

MIDDLE MANAGEMENT' RESPONSES TO CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVES BY TOP MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

This essay demonstrates that leadership by top managers is important in creating a sense of urgency regarding the need for an organizational culture of continuous improvement. Middle managers cannot be successful on their own. They depend on the efforts of top management. For continuous improvement programs, the commitment, involvement and leadership of the entire management of the organization are critical. However if top management's behavior is not in line with what they say, middle managers cannot trust the change process and ultimately cannot cooperate. If top management thinks of continuous improvement from an integrated approach, this has a positive effect on the expectations of middle managers, who therefore believe that continuous improvement can be included in the organizational culture in a sustainable manner. Such an approach is more holistic, thereby helping to ensure that an organization does not end with "just another tool", but with substantial improvements in behavior and culture.

Keywords: middle management; top management; leadership; organizational change; continuous improvement

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The current economic climate can be described as uncertain, competitive and rapidly changing (Al-Haddad and Kotnour 2015; Beer 2001; Burgelman et al. 2018; Du Plessis 2007; Lleo et al. 2017). As such, the environment of organizations is becoming increasingly complex, dynamic and global (Canel et al. 2000; Hammer 2004; Lee et al. 2012; Neilson et al. 2014; Steiber and Alänge 2016) and organizations are therefore constantly trying to adapt to these ever-changing conditions (e.g. Birkinshaw et al. 2008; Madhani 2017; Saha et al. 2017; Wagner et al. 2019).

Continuous Improvement (CI) practices such as Lean have the potential to position organizations for long-term success (Bakri 2019; Vashishth et al. 2019). By implementing Lean, organizations have a business model that is efficient, effective and sustainable, thereby offering the potential of greater flexibility and profitability moving forward (Jenkins et al. 2011; Khan et al. 2019). In addition, the fact that CI implementations are of a low-cost

nature, although certainly not cost-free, makes them attractive for organizations to implement (Bessant et al. 1994; Samuel et al. 2015). However, implementing Lean (or any other CI method) is a challenging process. Efforts to implement CI methods such as Lean are characterized by high failure rates (Holmemo and Ingvaldsen 2016; Taleghani 2010). Achieving sustainable improvement often proves to be difficult (Bateman 2005). Studies in both industrial and service-oriented organizations demonstrate that any (initial) results arising from such projects are often not sustained (Bortolotti et al. 2015; Found and Harvey 2007). As a result, a lot of money and effort is put into improving organizations with only a short term gain or no gain at all. Implementing CI appears to be a challenging process and demands substantial organizational changes and commitment of the people involved (Bhuiyan et al. 2006; Drew et al. 2004). The success (or failure) of CI, therefore, largely depends on the people responsible for implementing the method. This includes managers and employees at various organizational levels, including top management and middle management (Fine et al. 2008).

Thus, to make change successful, buy-in needs to exist in the entire organization, from the highest level of management to the shop floor (Simmons et al. 2010; Boyle et al. 2011). The implementation process requires explicit support from management (Worley and Doolen 2006; Achanga et al. 2006; O'Rourke 2005; Fryer et al. 2013; Timans et al. 2012), suggesting that top management should not only show commitment, it should also be active in implementing and communicating the change in the entire organization (Rentes et al. 2010; Simmons et al. 2010; Näslund 2013).

While top management is responsible for initiating and stimulating a cultural change to support the CI principles throughout the organization (Al-Najem et al. 2012; Mann 2009), they may initially pursue CI as a long-term integral management philosophy but may frame targets so as to establish short-term cost-cutting results (cf. McCann et al. 2015). In this context, middle managers are facing rather challenging conditions when their top management sets out to develop a culture of CI. These conditions include the ambiguity around the broader aim of the CI program and what top management expects from them. In this essay, we explore middle managers' responses to continuous improvement initiatives by top management. In the remainder, we conduct a broader exploration of the implications arising from this study as well as reflections and suggestions for future research.

2.0 TOP MANAGEMENT'S CONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE RATIONALE OF A CI PROGRAM

In the following section, we develop an overview of top management's conceptualization of the rationale of a CI program. Previous studies conducted reveal that middle managers engage in a dynamic playing field (Heyden et al. 2018; McCann et al. 2008; Theodore et al. 2017), in which they have a pivotal role when it comes to organizational change (Holmemo and Ingvaldsen 2016; Huy 2002; Tabrizi 2014; Tarakci et al. 2018).

The middle manager's unique position and pivotal role ensure that s/he can translate top management strategy into operational activities and at the same time is able to pay attention to problems on the shop floor on a daily basis (Anicich and Hirsh 2017a; Currie and Procter 2005; Floyd and Lane 2000).

This pivotal role makes middle managers important for strategical renewals (Floyd and Lane 2000; Osterman 2008; Raes et al. 2011; Wooldridge et al. 2008) such as implementing a CI Strategy (Collis 2016; Jayaram et al. 2008; Rahman et al. 2010).

More specifically, top management's conceptualization of the rationale of a CI program appears to significantly affect the role of middle management in getting CI implemented (see figure 1). From a practical perspective, this means that if top management conceives CI as an integrated management approach (philosophy), this has a positive effect on middle management's expectation that CI can be incorporated into the organizational culture in a sustained manner (Hermkens et al. 2019).

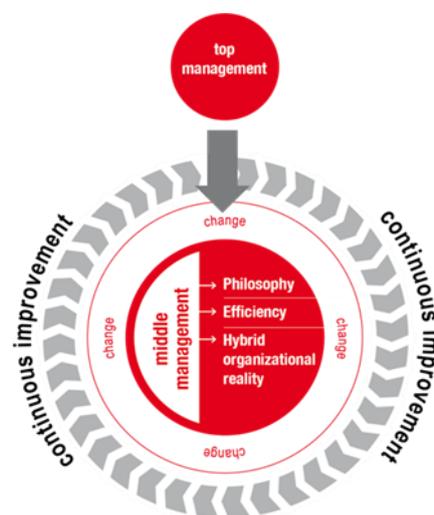


Figure 1: The dynamic playing field

However, multiple studies suggest that the middle management role is not an easy one (Anicich and Hirsh 2017b; Stoker and De Korte 2001; Uytterhoeven 1989), because middle managers have to change their own mindset and behavior (e.g. experimenting; evaluating; coaching; building trust) and lead by example, in order to create and sustain changes in the entire organization (Dahlgard and Dahlgard-Park 2006; Snee 2010). To make CI successful, organizations largely depend on the managers responsible for achieving CI, including middle managers (Fine et al. 2008; Holmemo and Ingvaldsen 2016). If the implementation of CI is not properly embedded in the organization, there is a significant risk that people in the organization perceive CI as 'just another' downsizing (efficiency) method focused on short-term financial targets (see figure 1). Middle managers can only help reduce this risk if top managers commit themselves to CI as an integrated management approach (again see figure 1) and communicate this in a consistent manner, time and again, throughout the entire organization (Mann 2009; Snee 2010). This implies that a more integral approach helps to prevent the organization ending up with 'just' another tool, with a rather short time horizon and without any substantial changes in behaviour and culture toward CI (Dibia et al. 2014; Fryer and Ogden 2014; Mann 2009).

It is also important that middle managers understand the purpose of the change (Hermkens et al. 2017; Livijn 2019; Strebel 1996; Tarakci et al. 2018). While the top and middle managers often deliberately try to plan change to make it more manageable (e.g. Gilley et al. 2009; Huy

2001; Rosenbaum et al. 2018), organizational realities tend to be more messy and noisy than can be effectively planned for. If top management says one thing but does the other, middle management may fear and eventually resist the change; this, in turn, confirms the idea that middle managers are no longer needed or have insufficient skills to support the change (Griffith et al. 2019; Keyser et al. 2016). These gaps and inconsistencies between what many top managers say they want and what they actually want (Argyris 2004; Argyris et al. 1985; Van Maanen and Barley 1984) create a so-called hybrid organizational reality. This hybrid organizational reality may cause an implementation gap between CI (rhetorically being) implemented 'for the long-run' and the reality of top managers seeking to merely accomplish short-term results (see figure 1). Top management may initially frame CI/Lean as an integral approach, to be implemented for the long-run, but end up being (perceived by many) as a cost-cutting program initiated to accomplish short-term results (cf. McCann et al. 2015). This gap can be reduced by proactively including middle managers in the change efforts, so they can actively contribute to reducing (if not avoiding) major gaps and inconsistencies (Hermkens et al. 2019; Snee 2010; Way et al. 2018).

Cooperation between top management and middle management thus appears to be essential for accomplishing CI. Top management needs to create the framework within which middle managers - using their link between top management and shop floor - can ensure that improvements are actually implemented and guaranteed within the organization. Middle managers can help bridge the gap between top management and employees at the operational level and translate top management strategy into operational activities (Ahearne et al. 2014; Anicich and Hirsh 2017a; Gatenby et al. 2015; Kim et al. 2014; Shi et al. 2009; Stoker and De Korte 2001). At the board room level, top management has to communicate openly and honestly about CI, by stating what the objective of the change is and then actively supporting the change (Gigliotti et al. 2019; Miller et al. 2004; Way et al. 2018).

In recent years, changes within organizations have become the norm rather than the exception (Dawson 2019; Sanders 2016; Schaffer 2017; Van Olffen et al. 2019; Wee and Taylor 2018) and to cope with all the change, these organizations have to become even more adaptive. To accomplish this, organizations are increasingly using the concept of agility, in addition to Lean and other CI methods (De Man et al. 2019; Harraf et al. 2015; Rigby et al. 2016; Williams et al. 2013), which changes the role of middle managers (De Smet 2018). The impact that an agile way of working has on the role of top management in relation to middle management is an interesting area for further research.

Overall, middle managers appear to play multiple pivotal roles in organizational change and play a key role in striking a balance between continuity and change (Balogun 2003; Buick et al. 2018; Kuyvenhoven and Buss 2011; McKinney et al. 2013). However, middle managers encounter the triangle of leading change, implementing change and changing their own behavior, which gives rise to tension and possibly the tendency to actively block and resist change (e.g. Blom 2018; Cândido and Santos 2019; Uytterhoeven 1989). To support middle managers in handling this triangle of roles and challenges, top managers would need to lead by example (Alhaqbani et al. 2016; Birken et al. 2015; Näslund 2013). This is a major challenge in itself, given the volatility at top management positions as well as shareholder pressure (e.g. toward cost-cutting) in many companies.

3.0 REFLECTIONS

This essay builds on the importance of top management policy and initiative related to CI implementation, because in most cases middle-managers' autonomy, responsibility, and motivation are influenced by or perhaps even dependent on top management policies. However, other potentially influencing factors could have been taken into account as well, such as company size, environmental conditions (e.g. stable or rapidly changing environment), industrial settings (e.g. manufacturing or service), and industrial relations (e.g. collaborative or hostile).

Furthermore, the assumption that the adoption of CI practices such as Lean can be beneficial to any organization. This may be a problematic assumption, one that has been contested (e.g. Ashkenas 2012; Delbridge et al. 2000; McCann et al. 2015). Future work, therefore, needs to explore whether the assumed benefits of CI practices such as Lean are substantial or merely rhetorical. The literature on Lean and other CI methods downsides and weaknesses and its effectiveness could be further reviewed.

Finally, most of the literature reviewed is the (often implicit) assumption that CI tools such as Lean involve programmatic changes. Successful changes require top and middle managers to constantly challenge and adjust the program to make sure the change delivers the desired results (Oakland and Tanner 2007). In this respect, an additional reason for unsuccessful transformation CI programs such as Lean may be that there is no, or limited, management of the change process during the transition (Nordin et al. 2012).

4.0 FUTURE RESEARCH

CI will remain an important challenge within many organizations and those studying it (Dorval et al. 2019; Prashar and Antony 2018; Van Dun et al. 2017). There is a wide range of CI-related topics that should be further researched. For example, an increasing number of organizations are using Agile ideas, in addition to Lean, in order to improve organizational performance (e.g. Parker et al. 2015; Tripp et al. 2018). This raises the question of whether Agile is likely to replace Lean, or whether a combination of both in so-called Leagile methods will arise (Krishnamoorthy and Ben 2019; Rahiminezhad and Helmi 2016). If we conceive Agile as a further development of Lean, it raises various questions for further research: What is the impact of an agile way of working (in autonomous teams) on the role of top management and middle management?

Further research can also be done on how CI will further develop if we explore the assumptions about the need to properly adopt Lean, as well as the meanings of the success/failure rates of the processes of adoption. And what is the impact of corporate culture on embedding CI in the organization (Bhasin 2013; Pakdil and Leonard 2015)?

Finally our findings underline the need for studies that further investigate the interplay between the top and middle management of organizations and how top management can support change initiative by middle managers (Heyden et al. 2020; Zjadewicz et al. 2016). In addition, further research could be conducted regarding how top management should create a context for the further development of middle managers (Marichal et al. 2020).

5.0 CLOSING REMARKS

Top management's conceptualization of the rationale of a CI program appears to affect the role of middle management in getting CI implemented. From a practical perspective, this means that if top management perceives CI as an integrated management approach, this may have a positive effect on middle management's expectation that CI can be incorporated into the organizational culture in a sustained manner. The findings of this doctoral dissertation suggest that the middle management role is not an easy one, because middle managers have to change their own mindset and behaviour and lead by example, in order to create and sustain changes in the entire organization. We concluded that it is important that middle managers understand the purpose of the change.

While the top and middle managers often deliberately try to plan change to make it more manageable, organizational realities tend to be more messy and noisy than can be effectively planned for. Cooperation between top management and middle management thus appears to be essential for accomplishing CI. Using their link between top management and shop floor, top management needs to create the conditions in which middle managers can ensure that improvements are actually implemented and guaranteed within the organization.

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