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Identifying the challenges remote middle managers face

Stephanie Diaz

IDENTIFYING THE CHALLENGES REMOTE

MIDDLE MANAGERS FACE

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Stephanie Diaz

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the challenges that remote middle managers face. Through a qualitative study focused on remote middle managers at a multinational organization, key themes were identified when middle managers were asked about challenges working and leading remotely. Participants included 12 middle managers working remotely based throughout the United States. Challenges identified included communication issues, work-life balance complications, and their involvement in strategy creation and implementation.

Keywords: middle manager, remote work, leadership, communication

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Middle managers, long the segment of the professional working force that has been belittled, forgotten, and even dismantled, are akin to chameleons. Known for changing behavior and appearances based on their environment, chameleons are agile and adapt to survive. Adapting for survival might be a strong phrase to place on middle managers, but there is some validity that to succeed, there is a needed agility for the middle managers. Because whether their role is to manage frontline employees or report to leadership, middle managers cater to different audiences in different ways.

Managing behavior in an adaptive manner has been achievable as traditionally middle managers are physically located within an office environment. However, given that the workforce composition now includes a growing remote presence, this is no longer guaranteed to be the case. The question then begs, how can a middle manager be successful and thrive when there's no traditional environment to thrive in? How can a middle manager be successful if their environment is entirely remote?

To explore middle management from a remote setting, this paper will examine the role of middle managers and the challenges they face as remote leaders. To identify such challenges, remote employees nestled within a business unit of a multi-national organization will serve as this study's participants.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to identify and understand the challenges remote middle managers face. By interviewing a select group of remote middle managers within a business unit of a multi-national organization, the anticipated result was to better

understand the nuances and challenges middle managers face in order to provide a commentary on how they may navigate uncharted waters.

Background and History

This study examined remote middle managers working in a multi-national organization, specifically in a business unit (BU) focused on bringing its manufactured products to end-use customers. To do so, the BU employed greater than 100 remote sales employees throughout the United States. To lead the sales force, there were 12 Regional Business Managers (RBM's) geographically positioned to serve as a conduit between headquarters/sales director and the field. This study explored the challenges these RBM's had leading as a remote middle manager.

Significance and Application

In January 2018 there was an RBM meeting to plan and review the year's goals. In attendance, RBMs, the BU's vice president, as well as directors from marketing, distribution, and sales. There were approximately 25 people in total. The first day of the meeting there was an exercise were everyone was asked to provide one word that represented an organizational gap. The one-word exercise yielded one conclusion: there were challenges within the organization, primarily voiced by the RBM's. Table 1 shows the gap words identified.

Table 1

Gap Words Identified at 2018 Sales Leadership Meeting

People	Engage	Speed	Relationships	Unity
Manage v Lead	Ownership	Vision	Commitment	Listening
Technology	School	Timeliness	Leverage	Accountability
Development	Compelling	Attitude	Strategy	Proactive
Reality	Activity Management	One-Voice	Head Count	Complaining
Trust	Challenge			

When reviewing these words, an experienced professional could quickly surmise that many of these words represented common issues within organizations. But if you interpret within the context that more than half of the organization is remote, led by these 12 RBM's, are the issues then compounded? The research question then arose: do these issues resemble challenges of working as a remote middle manager? And, if so, is it more challenging as a remote middle manager?

Study Outline

The purpose of this chapter was to present the idea that middle managers face added challenges by leading remotely. Chapter 2 summarizes existing literature on middle-managers, specific to those in the United States and the challenges they face as well as the future of middle management. Moreover, Chapter 2 describes a how the workplace that has become increasingly virtual and how middle managers work in this space. Chapter 3 outlines the research methods which include participant selection,

interview methodology, as well as how the data was analyzed. Chapter 4 is a presentation of the study's results as well as an examination of successes and challenges. The questions posed to participants are outlined as well as the key themes identified. Finally, Chapter 5 is a presentation of key findings, their meanings, and connection to literature. Furthermore, recommendations, study limitations, and implications for further research are outlined.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter summarizes existing literature on middle-managers, specific to those in the United States and the challenges they face. Moreover, it describes a workplace that has become increasingly virtual. Both literatures together support the research question for this study: "What challenges do remote middle managers face?"

Defining Middle Managers

Second-class citizen, sandwich manager, paper-pusher, mediator, perpetuator of groupthink, and a symbol of organizational bloat. All of these descriptions describe a person who would probably not be viewed favorably within an organization (Korn, 2013). Sometimes, they are also called middle managers.

Routinely acting as a bridge between top managers and front-line employees, middle managers are commonly defined as those employees who are two levels below the CEO and one level above the front line (Huy, 2001). According to statistics reported by the U.S. Labor Department and published by the Wall Street Journal in 2012, there were 10.8 million middle managers working in the United States. These middle managers are considered at the "collar line," the break between blue and white collar, with middle managers being the latter.

The role and acceptance of middle managers has evolved over the last 40 years. Currie and Procter (2005) refer to three distinct phases that have defined the path of middle managers. The first phase, which they coin the "golden age," was in the 1970's when middle managers were celebrated within organizations. The late 80's and early 90's proved to be vastly different as downsizing and "trimming the fat" was a common directive from senior leaders (Currie & Procter, 2005). The third phase is currently

evolving whereby middle managers, of those that remain, are being looked to as strategic contributors.

     Strategy stakeholders. Historically, middle managers were simply implementors of strategy crafted by organizational leadership. Now that organizations have evolved, not only do middle managers implement strategy, they can also influence how strategy is created. Floyd and Wooldbridge (1994) have written extensively on how middle managers contribute to strategy development. They argue that middle managers and their strategic input can create a competitive advantage, and better yet, a dynamic capability. They further state:

> Dynamic capability is a learning process which calls on organization members to interpret the world around them, to uncover new opportunities, to focus existing resources efficiently, and to accumulate new resources when existing ones become obsolete. Put simply, capabilities develop as the organization learns how to deliver what customers want and how to create new combinations of assets and skills. In other words, capabilities develop through the brains and nervous systems of middle managers. (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1994, p. 49)

To build upon their claim that middle managers are the brains behind dynamic capabilities, Floyd and Wooldridge (1994) developed a theoretical framework to capture the roles of middle managers in dynamic capabilities. According to Floyd and Wooldridge (1994), middle managers influence strategy via four key functions. First, middle managers influence upwards specific to championing alternatives, the "persistent and persuasive communication of strategic options to upper management" (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1994, p. 155). Second, they synthesize information, the "interpretation and

evaluation of information" (p. 50). Third, they facilitate adaptability, defined as "fostering flexible organizational arrangements" (p. 51). Finally, middle managers implement deliberate strategy, defined as "managerial interventions that align organizational action with strategic intention" (p. 51).

And as Floyd and Wooldridge (1997) suggest, middle managers influence within the organization both "upwards" and "downwards." Specifically, a middle manager's "upwards activities have the potential to alter the firm's strategic course by providing top management with unique interpretations of emerging issues and by proposing new initiatives" while "with downward influence, middle managers become change agents, fostering adaptability and implementing deliberate strategy" (Floyd & Wooldridge, pp. 465-466). Likert (1961) states that it is the middle manager that serves as the "linking pin" for this upward and downward influence on strategy formation.

Dance (2011) confirms this sentiment by stating that a middle manager's job is to implement organizational strategy by focusing on three task areas: technical, people, and strategic tasks. A key takeaway from these upwards and downward movements is that via middle managers, upwards influence is mostly on strategic actions while downwards the actions impact people.

Change agents. Given that middle managers are the implementors of change from the top, they are, by default, change agents. Though they deserve more credibility than just having a default task and label. Huy (2001) has voiced that if a middle manager buys into the change program, they will see that the objectives are carried through the organization. Middle managers, after all, do supervise the majority of employees; so being able to have their buy-in and support is key to effective change.

Middle managers have even been labeled "change masters." Though Kanter (1983) coined the term middle managers close to 40 years ago, she argued that without middle manager's instrumental involvement to facilitate change, the organization's efforts would have been more challenging and possibly would have resulted in failure.

Leaders. Though the word "manager" is in the "middle manager" title, the key action that makes a middle manager successful is that they are leaders as well. As Whitehurst (2015) says, middle managers influence, inspire, and foster inclusive environments - all qualities of a leader. Dance (2011) notes that leadership is about developing, improving, and driving through necessary change and that is precisely what middle managers have to do.

Emotional Supporters. Part of being an effective leader is understanding emotional intelligence. As Whitehurst (2015) notes, the best managers are those who marry their IQ with their EQ and focus on the 'whys' and 'how's' rather than the 'what's.' Huy (2002) notates that middle managers are closer to their employees and as a result are more likely to be more attuned to their team's emotional needs. It helps that middle managers have "street cred" with their direct reports as well (Caye et al., 2010). This credibility, essentially trust, helps foster and facilitate emotional support.

Communicators. Middle managers are networked. Given that most middle managers have greater longevity than senior managers within organizations, they can have larger network than those in other hierarchical positions. As Huy (2011) notes, middle managers build relationships that are both broad and deep. Moreover, they often serve as translators in deciphering information from senior leadership (Huy, 2001).

Knowing what and how information should be shared is a key middle management skill of strong performers. As Walker (2018) noted, they know how to "adopt the wishes of one side and squeeze the brakes on bad ideas" (p. 5). Not only are middle managers effective at communicating internally, they are close to the market (i.e., their customers). This proximity brings value both internally and externally.

Committed. Often referred to as "B Players," middle managers are committed to a work-life balance that demonstrates loyalty and hard work to stakeholders both at work and at home (DeLong & Vijayaraghavan, 2003). While their long tenure often might give off an appearance of complacency in upward mobility, many middle managers are content with the work-life balance that being a middle manager provides.

Challenges

Flattening. As Bunker and Alban (1997) noted, just because you flatten an organization, does not necessarily mean it will be more flexible. Though middle managers are known for their longevity at organizations, there are recent trends where organizations are flattening their hierarchy and the middle-management group has been most impacted. For example, Tesla, an innovative American car company, recently announced a major reorganization that would include "flattening the management structure" (Walker, 2018, p. 1). Elon Musk, Tesla's owner, noted that the rationale for this flattening was to improve communication.

Enhances in technology and business processes have been contributing factors as to why middle managers are no longer needed as much. With email, social media, and efficient methods to communicate top-down, the extra layer of middle management can more easily disappear (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1994). The thought behind flattening is that

"by thinning out the management layers, you accelerate the feedback loop between your generals and field commanders, allowing brilliant ideas to germinate quickly, enabling a nimble environment" (Walker, 2018, p. 1).

Power dynamics. In addition to trying to maintain a role within the organization (i.e., flattening), middle managers have been facing additional challenges. One such challenge is the power dynamic within an organization. By being at an "intermediate" (Anicich & Hirsh, 2017) power level, on one level middle managers are directing and guiding employees and, on the other, they are on the receiving end from their superiors. Anicich and Hirsh (2017) refer to this as vertical code-switching, meaning those who "vacillate between upward and downward social interactions" (p. 660). This repeated vacillation can be emotionally taxing and create conflict. Or as Caye et al. (2010) suggest, they are squeezed and feel pressure from all sides.

And sometimes middle managers feel as though they are being micro-managed, a recipe for poor morale (Knowledge@Wharton, 2008). Often having no authority, yet all the accountability, middle managers find themselves having to navigate the politics of visibly embracing change initiatives and following-through on delivery tactics.

Development. Not only do middle managers sometimes serve as therapists tending to their team's emotional needs, middle managers themselves need emotional support too. Middle managers face high-levels of stress from the high demand levels coming from both their direct reports as well as organizational leadership. In fact, a study of Barbary macaques (a type of monkey in Asia) showed that animals in the middle levels of a social hierarchy and pulled into power battles exhibited the highest levels of stress - a finding that researchers say applies to humans in the workplace (Korn, 2013).

Such stress can result in an imbalance when it comes to the work/life ratio. As reported by Korn (2013), middle managers suffer from a lack of work-life balance as a recent U.K. study of workplace attitudes reported that just 44% of middle managers are satisfied with work-life balance, compared with 70% of employees without managerial responsibilities.

With all of the challenges middle managers face, one begins to question how their emotional stability is maintained and supported. As Anichich and Hirsh (2017) note, it can be psychologically challenging to change mindsets rapidly with so many different tasks and stakeholder levels. Moreover, since middle managers are expected to be implementors of strategy, Huy (2011) alludes to the implications such changes could have not only on the individual level, but also those emotions middle managers feel on behalf of the group.

Developing middle managers is key to organizational success. After all, most senior managers were once middle managers. If they are not developed, they face a frozen middle management that can lead to vicious cycles of low morale and low engagement (Knowledge@Wharton, 2008).

Included. In order for middle managers to be successful, they need to be included in organizational discussions that are centered on strategy, objectives, vision and values (Caye et al., 2010). Floyd and Wooldridge (1994) argue that to maintain a balance between industry forces and organizational resources, middle management needs to be included in strategy development and more so than just being involved at the implementation level. Moreover, they need to be developed and provided the support and message that they matter.

The Future of Middle Management

As long as there are organizations with a product and/or service to sell, there will likely be middle managers as well. And the skills and capabilities that will make them successful will continuously evolve (Whitehurst, 2015). Floyd and Wooldridge (1990, 1992, 1997) have studied extensively over the last 30 years with respect to middle management. They have spoken to a middle manager's role with respect to their influence on strategy as well as how it is implemented.

And for those organizations that still employ managers, today it requires a different middle manager than those of the conventional hierarchical organization (Whitehurst, 2015). Today, we are in a time where information is more free-flowing and hierarchical lines are now blurred, and, as a result, middle managers today need new skillsets (Whitehurst, 2015).

The Virtual Workplace

In today's workplace, there is now the opportunity to bring professionals together who are geographically constrained. Thanks to advances in technology, the virtual workplace is a new norm.   According to a 2016 report by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, almost a quarter of those employed did some or all of their work from home. Virtual workplaces provide opportunities for their employees. In addition to the benefits of time saved (i.e., no travel to/from work), there is the capability of having diverse teams (e.g., global teams) as well as the potential for significant cost savings to the organization.

Defining Virtual. In a review of the literature, there were multiple labels and/or meanings assigned to those who work outside of the office. For example, teleworking, telecommuting, virtual team, distributed work, and flexible work arrangements were all names associated with employees who work outside of the office part or full-time.

It is thought the first time a term of working outside of the office was coined dates back to 1973 when Jack Niles, a NASA engineer, noted telecommuting. "The idea at the time was to move the work to workers rather than move workers to the work in an effort to alleviate traffic problems and reduce energy consumption" (Allen, Golden, & Shockley, 2015, p. 41). The defined term has had implications for studying those who work outside of the office. Such investigations could include performance, support, communication mechanisms, and organizational support.

The definition that most closely represents this study is "remote work." The United States Office of Personnel Management (OPM) in 2013 defined remote work as:

> A work arrangement in which the employee resides and works at a
> location beyond the local commuting area of the employing organization's
> worksite; generally includes full-time telework and may result in a change
> in duty location to the alternative worksite. (U.S. Office of Personnel
> Management, 2013)

For the purposes of this study, literature with all virtual definitions were explored as the participants in this study were remote. Not only were they remote, given the nature of their role and responsibilities of servicing a select geographic area/customers and team, they *had* to be remote.

Benefits. Kayworth and Leidner (2000) suggest that virtual team (VT) leaders who were more empathetic about their team members were considered more effective than those who were not. As Martins et al. (2004) suggests, a proposed VT benefit is that they can bring together individuals with the needed Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities (KSAs). To create this knowledge-based environment, it requires crucial elements such

as team trust, leadership, training, and relational bonds that fosters collaborative spaces where employees are open and empowered to share ideas (Zakaria, Amelinckx, & Wilemon, 2004).

A key benefit many remote workers voice is the work-life balance advantage. There is the notion that telecommuting can help remote workers with work and family challenges, given they have the flexibility to address and manage personal issues (e.g., kids, doctor's appointments) in a more efficient and effective manner (Allen, Golden, & Shockley, 2015). However, such a concept or perceived benefit can also be a challenge. As Allen et al. (2015) wrote, there is the idea that work can interfere with family (WIF) and family can interfere with work (FIW). Gajendran and Harrison (2007) have themed such a benefit/challenge relationship to work-life balance as the telecommuting paradox - one comes at the expense of the other, and vice versa.

Challenges. Some of the disadvantages for remote teams is the lack of physical interaction and the accompanying nonverbal cues that can help foster constructive communication (Cascio, 2000). Cascio (2001) says that "one pessimist in the group has the potential to undermine trust in the entire virtual team" (p. 84). It is this lack of trust that can have dire consequences when it comes to the success of remote employees.

Often, a lack of trust stems from a lack of communication. And, as a result, one of the biggest hurdles that a remote employee can face is the lack of (or misinterpreted) communication. Golden and Raghuram (2010) studied teleworkers over several months and concluded that telecommuters who reported that the more trusting work relationships are results in greater knowledge sharing (i.e., better communication). It is critical that the

communication gap that could exist between a superior and their remote employees be closed and addressed consistently (Singh, Kumar, & Varghese, 2017).

An additional challenge for remote employees is receiving the appropriate amount of organizational support. Whether it is from the direct supervisor or the organization as a whole (e.g., Human Resources, Training), "support is needed for remote employees to be effective" (Allen, Golden, & Shockley, 2015, p. 55). It is this connection from leadership that helps build trust. Trust in that the remote employee will be effective in their remote duties as well as reciprocate needs back to the organization.

Role of technology. Technology has played as an increasing role in the support and effectiveness of remote employees. As Allen et al. (2015) note, the technology that supports teleworking has continued to evolve. However, to optimize the success of remote work, "communication tools that can best simulate face-to-face interactions and that inject social context are needed" (Waber, 2013, p. 55).

Today, remote employees have the benefit of connecting to the office using technologies like VPN, video conferencing, and instant messaging. It is these tools which can help remote employees be more successful.

Virtual Environment and Middle Managers

This chapter explored both the challenges middle managers face as well as those who work virtually. The question then remains, are the challenges then compounded when a middle manager is remote? Chapter 3 outlines the methodology crafted seeking to ask this question.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this study was to examine the challenges middle managers face working as remote employees. This chapter outlines the research design, provides a description of the sample study, and a description of the research procedures. Finally, a description of the steps taken for the protection of human subjects is outlined.

Design

To best understand the challenges remote middle manager's face, this study utilized a qualitative approach. Given that the primary research question was centered on identifying challenges in a specific role dispersed throughout the nation, the most effective way to learn of their challenges was to ask and listen. As a result, five questions were designed to gain insight.

Sample

The population of the study was 12 remote middle managers, specific to a business unit within a multi-national organization. Each of the12 middle managers, known as Regional Business Managers (RBM's), served as a leader respective to specific regions throughout the United States (e.g., Pacific Northwest, Southeast, Mid-Atlantic).

The interviewees ranged in age from early 30's to late 60's. In total, 11 men and one woman participated in the interviews. All interviews were conducted via phone and 11 participants agreed to be recorded.

Each manager led between 6-12 people within their respective region. The regions covered vast regions throughout the United States (e.g., Minnesota through Colorado) or just one state (e.g., Texas), with direct reports dispersed throughout. Their

teams consisted of account and technical managers who had direct contact with the customers and product.

Measures

Data was collected via structured and scheduled telephone interviews. The questions were crafted based on the literature explored as well as the intent of the study, to identify and understand what challenges remote middle managers face. They were:

1. As a middle manager, how do you find leading is different being that you're remote?

2. As a middle manager, do you feel you have any influence in developing strategy? Or just implementing it? Or both?

3. What challenges do you face being that you're leading remotely versus in an office?

4. As time has evolved with new technologies, (e.g. WebEx's, text, computers), does this help communicating messages up to leadership and down to the front line?

5. Do you feel you have support on being a remote middle manager (e.g. training, development)?

Procedures

To invite the participants to participate, an email was sent to the business unit's Human Resources Business Partner, Vice President, and the Sales Director introducing the study's intent as well as their permission to participate in the study. Following the manager's email, each RBM was asked via a direct email to inquire if they were willing to participate, followed by an email invitation for an hour of their time.

Approval to conduct the study was obtained by the company's HR services, which outlined that the study/interviews were to be confidential and not notate the person's name nor the name of the company. Additionally, the approval was obtained from Pepperdine's Institutional Review Board (IRB). All compliance guidelines were followed. Volunteer managers could withdraw at any time without penalty.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the research methodology specific to the methods that were utilized and the research design.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this research was to explore the challenges remote middle managers faced. This chapter presents the results of 12 interviews with remote middle managers located in the United States, all working for the same multi-national organization. Five questions were asked of the participants:

1. As a middle manager, how do you find leading is different being that you're remote?

2. As a middle manager, do you feel you have any influence in developing strategy? Or just implementing it? Or both?

3. What challenges do you face being that you're leading remotely versus in an office?

4. As time has evolved with new technologies, (e.g. WebEx's, text, computers), does this help communicating messages up to leadership and down to the front line?

5. Do you feel you have support on being a remote middle manager (e.g. training, development)?

Leading Remote is Different

The first research question asked the participants how leading in a remote environment was different since they were remote.   Out of the 12 interviewed, all of them had led or at least worked in an office environment at some point in their careers. Table 2 presents the common themes.

Table 2

Common Themes from Research Question 1

Theme	Middle Manager Comments
Effectively Communicating (f=4)	Information is readily accessible in an office environment vs. remote

Communication nuances not present (can't see facial expressions if speaking on phone or emailing)

Communication skills have to be up to par

Replacing face-to-face contact with a lot of emails, phone dialogue, texting, things like that |
| Dependent on corporate/senior management for sharing information (f=1) | Reliant on senior management communicating downward |
| More advanced planning (f=2) | Typically requires the coordination of a month to get everyone together (team is geographically dispersed)

Scheduling set meetings |
| Manage through more data (f=2) | Whether it's CRM for activity reports or knowing only what people tell you, limited to results (or lack thereof)

You're just managing to data, you're not managing to quality |
| Different tactics to motivate (f=1) | Style for motiving someone in the office versus out of the office might be a little bit different |
| Employee development (f=2) | More difficult to advocate and champion your employees, particularly with employee development

Having the ability to judge, make decisions and monitor their day-to-day activity is very hard and limited |

The most common theme was how effective communication was the main difference between leading remotely versus in an office. The interviewees commonly replied with verbiage that spoke to the difficulty in communicating, such as "when you work remotely, one of the biggest problems you have is that you don't see people's faces or how they react to things you say." And, though probably not classified as difficulty, there were responses that spoke to the formality of communicating remotely. For example, a respondent noted that "remote, you're more scheduling set meetings, and it seems more formalized."

An interesting discovery through the interviews is how the managers were more reliant on data to determine an individual's productivity. For example, many managers were reliant on data from CRM, input from customers as well as sales to determine if their team members were effective with job duties.

Influence in Developing Strategy

Much of the literature noted that middle managers have had an increased influence in developing strategy and, as a result, question two centered on if the middle managers had any influence on developing strategy. Table 3 outlines the key themes and comments directly from the respondents.

Table 3

Key Themes from Research Question 2

Theme	Middle Manager Comments
No, not at all (f=4)	Less and less influence on the strategy or the change or the policy change I have almost zero input into any developing of any strategy The overall strategy is pretty much determined above my pay grade From a corporate standpoint, I have zero input, zero impact on our corporate strategy, at all, whatsoever.
Yes, I'm given goals and it's my job to set strategy to achieve them in my region (f=3)	It's clearly a top-down strategy (with this organization) You're given your marching orders, and then you develop your strategy in how to meet those variables. I do feel empowered in the way that I've managed my team is that I take what I'm given, right, whatever the sales target may be, whatever the growth initiative may be, and then you drill it down to say, hey, you're identifying who your key strategic
Expectation is to implement, not set (f=4)	And I am expected more of to execute the policy or the strategy I had it mentioned recently that my job is not to worry about the strategy, my job is to manage my people It's just here's the idea, here's the goal, you go and execute. We are just implementers here, for sure.
Leadership dependent (f=2)	It all just depends on the leadership (if I'm involved) Very limited influence based off of the culture of the organization I work in.

Many of the answers depended on mindset of strategy. It can be surmised that all of the managers agreed that they had no influence developing strategy up; however, as to if they had a stake in developing strategy downwards, it depended on the manager. More than half of those interviewed sternly said they had no influence in developing strategy and left it at that. However, there were a few that said based on the goals received from their managers, it was up to them in turn, to develop a regional strategy to achieve results.

There were also two comments that indicated they had more influence on developing strategy upwards in the past. However, with this current organization, the leadership looks to them (as a middle manager) in a more traditional manner - to simply implement strategic initiatives. In fact, one participant relayed that his manager told him that his "job is not to worry about strategy, but to manage his people."

Challenges as a Remote Middle Manager

Question three investigated what challenges are present working as a middle manager in a remote environment. Though similar to question one (i.e., leading remotely), question three asked specifically about the challenges present in remote middle management. Common themes from respondents are captured in Table 4.

Table 4

Key Themes from Research Question 3

Theme	Middle Manager Comments
Employee engagement (f=7)	The challenge is making sure that I give enough time to my employees so they can voice their concerns or their challenges and make sure that I can solve them or execute on them… I think it's harder for me to add value to my direct reports, because I don't always have access to people and information that I would in an office setting. Just making time to be out in the field selling and working with these guys is, can be a challenge. I need to be strategic in how I plan and guide them (employees), so that I can allow them to go on their own and not have to constantly check-in with them. Well, clearly, out of sight, out of mind. So I have to trust data, or either results, everything is pretty objective, which is good to have a good objective measure. But I would say the biggest challenge is really engagement, employee engagement because they don't see you very frequently, so you have to kinda try and replace that with more frequent communication, probably even more so than you would have in the office… Town halls, get togethers, those kind of things just don't happen. So, sometimes it can make you feel loose, and a different part than the whole of the company, if that makes sense.
Communication (f=1)	I think communication is the greatest challenge and probably the only one that really deserves speaking about.

Guilt (f=1)	As a middle manager, there's a very big guilt factor if you're a good manager because if you are home in your office with your family and stuff, you feel guilty that you're no on the road working with your people and directing what's happening in the field. If you're in the field, there's a tremendous amount of guilt about you're gone for weeks at a time and you're guilty that you're not at home raising your kids and taking care of your wife and being a good father and a good husband and all that.
External/Customers (f=1)	I would say, not internally with my team. I'd say, the external factors, with our business partners can be challenging given the distance.

The most common theme throughout question three was the challenge of effectively communicating as a remote middle manager. An interesting perspective on this was a comment regarding how communication is even more difficult with customers, an external component.

An additional interesting response was that the feeling of guilt was identified as a challenge noted by two middle managers. Given that they are constantly traveling to meet with customers and/or employees, the time away from home proved to be difficult for their work-life balance. Such a response related to the telecommuting paradox (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007).

Communicating Remotely with Technology

Given the advances of technology over the last 20 years, the question was posed as to what role (if any) technology has played into the communication methods of remote middle managers, specifically communicating up to leadership and down to their teams.

Eight respondents were grateful for the advances in communication mediums; however, they were also quick to note that there is still the loss of quickly building authentic relationships with a phone call and many times, the intent of the message is lost simply because of how it was received (e.g., email vs. in-person). Table 5 provides a review of the key themes identified in discussions with middle managers.

Table 5

Key Themes from Research Question 4

Theme	Middle Manager Comments
Technology is an assist/help (f=3)	It does assist, though not say the word help. I'll say it assists us in getting messages and discussing subjects that we might not be sure about, but it also can overwhelm you and overwhelm the field, then trying to decipher the message. Technology has made things, much, much better. It's better than nothing, and I think it works, it has its place. Well, I think the successful components to remotely is today is the different mediums that you could use to communicate.
Adoption (f=2)	I would say the one thing about utilizing the technology is there has to be a willingness to engage with it. I feel that, as a manager, I'm supposed to develop talent and have people move up. I take the technology adoption as an indicator of who can take over for my position, or who can walk into a position similar to mine. You have to be able to leverage technology, as best as you can.
Audience direction (best used pushing information down vs. up to leadership) (f=2)	I think it does serve itself better to push information down as opposed to pushing information up. But certainly with the right culture, you can push information up with technology. The communication downward I think is an excellent place to use technology and leverage it, but in the right way.
Intent (f=1)	It creates a very difficult communication pathways, so there's boundaries that you have to set.

| Consistency (f=1) | So, with being able to have everybody on the same page, look at, whether it's a PowerPoint presentation, demonstrating what roles and responsibilities or core values you're trying to speak to as an organization, or pillars of safety or success, you can do that in a uniform, combined, and consolidated approach. |

Overall, the responses received from how technology has helped remote middle managers communicate were overwhelmingly positive. Though there were always the caveat that it can also be a hindrance based on use, intent and audience. One comment that probably transcends both remote and office workers is that with the advancements in technology, one never stops working.

Middle Management Support

The final question centered on if the middle managers felt as though they received support, (e.g., training, professional development, team building) being that they were remote. Table 6 highlights the key themes identified when respondents were asked this question.

Table 6

Key Themes from Research Question 5

Theme	Middle Manager Comments
Depends on leader/organization (f=4)	I feel like I get the support I need just because of the people I am working with. Every organization is a little bit different. My current organization, I don't feel that we're doing basically anything in terms of training and developing middle managers. I feel that I get great support from my direct supervisor, however, the company that I work for now has zero training methods, zero process for selling, nothing. Depends on who is VP of business…0 training today because of expense.
Self-directed (f=2)	You own a lot of your own success in life. I mean, whether you're a remote employee or an employee that works in an office…I would have to say that if you're actually eager on trying to advance your career and you love to be successful, or whatever you find success to be, even if it's developing your career in your current role to find success, I think that joining different organizations…might be a good way of doing that. I just look at it as a way that you've got to be creative, you have to think more entrepreneurial-like, am I empowered to the best of my ability.
Could do better (f=2)	When you look at it from developing me, as a manager, I think that the organization could do a better job when it comes to setting standards, or SOPs, or even like a development plan for me onboarding and being new into this role, right? No, very few feel like they have what they need…they have to create own training programs

Many of the responses were direct (i.e., no); however, many in the same sentence would notate that their success was self-driven. That is, that it was up to them to learn and adapt, even if at their own financial expense.

Three responses were that the organization could do better from a corporate stand-point, but that they received support from their direct manager. It was that the more formal programs that cost money and we are not an option.

Summary

This chapter reported the key themes that emerged through the researcher's investigation. The investigation was qualitative in nature and conducted via telephone, asking 12 remote middle managers about the challenges they faced compared to an office setting.

Several primary themes evolved, which included: 1) to trust data - as a remote middle manager, it was critical to rely on information, whether it be from CRM or the customers. The challenge of not having data is that they would be leading subjectively and without a mechanism to reward (or counsel); 2) employee engagement is more difficult to facilitate as a remote leader; however, it is necessary to build trust and develop their employees; 3) success was dependent on mindset of the middle manager. Whether it was their vantage point on strategy involvement and/or their proactiveness to develop themselves and/or their team, many of the responses were how the middle manager viewed responsibilities for themselves and team; and 4) the most prevailing theme resulting from the research is that communication is a middle-managers greatest challenge. And though technology has advanced to help facilitate messaging, both formal and informal, there are tactful and purposeful ways to use it.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Limitations & Recommendations

Overview

The purpose of this study was to investigate the challenges that remote middle managers face. Through a qualitative study focused on remote middle managers at a multinational organization, key themes were identified when middle managers asked about challenges working and leading remotely.

One of the key themes identified was the positioning of a middle manager's contribution on strategy creation. As stated by Floyd and Wooldridge (1992), there was more of an expectation and/or demonstration that strategy is influenced downward via middle managers. Based on the conversations with the remote middle managers within this study, such circumstances proved to be true. The middle managers felt as though, in their current roles, they had no or limited participation in creating strategy, only implementing it.

Key challenges included the role that communication played as well as how the organization's leadership (or lack thereof) contributed to a remote middle manager's challenges. Moreover, employee engagement was an expected response, and many of the respondents did mention the difficultly behind building trust in a timely fashion, developing their team, and having accessibility (having to plan to meet with team versus walking to their desk).

Key challenges that were interesting to learn was the guilt that remote middle managers associated with working remotely (as a result of constant traveling to meet team and customers) as well as a middle manager's mindset. The mindset was an interesting discovery in that the same questions were asked of 12 people, and though key themes did appear, there were a couple of respondents who provided answers from a

positive vantage point. Specifically, when asked about communication and/or support they received, they essentially responded that it (the challenges) were how they approached them. That if they wanted to develop, they needed to be proactive about such measures. If the organization wasn't willing or able to provide resources, they would seek on their own.

Additionally, the reliance on data to help manage their team provided an observation not yet considered. The middle managers consistently noted that it was a challenge to lead a team dispersed over hundreds of miles and, with data, they were able to quickly assess performance.

Scholarship Implications

Within the academic arena, the need for further exploration into remote workers is needed. As noted in the literature review, there are many definitions when it comes to virtual employees. However, specific to employees who are virtual because they have to be (i.e., responsible for sales in a select geographic region) was difficult to find. Moreover, as remote employees have become more the norm vs. the exception, the need to study this select group and their needs for success are ever more important. Additional research has the potential to help address some of the challenges middle managers face like work-life balance, communication and development of their teams.

A suggestion for further research is to investigate how data plays (or will play) into how remote middle managers lead. As noted above, the researcher was intrigued by how middle managers were using data to help manage their teams. With Business Intelligence further developing with platforms like Customer Relationship Management (CRM), what does the future look like when it comes to communication, transparency,

and strategy development? Will data serve as a replacement for the mode of communication between the field and headquarters? And further, how will the development of data further play into the challenges remote middle managers face?

Practice Implications

The first and probably the most important recommendation is to involve middle managers in the creation of strategy, not just the implementation. As Floyd and Wooldridge (1994) argued, "involvement is an important stimulus to strategic thinking" (p. 49) and, as a result, middle management's input is highly likely to be better that the strategy developed at the top. They further note that there is research that demonstrates that a middle manager's strategic contributions directly affect the bottom line. One of the study participants voiced the same sentiment by stating "I think organizations in general are missing an opportunity to engage remote middle management."

Being a middle manager, on top of being remote, adds complexity to not only implementing strategy, but also developing it. It must not be lost on leadership that the remote middle managers are those closest to customers and have input which help better shape the organization and its goals.

Study Limitations

Given that the study was limited to one organization, specifically to just 12 regional business managers within a business unit of a multinational organization, the current culture and leadership within the organization is recognized as weighing heavily on responses. This creates a limitation of generalizability of the results to other populations.

Relatedly, a unique situation occurred during the research period. The author, an employee of the organization, had their position eliminated as a result of a lay-off. In an effort to reduce fixed costs, positions were eliminated (not only to the specific business unit, but also on a global scale). It is possible that the tone of the interviews had a more negative and patronizing result given the organization's current circumstances.

Conclusion

Remote middle managers do face added challenges given their geographic status (compared to those working at office headquarters) and this research sought to define and better understand the variables behind such complications.

Understanding these challenges will allow organizations to better prepare, develop, and support middle managers. One final thought is that leading remotely, while challenging, appears to be doable. Middle managers can be successful as it comes down to individual leadership, mindset, and a tactical plan to effectively communicate.

The anticipated result was to better understand the nuances and challenges associated with working as a remote middle manager. Based on this investigation, many of these (nuances/challenges) were identified.

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Appendix A: Invitation and Consent to Participate

Recruitment Email Template

Subject: Voluntary Study for Remote Middle Managers

Dear [SUBJECT NAME],

The following is the inclusion criteria for this study:

Participants must be a remote middle manager and be at least 19 years in age.

My name is Stephanie Diaz and I am a master's student in Organization Development at Pepperdine University. I am conducting research on the challenges remote middle managers face, and I am inviting you to participate in the study.

If you agree, you are invited to participate in a semi-structured interview. This interview is anticipated to take no more than 30 minutes to complete and will be conducted via phone. You will be given the option to have your interview audio-recorded.

Participation in this study is voluntary and you will be provided a consent form. Your identity as a participant will remain confidential both during and after the study. All information collected during the interview will be analyzed for themes, and no personal identification of any kind will be connected to the data that is used in the final version of the study. Your identity will be protected through the use of a security code, such as Participant 1, or P1. All data will be encrypted and securely stored on the researcher's personal computer, and all data will be properly deleted upon approval of the research study.

If you have questions or would like to participate, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Thank you for your consideration,

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