change

Organizational Context: Fragmented Sensemaking and Disconnected Leadership

Nine months later, in February 2014, Telco North was in the midst of implementing its transformation strategy. The rebranding project was well underway, scores of IT systems had been “killed off”, and the subsidiary had completed two rounds of downsizing. Nevertheless, some organization members, including some of the central project members and change agents, began questioning the progress and leadership of change. They explained that there were too

many parallel changes and several delays in deliveries of results. Although the divisional leaders still expressed the same ambitions for change, different perspectives on the risks involved began to surface, and there were different opinions within the divisional leadership team on the measures necessary to move forward. One divisional leader wanted to slow down and take a step back to examine change dilemmas and concerns at different leadership levels, while another stressed the importance of keeping the momentum and making necessary adjustments during implementation. Some employees had professed concerns about the different leadership styles adopted by newly appointed divisional and change project leaders coming from outside Northern Europe. Consequently, the divisional leadership appeared increasingly fragmented and disconnected from the rest of the organization. At the same time, the market situation remained highly competitive with low profitability, and corporate HQ was pushing the division to deliver on its promised ambitions. To deal with the pressing situation, divisional leaders made several moves to reconnect the different parts of the organization and create a shared understanding. One important move was to streamline and simplify the change agenda.

Change Content: From Multiple Changes to Two Key Programs

The many parallel change projects were bundled into two larger programs: *Brand*, which incorporated the branding- and marketing-related changes, and *Techno*, which incorporated the technological and IT-related changes. In addition, Techno was ramped up and expanded to include additional people and even higher ambitions.

Strategic Sensemaking Activities and Reassembling Change Initiatives

In addition to *reassembling* the many changes into two main programs, divisional leaders worked intensely in the division to reconnect various leadership levels with the rest of the organization. Various internal stakeholder groups were influenced as divisional leaders *set the scene* and *performed the conversation*. In the following subsections, we describe how, through these activities, divisional leaders secured commitment and resources to move from fragmented

sensemaking and disconnected leadership to a shared understanding of the main change goals and commitment to move forward.

Reassembling the change initiatives by bundling them into two key programs. Divisional leaders simplified the change message by bundling the many initiatives into two key programs. One of the divisional leaders used a large sheet of brown paper (see Figure 2) to illustrate the need for clarifying communication of the change story. *“I had a big brown paper on the wall here [with all the change projects]. It got too complex for the organization. I used the brown paper to scare [the rest of the] leadership group into simplifying – to go from PowerPoint to a simple message. In a sense, I used it by saying, ‘take a look at the craziness’.”*

Insert Figure 2 about here

Moreover, the divisional leaders saw a need to provide more clarity in the strategy by reducing the many change initiatives: *“We were supposed to take a service position (in the marketplaces) and we managed to bundle everything we do regarding branding, and everything we do regarding service and deliveries within our ‘go-to-market’ strategy, which we named Brand”*. Consequently, the purpose of reassembling the change initiatives into two main programs was to simplify the change message and illustrate how different strategic initiatives were connected internally as well as with the corporate change agenda. *“This works out much better now because we are clearer about what we are supposed to be for our customers, what kind of position we would like to take, and what kind of products, services and service concepts we are supposed to launch in 2014 in order to succeed with the strategy.”*

Setting the scene and performing the conversation. The disconnected organization was reconnected by revamping involvement and ownership at the middle management level. Again, divisional leaders carefully *set the scene and performed the conversation*. Weekly “white board”

meetings were adopted, at which the two main change programs were presented and discussed with subsidiary middle managers. The meetings created a shared understanding of the situation, the current results, and how to manage performance and change: *“Here we have managed to ... create that platform ... for alignment”*. Project deliveries, change challenges, and leadership capabilities to handle challenges became more transparent. A common understanding of progress and performance was developed: *“Everyone gets an overview of how the organization is doing and the most important project, and they can tell the same story when they return to their units”*. The meetings also contributed to ensuring that the right resources were made available for the two programs: *“We have included the transformation activities in the weekly meeting. If there are any misunderstandings, we can quickly establish contact between managers. It’s not just about providing information, it’s also about ensuring action where there’s not enough momentum”*. As this quote suggests, if one of the prioritized projects lacked resources or capabilities, additional resources were allocated or existing ones were reallocated. A training program was introduced for middle management, which, in addition to developing competences in change management and facilitating a shared understanding among middle managers, provided senior management with feedback from the middle.

The divisional leaders also continued to communicate the purpose and goals of the transformation program to employees through a series of town hall meetings and business-unit gatherings. One divisional leader explained: *“You simply have to engage the employees; they have to understand what this story is about. And they should not only read about it, because when they read about it, they construct individual interpretations which might be different from the one [the company] is trying to convey. So what I have done with my management team [is to] walk the talk and tell the story multiple times”*. Another divisional leader talked to his employees about the implications change had for the culture and behavior at all levels of the organizations: *“I am*

out there, in the divisions, meeting with 130–140 employees. I talk about three things: business transformation, values and behavior, and change management”.

Thus, divisional leaders *set the scene* by creating formal and informal arenas for sensemaking at different levels within the organization and *performed the conversation* by simplifying the change message and targeting it to the specific audience, as well as securing feedback. Although most of the strategic sensemaking activities at this time were directed internally to handle the disconnected organization, there was also continuous dialogue with corporate HQ: *“It’s not like we have been given an unlimited amount of support forever [from HQ]. Almost every single month through all kinds of meetings, steering committees, business reviews and other arenas, we have to reiterate on progress the development, the challenges, the risks you know and things we have delivered on.... We have to work to maintain the support. In that sense it’s about telling the story over and over, being inspiring, clear about the vision. And proving along the way that we are going in that direction, and that is the right direction because we are showing partial results”.*

In summary, once multiple changes were being implemented, capacity-related challenges having to do with perceptions of excessive change and reduced commitment and support within the division emerged. Divisional leaders created capacity to move forward by bundling the many local change initiatives into two key programs and by continuing to connect some of the local changes with corporate ones. In addition, the divisional leaders continuously engaged in well-known strategic sensemaking activities at multiple levels within the subsidiary, such as clarifying the responsibilities and resource allocation and training and supporting the change agents at various organizational levels. In contrast with T1, when divisional leaders were attentive to discursive aspects, visuals took on an increasingly important role to create a shared understanding of actions, results, and priorities (for an overview of activities during T2, see Table 3).

T3: Mission (Im)possible?

Organizational Context: External Shocks and Influences

Approximately 12 months later, in February 2015, some of the ongoing change initiatives were altered, and new changes that were driven by external demands emerged. First, owing to cost and control concerns, the most radical and ambitious program (Techno) was subject to an audit by MNE HQ in the fall of 2014, after which MNE HQ took ownership and control of it. Second, in December 2014, MNE HQ announced that Telco North would enter into a joint venture (JV) with a competitor in response to the competitive local market. Naturally, these moves created increased uncertainty among employees and managers not only about their future possibilities within the merged company but also about the future of the ongoing change initiatives. Thus, divisional leaders faced a situation of increasing uncertainty, a demanding ongoing transformation, an extremely challenging market situation, a JV demanding resources for preparatory integration work, substantial pressure from corporate HQ, and limited resources. The divisional leadership group described the situation as “mission impossible”. After several downsizing processes, there was “no fat left on the body”. One divisional leader explained the strained resource situation as follows: “*Techno is about to eat all available resources, which is natural when you do a big launch. But on top of this we need to take some of our best people to deliver the best for this JV integration ... and that is really a challenge. So, it’s ... very demanding because we have a lot of uncertainty on all levels. I don’t know if I have a job, but I’ve lived with that uncertainty for years, but people down in the organization they can only see ... 86.078.871 EURO [illustrating a huge number] in synergies - that must mean less jobs.... [They ask themselves,] ‘Oh, do I have a job next year? I don’t know’*”. The main capacity issue at this time was therefore tied to increased uncertainty coupled with decreased resources. In this challenging situation, divisional leaders created capacity for change by honing in on the

prestigious change program Techno and connecting it with the JV, thereby protecting it while everything else was in flux.

Change Content: Connecting New Changes with Pet Program

At T3, the Brand program had been completed and demobilized, but several other changes were pursued in the subsidiary during the second half of 2014. The divisional leadership group was again reorganized, and a new leader was put in charge of the Techno project. In contrast with the previous leader, who was young, had international experience, and had an entrepreneurial background, the new leader boasted more than 30 years of experience at Telco North, which was deemed important to ensure sufficient legitimacy within the broader MNE to move forward with Techno. When MNE HQ announced the JV with the competitor, an integration project charged with planning and preparing for organizational integration was established. Some of the key change agents responsible for implementing the transformation strategy, and the Techno project in particular, were assigned to the integration project to ensure sufficient influence on the merged organization.

Strategic Sensemaking Activities and Reassembling Change

To handle the external shock of the JV and the constraints this posed on resources, divisional leaders made two main moves. First, as described previously, they connected the new integration project tightly to Techno, thereby maintaining the focus on the IT program (which was now heavily supported and controlled by corporate HQ) and thus protecting it from becoming overshadowed by the JV. Second, they communicated to their middle management the important change agent role they would need to take on for the subsidiary to succeed with the transformation agenda, which they now referred to as “mission possible”.

Reassembling change initiatives by connecting and protecting. In their internal communications, divisional leaders were quite clear on their priorities: the main focus would be on Techno. They argued that successful implementation of Techno would be the ticket into the

JV, and therefore they linked their pet project to the JV: *“We know exactly what we need to deliver on. We have to deliver Techno on deadline. We have to keep the motivation on top, and we have to deliver on the plans for the JV in a way that allows us to maintain commitment and motivation. Our people want to be a part of this new era, but there’s enormous pressure to communicate our position”*. Divisional leaders stressed the importance of completing the Techno project as planned: *“The project leader is quite close to the people, so what he’s doing ... is to have breakfast meetings with employees. He takes 10–15 employees, three times a week, different employees ... and then he asks questions, [they] talk about anything. And I mean, that’s one of the ways he tries to get people involved, and get the frustration from everybody and into how we should manage the program, and do the plan”*. Moreover, they argued that the Techno project would be a key capability Telco North could bring into the merged company to secure a technological infrastructure that was in line with future telecommunications operating models. Delivering on Techno would also ensure that people from Telco North were guaranteed positions in the merged company. Consequently, several organizational decisions were made to support the JV, such as putting key people with in-depth knowledge of Techno in the integration project.

Setting the scene and performing the conversation. To build commitment and continued momentum among Telco North’s middle management, divisional leaders organized a management gathering. In their communication, divisional leaders spoke about hard work and collaboration at the various divisional leadership levels, as well as transparency in strategic priorities and resource allocations. This *mission possible* meeting aimed to create a foundation for increased reflection on dilemmas and how to handle them. Divisional leaders advocated close collaboration across organizational and leadership levels.

In summary, when external shock and extensive corporate HQ control put resource constraints on the subsidiary, the divisional leaders developed capacity by making tough decisions among the various change initiatives and reassembling by protecting and connecting the most

important ones. The ambitious and prestigious IT program Techno was protected and given top priority to bring value to the JV. Furthermore, divisional leaders continued to engage in strategic sensemaking by setting the direction and modeling behavior, signaling their own willingness to work hard to reach their transformation goals (for an overview, see Table 3). In this way, sufficient capacity to move multiple changes forward at that particular point in time was developed.

Aftermath. After leaving the field, we continued to follow the situation in the media and periodically consulted our main contact person for updates. In mid-2015, the European Competition Authorities signaled that the JV would negatively affect the competitive situation in the local market, leading the two firms to absolve their plans for a merger. The Techno program was implemented as planned at Telco North, but it exceeded the expected time and cost frames. Techno has not yet been adopted by any other division in the MNE, including Telco East. In retrospect, opinions differ regarding the success of the transformation and implementation of multiple changes in Telco North. As is often the case in such complex processes, its success depends on whom you ask (Vaara 2002). Nevertheless, our analysis illustrates how the divisional leaders made the mission possible by continuously attending to emerging capacity challenges through the reassembling of change initiatives and strategic sensemaking activities.

DISCUSSION: DEVELOPING CHANGE CAPACITY

Our analysis illustrates the multiple change context within which divisional leaders operate. It shows how various change initiatives morph and interact over time and across levels, with some change projects gaining traction and valence and others becoming less significant. Although change projects may appear to take on a life of their own, our study demonstrates the important role of divisional leaders in this situation. In this section, we present our emerging model illustrating how divisional leaders develop capacity for multiple changes (see Figure 3). The

model shows that divisional leaders are faced with dual pressures for change: pressure from their local market and pressure from the corporate HQ level. This dual pressure causes capacity-related challenges. Divisional leaders engage in various activities to develop a shared understanding and sufficient resources and to secure commitment to move changes forward. Some of these activities are well-known from existing research, such as strategic sensemaking (setting the scene and performing the conversation), while another set of activities emerged through our inductive analysis: the assembling and reassembling change initiatives. These two sets of activities are interrelated and, together, create change capacity in the form of shared understanding and sufficient resources. However, capacity for change is only a temporary situation. Over time, new capacity-related challenges can emerge, either as a result of previous processes or from external shocks creating resource strains, leading divisional leaders to again engage in strategic sensemaking and the reassembling of change projects. Below we discuss each component in the model in more detail.

Insert Figure 3 about here

The dual pressures for change occur because of the combination of corporate-driven changes and change initiatives aiming to combat the local market situation. Idiosyncrasies within the local market may lead the division to embark on change initiatives that are distinct from the rest of the corporation. Even when the global and local markets attempt to respond to similar external pressures, such as increasing intensity of competition, shifting customer demands, and/or increasing efficiency demands, the changes initiated to respond to external demands are not always entirely aligned across HQ–subsidiary levels. Consequently, divisional leaders face dual demands, leading them to be particularly exposed to multiple changes.

Our findings highlight two distinct capacity-related challenges that emerge in situations of multiple changes. First, divisional leaders find that they have insufficient financial or human resources to handle multiple changes while attending to daily operations, which we label as a lack of resources. Second, divisional leaders and employees experience an overwhelming situation because of the many parallel and overlapping changes, which we label as excessive change (see Stensaker, Meyer, Falkenberg, & Haueng 2002). Excessive change involves feelings of chaos, loss of overview, and fragmented or disconnected leadership.

To solve the capacity-related challenges, divisional leaders engage in two sets of activities: strategic sensemaking and reassembling change initiatives. As Roleau and Balogun (2011) suggest, strategic sensemaking promotes and secures the implementation of change by creating a shared understanding. This is achieved by bringing together key stakeholders (setting the scene) and drawing on language that mobilizes and creates commitment in the various stakeholder groups (performing the conversation). Previous research has examined these activities at the individual level, but our study suggests that they also apply to the group and organizational levels. Our findings show that divisional leaders manage extensively upward, downward, and horizontally to secure support and capacity for multiple changes. The upward orientation is conducive to strategic issue selling, as Dutton and Ashford (1993) described, but the processes through which it takes place differ somewhat. Dutton and Ashford illustrated how middle managers sell strategic issues to top management during the strategy formulation phase in which issues are supposed to be identified and diagnosed. By contrast, our study shows how middle managers latch on to an already-formulated corporate agenda, by connecting their own transformation agenda with the corporate strategy. In addition, while prior research has emphasized the discursive and political aspects (Roleau & Balogun 2011), our study shows how change agents extensively mobilize visual tools (e.g. charts, brown wall paper, white boards) to influence sensemaking and create a shared understanding at the collective level.

The second capacity-related activity involves assembling and reassembling various change projects. Our analysis shows that while the multiple change context creates capacity-related challenges, it also provides possibilities. Divisional leaders can draw on and exploit a portfolio of multiple change initiatives in opportunistic ways. Specifically, our findings suggest that this can be done in three distinct ways: (1) by *connecting* local change projects with corporate ones, (2) by *bundling* various change projects together, or (3) by *protecting* specific change projects. Connecting local change projects with the change agenda of others within the broader corporation can add momentum, traction, and value to a local change initiative, while connecting local changes with *corporate ones (or other divisions)* can provide capacity in the form of added resources. This is conducive to the notion of creating interdependences (Ciabuschi, Perna, & Snehota 2012), a key aspect in resource assemblage theory that states that opportunity is built through collective action and cocreation. The resources necessary to act on new situations or opportunities (or create capacity) may be external (Håkansson, Ford, Gadde, Snehota, & Waluszewski 2009), suggesting that those who assemble resources must have the ability to connect various internal and external resources. This is not simply a structural activity, but also a social endeavor requiring skills in systems thinking. Connecting divisional changes with the corporate agenda provides capacity beyond the immediate resources however, as it also provides legitimacy in the form of added importance and status-based value. Connecting current changes with *legacy* provides a different type of legitimacy tied to meaning and a long-term rationale rather than status-based value. Connecting local changes with corporate ones or history will be effective if the capacity-related challenges are tied to a lack of resources. *Bundling* change projects together works in a different manner. Here, the key mechanism involves simplifying and consolidating the change agenda and clarifying how various changes are linked together. This is also a structural activity that includes communicative aspects. Bundling will be effective if employees are experiencing changes as chaotic and excessive. Finally, *protecting* one or a few

specific change initiatives allows divisional leaders to communicate a focus of resources and attention. In our study, we found that connecting and protecting functioned together to allow focused use of key resources in a particularly turbulent period when external changes imposed substantial constraints on resources. Thus, this form of reassembling attends to extreme resource constraints coupled with excessive change by making tough and clear prioritizations. In summary, by assembling and reassembling change initiatives in these three ways (potentially also through a combination of these), divisional leaders mobilize resources and develop a shared understanding that provides them with capacity for change.

However, as illustrated in the process model, capacity is only temporary. By attending to one type of capacity-related challenge, divisional leaders may create new and different capacity-related challenges. What creates capacity at one point in time may therefore have different long-term effects and create path dependencies that influence later stages in the process. For example, we found that to get the transformation going, multiple changes were launched, and corporate HQ was intentionally involved. While this created capacity at one point in time, it later led to excessive change. Further down the road, the corporate support that was important in the early phase became problematic. The corporate attention divisional leaders pleaded for early on later came back to haunt them, when corporate HQ moved in and took control of the most important project. Nevertheless, by again reassembling, divisional leaders were able to create capacity even when they were heavily controlled and challenged. The temporary nature of capacity relates to several aspects of resource assemblage theory. According to this theory, a resource is only a resource in relation to a specific situation or action (Ciabuschi et al. 2012), and resources are never fully controlled or owned by any one party (Håkansson & Waluszewski 2002).

Importantly, the model does not suggest a generic set of phases, moving from lack of resources to excessive change and back to lack of resources. Instead, the process is driven by a combination of internal and external forces. Thus, the bundling we observed during T2 did not in

and of itself cause the situation we observed in T3. The severely strained resources during T3 occurred despite the attempts to simplify and were largely influenced by external shocks. A better understanding of how capacity-related challenges emerge and are handled requires knowledge of how internal processes and external pressures function together.

CONCLUSION

We set out to explore how divisional leaders handle multiple changes and, more specifically, the dual pressure of implementing corporate change initiatives in parallel with more local division-specific change. While middle management literature has addressed the challenges of being both a change recipient and a change agent, it has not specifically assessed how middle managers develop capacity to handle multiple changes. We examined higher-level middle managers (divisional leaders in an MNE subsidiary) and found that in addition to creating a shared understanding and commitment to change through strategic sensemaking activities, they acquired the necessary resources and developed capacity to handle multiple changes by assembling and reassembling change initiatives. Therefore, our findings extend current knowledge on divisional leaders' role during strategic change and show how they may take on change agency and systematically develop capacity for multiple changes, both those initiated internally and those coming from the corporate level. We contribute to the existing literature in three important ways.

First, in contrast with linear and stepwise process models focusing on one specific change, our study empirically illustrates how multiple organizational change projects coexist, interact, and influence one another over time. Although the strategic change literature acknowledges that organizations tend to pursue several parallel and overlapping changes (Pettigrew & Whipp 1991; Ven de Ven & Poole 1995; Stensaker et al. 2002), empirical studies rarely report on this, but instead tend to emphasize one particular change initiative, without acknowledging how other parallel changes might influence the focal initiative. Yet divisional leaders in particular must be

able to handle multiple changes. Although the multiple change context may appear overwhelming and complex, it also equips divisional leaders with the ability to connect and disconnect change projects in ways that not only provide energy and build understanding and commitment for change but also create the necessary resources.

Second, we offer new insights into how divisional leaders achieve their change goals by purposefully assembling and reassembling change projects across organizational levels. In doing so, we extend extant research that suggests that middle managers influence change by setting the scene and performing the conversation (Rouleau & Balogun 2011) by adding another important activity—the assembling and reassembling of change initiatives—and describing how this structural and social activity can provide divisional leaders with the capacity necessary to handle multiple changes.

Third, our study illustrates how different capacity-related challenges emerge over time in a continuous process. Previous research has not sufficiently paid attention to the temporal dimension and how differential challenges emerge over time. We argue that any capacity that is generated will only be temporary, as by resolving one particular challenge, management potentially creates new challenges that subsequently need to be resolved. In addition, new pressures for change will emerge both externally and internally, from corporate and divisional levels.

We developed our model of how divisional leaders can develop capacity for multiple changes through a study of one MNE, and thus it cannot immediately be transferred to other organizational contexts. Although we believe that our findings are applicable more generally to large multidivisional firms, this remains to be proved. Future research should explore whether similar capacity-related challenges can be handled through assembling and reassembling also in other organizational contexts: whether the same types of capacity-related challenges emerge and whether there are additional ways change initiatives can be assembled and reassembled.

Our study has important practical implications, as it shows how divisional leaders can mobilize into creative and committed change agents. Rather than resisting changes coming from above, through various means divisional leaders can develop capacity to deal with dual pressures of change. For example, they can proactively draw on corporate changes to move their own change agendas forward. Adopting this role requires that divisional leaders are given a certain degree of autonomy and room to maneuver. Only then can they assemble and reassemble changes in ways that create the necessary capacity.

Furthermore, our study illustrates how divisional leaders can create connections across divisional borders and organizational levels. This requires an understanding of the larger system, emergent processes, and how to maneuver within these. While previous research has emphasized the discursive and political skills required to set the scene and perform the conversation (Roleau & Balogun 2011), we show that divisional leaders also need skills and capabilities to effectively operate in loosely coupled systems to find and create connections across boundaries and change initiatives. However, reassembling change projects does not in and of itself create capacity, unless it is communicated in an adequate manner to the right people through strategic sensemaking activities. Taken together, these two sets of activities release resources and capacity.

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Figure 1: Multiple changes in Telco North

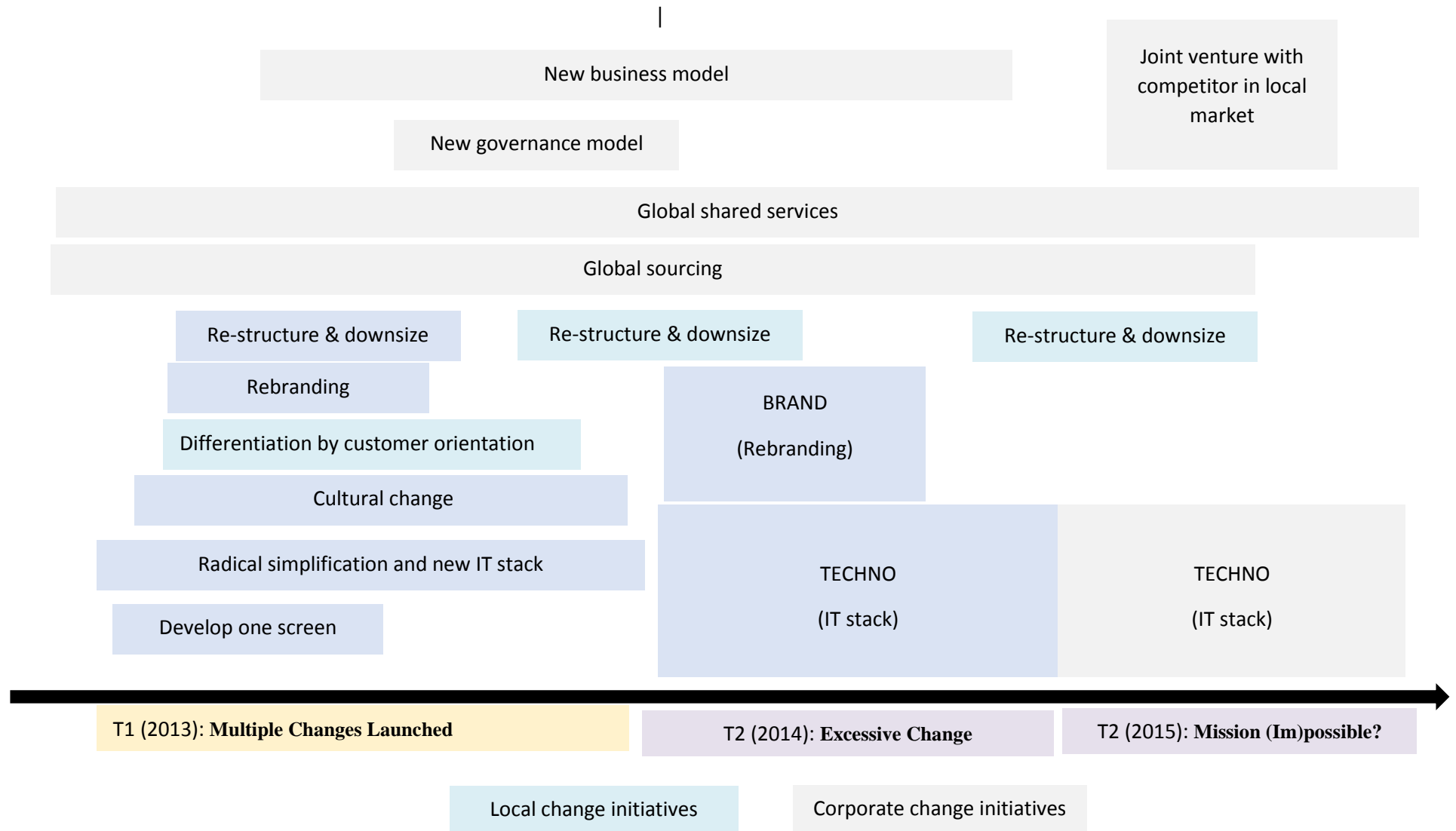


Figure 2: War room at T1

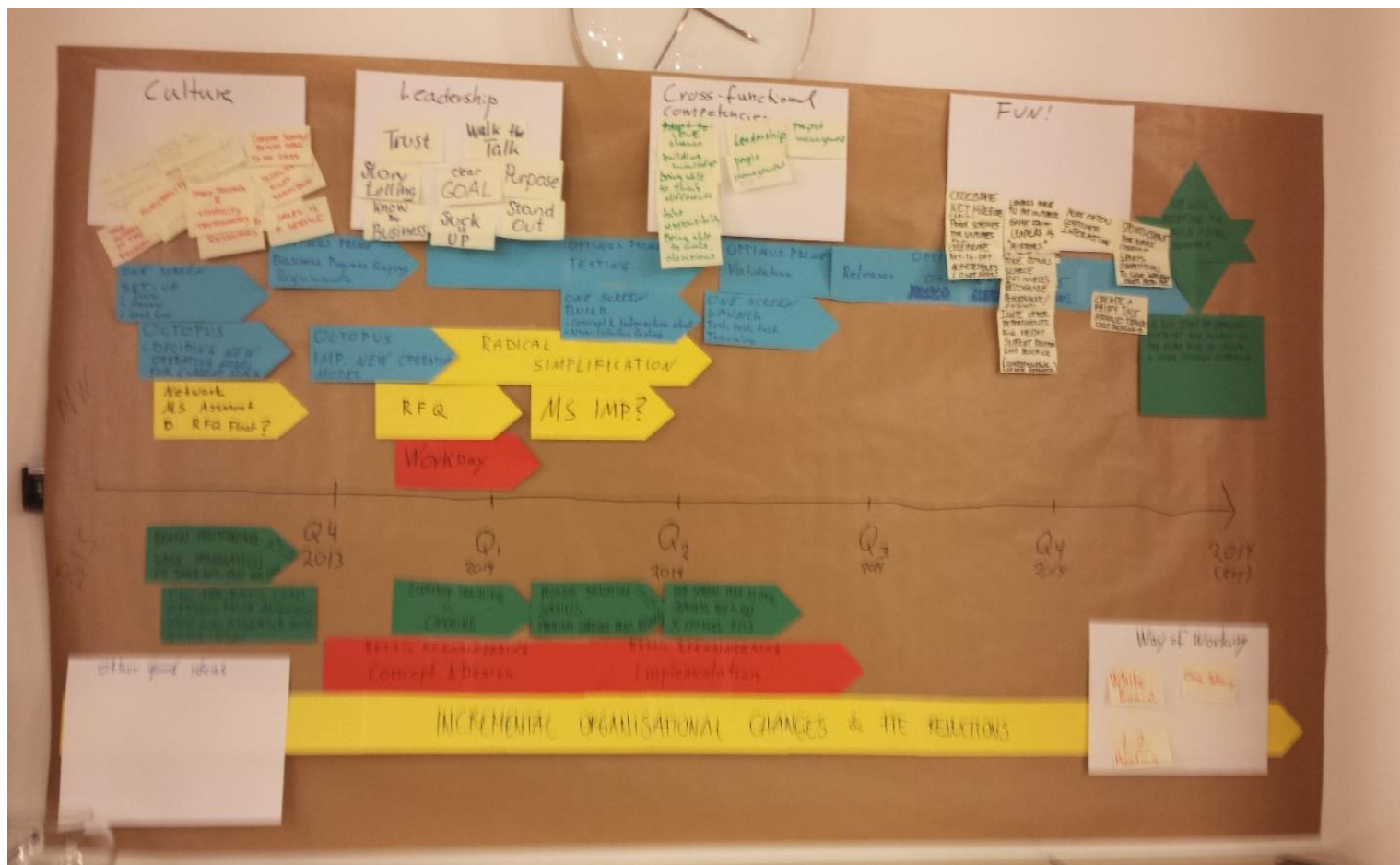


Figure 3: A process model of how divisional leaders develop capacity for multiple changes

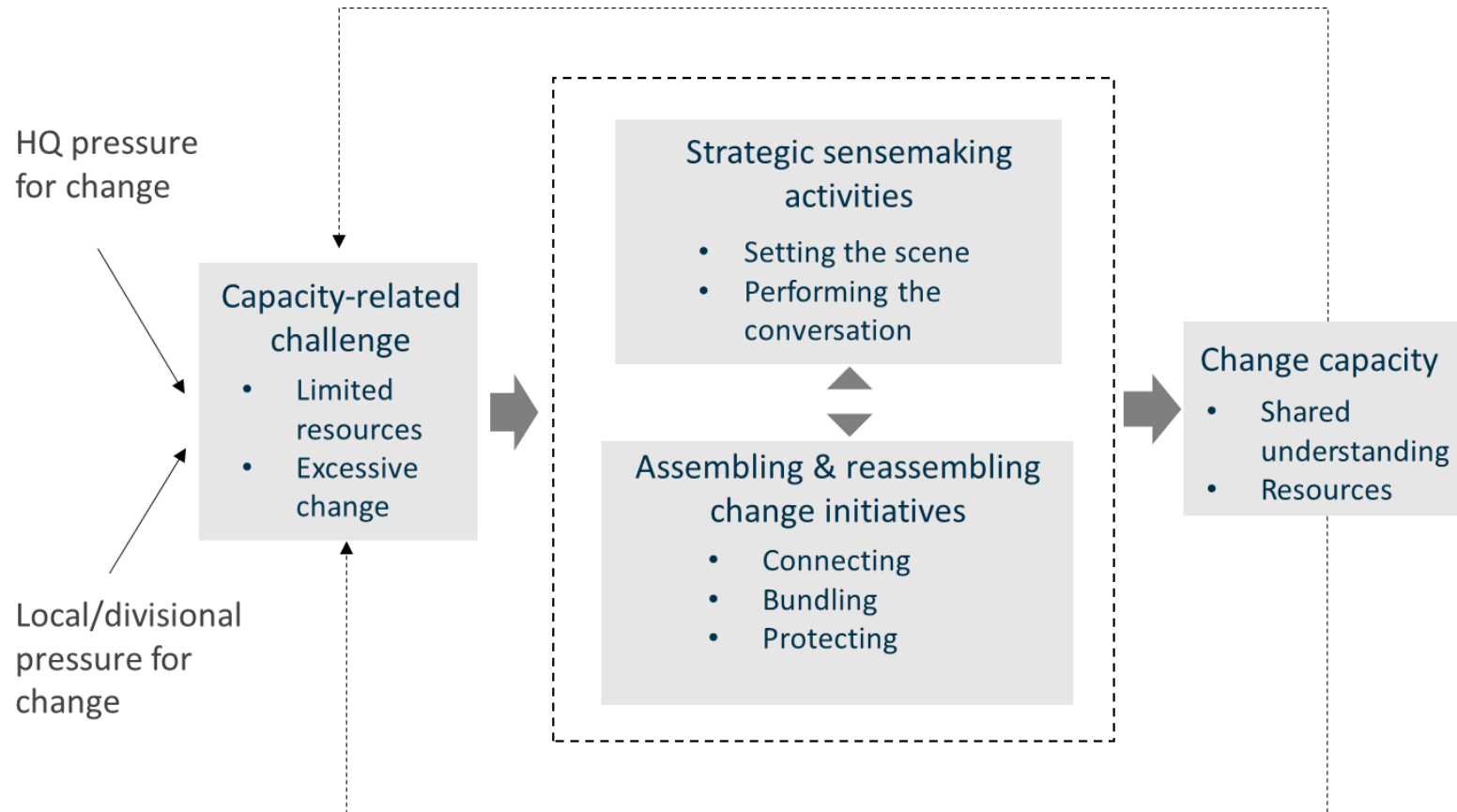


Table 1: Data collection overview

	T1: May 2013	T2: February 2014	T3: February 2015
Interviews	4 divisional top managers 5 divisional middle managers	5 divisional top managers 1 divisional middle manager	4 divisional top managers 15 divisional middle managers
Observations	“War room” with a large number of subsidiary change initiatives posted on wall	War room. Changes bundled and well-organized. Visuals (e.g. charts in cafeteria where old IT systems were “killed”) Kickoff meeting held by CEO rallying internal support for change	Leadership summit where the phrase “mission possible” was coined.
Documents	Divisional strategic plans and presentations Media coverage	Divisional plans and presentations Media coverage	Media coverage

Table 2: Overview and description of changes in Telco North at T1

Change initiatives	Initiated by	Description	Expressed rationale behind changes
Restructure and downsize	Divisional leaders	New organizational structure and divisional leadership team emphasizing marketing Reduce numbers of employees	Enable and support transformation Cost-reduction
Rebranding	Divisional leaders	Move the market from a sole focus on price to increased customer loyalty. Relevant content – premium brand. Including offering new products, new devices (e.g. iPad) that support the new position.	Need new points of differentiation Cannot compete on price
Differentiation by customer orientation	Divisional leaders	From cost-leader to differentiation: customer service and quality	Need new points of differentiation
Cultural change	Divisional leaders	Change the mindset in the organization	Engagement
Develop one screen	Divisional leaders	Seamless unique interface. Real-time customer information presented in the same interface for both the customer and the employees	Efficient sharing of information between the different channels
Radical simplification & new IT stack	Divisional leaders	Simplify products & services. Reduce IT systems portfolio from 450 to 10–20 systems. New enterprise architecture	Simplicity Cost-reductions and more flexible enterprise architecture
New business model	Corporate HQ	Offer new products/services and product plans concentrated on use of data rather than SMS and voice	Developments in the marketplace
Change in governance model	Corporate HQ	Adjust governance model to better fit cross-national integration and collaboration	Changes in strategy require adjusted governance model
Global shared services	Corporate HQ	Integrate service activities on a global scale	Leverage scale and save cost
Global sourcing	Corporate HQ	Integrate sourcing activities on a global scale	Leverage scale and save cost

Table 3: How divisional leaders create capacity for multiple changes

	Multiple changes launched in the subsidiary	Excessive change	Mission (im)possible?
Organizational context	<p>New divisional leaders set out to embark on radical transformation.</p> <p>Limited attention paid to corporate change initiatives.</p> <p>Views the division as autonomous, but lacking in resources and capacity for change. Need to get corporate level management to support local transformation.</p>	<p>The large number of changes initiated creates somewhat of a chaos in the organization. A number of elements are changed simultaneously, including two rounds of downsizing.</p> <p>Corporate level plays an increasingly important role in the change narratives within the subsidiary.</p>	<p>A JV with competitor in the local market announced by corporate HQ.</p> <p>Corporate HQ takes control over Techno due to high risk of project, perceived lack of control, and increasing importance to HQ.</p> <p>Serious strain on local management due to challenging IT change at the same time as new change initiatives related to JV, while subsidiary has downsized so has fewer people.</p>
Change initiatives	<p>Corporate-level initiatives: New business model, new governance structure, integrate sourcing and shared services</p> <p>Subsidiary transformation: Restructure and downsizing, rebranding, differentiation by customer orientation, radical simplification, develop one screen, new IT-stack, cultural change, and initial restructuring with new CEO.</p>	<p>Change agenda is streamlined into two main programs to simplify and consolidate: Brand (rebranding project) and Techno (IT project)</p> <p>Other change initiatives are either incorporated into the two main change programs or put on hold.</p>	<p>New JV integration project launched.</p> <p>Techno continues with increased effort.</p>
Strategic sensemaking activities	<p><i>Setting the scene and performing the conversation by HQ support, engaging the divisional leaders and middle managers, and motivating the employees</i></p> <p>Setting the scene: -Invite HQ managers to workshop and HQ people into projects.</p>	<p><i>Setting the scene and performing the conversation by mobilizing middle management and engaging employees and corporate.</i></p> <p>Setting the scene : -Establish a more transparent project management. -Introducing a change management program.</p>	<p><i>Setting the scene and performing the conversation by engaging middle management and employees.</i></p> <p>Setting the scene: -Senior managers put in key positions in the subsidiary to regain legitimacy internally as well as within larger corporation.</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Invite subsidiary team to workshops and middle managers to workshops. - Mobilize employees through storytelling -Develop new competences related to customer service. <p>Performing the conversation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Communicate subsidiary strategy and financial implications and improvements to HQ management. - Collaborate on creating and communicating the strategy at different management levels. -Focus on customer service rather than cost (aligned with historic foundation). -Argue that experiences with the transformation will be valuable also for those who may lose their jobs. -Communicate a strategic story that emphasizes emotional aspects for internal use. 	<p>Performing the conversation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Secure transparence, efficient resource allocation, and balance between transformation and daily operations. <p>Continue to push the connection with the corporate change agenda.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Continue to communicate the purpose and status of the transformation journey to the employees. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Key people with in-depth knowledge of Techno positioned in the integration project. -Invite senior and middle management to leadership gathering (mission possible). <p>Performing the conversation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Communicate importance of maintaining focus on Techno. Argued as key to influence the JV and presented as the most valuable capability the subsidiary can bring into JV. Will ensure that people from subsidiary are guaranteed positions in merged company. -Engage middle management staff in the change journey (mission possible).
<p>Assembling and reassembling change initiatives</p>	<p>Assembling local transformation initiative by connecting with the corporate agenda</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Connecting the local transformation agenda onto corporate HQ change agenda. -Connecting another subsidiary to their radical transformation journey - Connecting to legacy of excellent customer services. 	<p>Reassembling the change initiatives by bundling them into two key programs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Bundling the many change projects into two main programs to simplify communication about change. 	<p>Reassembling change initiatives by protecting the main program and connecting new changes with previous ones.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Protecting one particular change initiative. All resources are put into Techno. No other competing processes (aside from JV integration planning). -Protecting Techno by connecting it to JV.
<p>Creating capacity</p>	<p>Shared understanding:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Create understanding, legitimacy, and commitment from corporate-level management. -Develop shared understanding and <i>one voice</i> within subsidiary management team. -Develop shared understanding, support, & commitment within division at different middle management levels and from employees. 	<p>Shared understanding:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Develop a better understanding and commitment within the subsidiary at middle management level. -Maintain attention from HQ b/c radical change pursued “regionally”. -Develop a better understanding of the process among the employees. 	<p>Shared understanding:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Create understanding, commitment, and leadership capabilities at middle management level to continue efforts to succeed with Techno.

	Resources: -Obtain necessary resources to kick off the transformation strategy.	Resources: -Focus resources and attention on limited number of change projects and activities in a time of chaos internally. -Allows divisional managers and employees to implement change while maintaining operational focus.	Resources: -Focus on one change initiative provides clear priority for divisional leaders. -Focus resources and attention in a time of great uncertainty around potential JV.
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