

The Strategic Capabilities of Middle Managers in Achieving Organizational Ambidexterity

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Introduction

The role that middle managers play in the development and execution of organisational ambidexterity is underexplored despite a growing literature examining middle managers significance in strategy processes. As Radaelli & Sitton-Kent (2016) point out, much of the focus of attention is on senior executives and limited to specific functions, such as R&D. Burgess et al. (2015) argue that middle managers are critical for organizational ambidexterity because of their role as organizational connectors. Part of the problem is that interest in the middle manager is refracted through differing viewpoints and multiple foci. Early papers focused on the role of middle manager in the strategy process (Mintzberg, 1985; Floyd & Wooldridge, 2000; Dutton & Ashford, 1993). Other work has explored middle management's role in dynamic environments and in achieving organizational ambidexterity through strategic change (Balogun, 2003, 2006), strategy implementation and emergent strategies (Mintzberg, 1979; Balogun & Johnson, 2004) and aspects of organizational learning (Nonaka, 1988). Missing so far, is a holistic exploration of middle managers, their capabilities and how this links to the performance of organisational ambidexterity.

This paper sets out to address this gap. Through a systematic review of the literature, we assess current knowledge and locate, critically appraise, and synthesise, relevant research in relation to the relationship between the strategic role of the middle manager and the development of organisational ambidexterity. We then identify the capabilities needed by middle managers in organisational ambidexterity processes before discussing a holistic conceptual framework. We end by exploring the possibility of differing portfolios of middle manager capabilities dependent on varying structural characteristics of the organisation.

Defining Middle Management

McConville (2006) observed that middle management is often described in terms of what it is not, being neither scaled-down senior management, nor an enhanced form of supervision. Broadly speaking, a middle manager is someone "who is responsible for a business unit at the intermediate level of corporate hierarchy" (Uyterhoeven 1972, p. 136). This pinpoints middle managers hierarchically as "below the general manager's executive team and above the level of supervisor" (Heckscher, 1995, p. 9). Functionally, middle managers include those who give and receive direction (Stoker, 2006). Compared to senior managers, these managers are nearer to the operational front line but are sufficiently removed from day to day concerns that "they can see the big picture" (Huy, 2001, p. 73). More formally, Browne, et. al (2014) defined a middle manager as someone with managerial authority over an organisational unit, such as a department within a business, who has ongoing responsibilities, goals, and objectives specific to that department; but which are also aligned with the organization's overall strategy and vision.

Although difficult to delineate because of the range of roles involved, the work of middle managers incorporates three broad areas (Torrington & Weightman, 1987). *Administrative work* covering the routine and visible activities of information collection and distribution. *Technical work* relating to a manager's original trade or profession is important, not only for appreciating and detecting operational problems, but for reputational effect as an authority in the field of knowledge rather than simply being in authority. *Managerial work* recognises that persuading others into an opinion or course of action is also sometimes required (Torrington & Weightman, 1987). Here, confidence in middle managers ability to cope with uncertainties is necessary, both from seniors in delegating appropriate authority, and from subordinates in following a manager's lead (McConville, 2006).

Currie & Procter (2005) argue that, as markets have become more dynamic and predictability lower, the significance of the middle manager role in the strategy process has increased in several ways. In conceiving new ideas, middle managers supply contextual and technical knowledge as well as experience in shaping strategy (Dutton & Ashford, 1993). As Kanter (1982) remarks, "because middle managers have their fingers on the pulse of operations, they can also conceive, suggest, and set in motion new ideas that top managers may not have thought of." This centrality in their organizations' knowledge systems helps the middle manager to drive emergent processes of change and adaptation, acting as important catalysts for the bottom-up development of organizational capabilities (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Floyd & Wooldridge, 1999). Confronted with senior management strategic uncertainty, middle managers have broad scope for interpreting their responsibility for developing and implementing strategic initiatives as strategy becomes an adaptive process constructed from many individual decisions over time (Mintzberg, 1979; Sillince & Mueller, 2007).

The Strategic Capabilities of Middle Managers in Achieving Organizational Ambidexterity

Defining Organizational Ambidexterity

Raisch et al. (2009) noted that “the number of studies in leading management journals that explicitly refer to the ambidexterity concept increased from less than 10 in 2004 to more than 80 today”. Although popular across differing research domains, poor cross-fertilization has resulted in fragmented and contextualised views of ambidexterity (Simsek, 2009). Nonetheless, ‘ambidexterity’ commonly refers to the management of the seemingly contradictory processes of exploration and exploitation within the organisation (O’Reilly & Tushman, 2008). Exploitation and exploration processes compete for scarce resources and involve differing capabilities and activities within the organization; exploring is more time consuming, uncertain and has a longer time horizon than exploitation which is based on refining current knowledge and extending current competencies (March, 1991). The micro foundation of these processes is embedded in the skills, processes, procedures, organizational structures and decision rules of the organisation (O’Reilly & Tushman, 2008). Firms overemphasizing either exploration or exploitation, risk getting caught into failure or success traps (Levinthal & March, 1993), highlighting the need for paradoxical thinking in organizations to manage these opposing demands (Raisch et al., 2009; Jansen et al., 2008). However, as Gupta et al. (2006) points out: “although new consensus exists on the need for balance, there is considerably less clarity on how the balance is achieved”. Finding this balance is typically a role assigned to senior management. Benner & Tushman (2003) for example, have noted that exploratory units are typically small, decentralized, and with flexible control processes in contrast to exploitative units that are characteristically larger and with less flexible processes. The actions of senior management ensure strategic coherence and appropriate resource allocation (Lubatkin et al., 2006). Such action includes the crafting of a shared vision, contingency rewards and transformational leadership (Jansen et al., 2008). This can also include developing an organisational culture that tolerates and rewards differences while promoting the active involvement of members in building the organisation’s strategic goals (Wang & Rafiq, 2014).

Less often acknowledged is the contribution of middle managers in this balancing process. Jansen et al., (2008) argued for the use of cross-functional interfaces (such as liaison personnel, task forces and teams) as a means of enabling knowledge exchange within organizational units that manage exploration and exploitation. At the group level Fang et al., (2010), examined how exploration and exploitation can be successfully managed through semi-autonomous subunits with a small fraction of cross-group links such as inter-team liaison roles, personnel rotation or interdivisional task forces.

Strategic Capabilities of Middle Managers in Achieving Organizational ambidexterity

A systematic review¹ of all articles relevant to the focus on middle managers in the strategy processes in general and organizational ambidexterity specifically, yielded 98 journal articles published up to December 2015 for subsequent analysis. From this review, six strategic capabilities of middle managers pertinent to achieving organizational ambidexterity were identified: strategic sensemaking, political, administrative, learning, entrepreneurial and balancing capability. Capability, here, is defined as “the capacity to perform a particular activity in a reliable and at least minimally satisfactory manner” (Helfat & Winter, 2011). The six strategic capabilities are sketched briefly below.

1. Strategic Sensemaking

Strategic sensemaking refers to a range of processes which middle managers undertake to understand, interpret and communicate the strategic direction at varying organizational interfaces. Middle managers translate directions into strategies and values into behaviours (Jackson & Humble, 1994). This involves navigating reciprocal social processes that include both ‘sense making’ and ‘sense giving’. Sense-making captures a process of meaning construction and reconstruction through which managers understand, interpret, and create sense for themselves and others (Balogun & Johnson, 2004). Sense-giving reflects an allied process where managers attempt to influence strategic outcomes, to communicate their thoughts about the change to others, and to gain their support (Rouleau, 2005). Activity is multidirectional: upward to senior managers; horizontally across peers to make sense of strategy; and downward to aid their teams in making sense of the strategy and environment (Balogun, 2006; Balogun & Johnson 2004). Underlying this is a facility for communication. Middle managers are simultaneously involved in telling people the stories they wanted to hear about the strategic direction (translating), inscribing their

¹ For space reasons, a detailed account of the methods used for the systematic literature review, including the article search boundaries, inclusion and exclusion criteria, steps taken to screen the articles, and codes used to analyze the data is available upon request.

The Strategic Capabilities of Middle Managers in Achieving Organizational Ambidexterity

speeches and acts with appropriate socio-cultural codes to reinforce the meaning (overcoding), producing subjective and emotional effects around the change (disciplining), and providing a set of good reasons to adopt the direction (justifying) (Weick et al., 2005).

2. Political Capability

Organisations, as Narayanan & Fahey (1982) argue, are fundamentally political entities and so the process of making decisions is not exclusively rational and normative but also includes a political element. Successful managers use their power and influence to navigate the complex socio-political maze inside their corporations. Power here is meant in the broadest sense: it may be based on hierarchical position, access to resources, technical expertise, and/or centrality in a sociometric network of information (Day, 1994). Middle managers occupy potentially powerful positions as the “linking pins” of an organization, adapting and switching between various brokerage roles to influence strategic goals (Shi et al., 2009). In these positions, managers use their social capital to connect separate groups, stimulating collaboration and building alliances (Keys and Bell, 1982). Their location provides access to the information and resources needed to anticipate, prioritise and realise senior management’s often incompatible expectations (Glaser et al., 2015).

Administrative capability

Benner & Tushman (2003) argue that process management and administration is by its nature, essentially exploitative in seeking to reduce variance, increase efficiency and limit change. This can be achieved through formal, institutional, processes of control and the ability to work through such processes appear also to be mechanisms through which senior managers explores the strategic competence of middle managers (Fauré & Rouleau, 2011). Formal control need not necessarily direct managers only towards considerations of efficiency and performance. Marginson (2002) found that the design and use of the firm’s administrative systems shape middle managers perceptions of their role within the firm. Middle managers can utilise the embeddedness of formal processes in organizations to deploy opposing business processes to overcome the negative implications of legacy and core rigidities (Benner & Tushman, 2002).

3. Entrepreneurial

This is the ability of middle managers to identify, support and realise new opportunities. Teece (2012) emphasizes that entrepreneurial managers create markets and orchestrate and reconfigure resources to realize opportunities. Floyd & Wooldridge (1999) consider middle management as forming the locus of corporate entrepreneurship activities through identifying entrepreneurial opportunities, developing entrepreneurial initiatives, and renewing organizational capabilities. Middle managers are pivotal in acting as change agents, helping to find innovative solutions to problems, taking risks in implementation and learning from experience for the future (Burgess, 2013). In doing so, middle managers perform dual roles as both change implementers and change initiators (Wet al., 2018).

4. Learning

Learning refers to the ability of middle managers to nurture and develop a learning organization (Costanzo & Tzoumpa, 2008). Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995) cast middle managers as active knowledge brokers operating at the intersections of information flows across the organisation. Rather than passive recipients of information, middle managers help recognise knowledge gaps and act as communication agents across different teams and groupings in the organisation, helping to facilitate knowledge transfer and integration (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Participating in multiple conversations, middle managers foster a diverse learning process, making them the main agent in the development of organizational capabilities and renewal activities (Jackson & Humble, 1994). They add value by brokering organizational knowledge (i.e. of the external environment and strategic intent) and professional knowledge (i.e. of practice on the ground) in the development and implementation of strategy (Burgess & Currie, 2013).

5. Balancing Capability

Balancing refers to middle managers ability to find ways of facilitating exploration and exploitation activities as appropriate, at the operational level (Burgess et al. 2015). Balancing requires middle managers to deal with paradox (Van de Ven & Poole, 1988) and/or dilemmas (Knight & Paroutis, 2017) and “host contradictions” (Mom

The Strategic Capabilities of Middle Managers in Achieving Organizational Ambidexterity

et al., 2009: p. 813). As Currie & Procter (2005) notes, given their place in the organisation, the very nature of the role of middle managers is to manage the contradictory expectations of key stakeholders. Faced with role conflicts and ambiguities, managers navigate emergent contradictions by orchestrating the necessary trade-offs between exploration and exploitation, creating workable compromises (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2011).

Discussion: Towards a Conceptual Framework

The extant literature, from which the six middle manager capabilities are derived, predominantly discusses the individual capabilities in isolated contexts. Around half of the papers in the scope touched on different middle manager capabilities in their research, but few have examined possible interrelations as part of their studies. Notably, there is some consensus in the research that both sensemaking and balancing are social-political process (Hensmans, 2015; Beck & Plowman, 2009). In contrast, other scholars have concentrated particularly on the strategic renewal role of middle managers such as a focus on entrepreneurial skills as innovators and risk-takers (Burgess, 2013). Strategic frameworks in middle management research, especially with a view on the strategy process, usefully remind us of the value in adopting a more comprehensive and holistic view in examining the role of middle managers in meeting their environmental challenges of exploitation and exploration.

Floyd & Wooldridge's (2000) classic framework of middle manager roles for example, proposes four types of involvement in strategy: Championing Alternatives, Sensitizing Information, Facilitating Adaptability and Implementation of a deliberate strategy. These roles can be aligned with the six middle manager capabilities in organisational ambidexterity: Sensemaking ('they infuse information with meaning', 'these subjective interpretations may lay the groundwork for strategic change'), Political ('middle managers use information to promote their own agendas'), Administrative ('middle managers' efforts to deploy existing resources efficiently and effectively'), Learning ('middle managers facilitate learning'), Entrepreneurial ('middle managers select certain projects, nurture them with seed money, and when they prove successful, advocate them as new business opportunities'), and Balancing ('even in fairly stable situations, priorities must be revised as conditions evolve and new information unfolds').

Table 1: Ambidexterity profiles and middle managers capabilities

		Capabilities					
		Sensemaking	Political	Administrative	Entrepreneurial	Learning	Balancing
Ambidexterity	Structural	High	Very high	Low	High	High	High
	Temporal (a) explore-exploit	Very low	Low	Very high	Very low	Very low	Very low
	Temporal (b) exploit-explore	High	Low	Very high	High	High	Very low
	Contextual	Very high	Very low	Very low	Very high	Very high	Very high

Viewing the six middle managers capabilities collectively, highlights the range of activities associated with the pursuit of organisational ambidexterity. This suggests that an individual manager is unlikely to possess all the capabilities required, indicating that the pursuit of organisational ambidexterity is a collective act performed by middle managers with varying degrees of the six capabilities. Different managers are likely to exhibit differing tendencies towards exploration and exploitation. Moreover, differing combinations of the six capabilities are implied depending upon whether the focus is exploration or exploitation. This suggests the possibility that as the organisation moves from exploration to exploitation, different combinations of middle management capabilities come into play. One influencing factor here is organisational structure which, as it varies from centralised to decentralised authority, may give rise to a portfolio of ambidexterity possibilities. This is shown in Table 1. At one extreme, 'contextual', power and authority within the organisation is decentralised. Acting as autonomous units, there is less call on middle managers to have to deploy political and administrative skills in seeking resources and gaining agreement on action. Managers though still must engage with the other capabilities identified in pursuing exploration and exploitation activities. In contrast, 'temporal' indicates two scenarios of greater top

The Strategic Capabilities of Middle Managers in Achieving Organizational Ambidexterity

down, or more centralised, structures. These scenarios are built on the primary focus of the organisation, whether it be exploration or exploitation. When the focus is on exploitation, there is less call on the manager's political ability to influence the strategic direction of the organisation. Alternatively, when exploration is the attention of a centralised structure, managers administrative ability to coordinate and secure resources for discovery and innovation become more important. Finally, 'structural' illustrates an organisation deploying structures that are neither obviously centralised or decentralised. Under such structures, pursuing both exploration and exploitation activities requires almost all of middle managers capabilities. Exceptionally, there is less need for middle managers administrative capability because the requirement for homogeneity and control is reduced.

The Strategic Capabilities of Middle Managers in Achieving Organizational Ambidexterity

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The Strategic Capabilities of Middle Managers in Achieving Organizational Ambidexterity

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