A Middle Management Perspective on Strategy Implementation

Ahmad Salih[1] & Yvonne Doll[1]

[1] School of Management, Walden University, USA

Correspondence: Ahmad Salih, School of Management, Walden University, Minneapolis, USA. Tel: 965-6662-2993. E-mail: ahmad.salih@waldenu.edu

Abstract

Middle managers play critical roles in the implementation of organizational strategies. Yet, little is known about the views of middle managers on the organizational factors influencing strategy implementation. This paper is an attempt to extend existing understandings on the organizational factors influencing strategy implementation from the viewpoints of middle managers, including the contribution of middle managers in the implementation of organizational strategies and the challenges associated with the implementation process. Data were collected using semistructured in-depth email interviews with 12 middle managers. This research demonstrates that management style, strategic alignment, internal communication, and middle management contribution are critical factors influencing strategy implementation.

Keywords: strategy implementation, middle managers, email interviewing, strategy-as-practice

1. Introduction

Middle managers play a key role in organizational strategic activities and outcomes (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; Teulier & Rouleau, 2013) and in strategy implementation in particular (Huy, 2011). In this paper, we address the primary research question: What are the views of middle managers on the organizational factors influencing strategy implementation? The question was deliberately broad with the intent to elicit a wide range of views and perceptions regarding the dynamics of strategy implementation. Additional questions were crafted to explore the translation of strategic intentions into managerial action, the contribution of middle managers to strategy implementation, and the key challenges associated with strategy implementation.

By exploring these questions, we intended to expand research in strategic management by illuminating themes related to various aspects of strategy implementation. The objective was to explore the organizational factors influencing strategy implementation as viewed by middle managers, an area that had been largely ignored by researchers in strategic management. The problem examined in this study and the research question were shaped by a conceptual framework based on the assumption that strategy implementation is a complex social activity.

2. The Strategy as Practice Perspective (SAP)

A distinctive approach for studying strategic management, known as strategy-as-practice (SAP), has emerged as a stream of research concentrating on how people engage in strategic practices (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009; Paroutis, Heracleous & Angwin, 2013). The focus of SAP is on the microlevel social activities and practices that characterize organizational strategy and strategizing (Golsorkhi, Rouleau & Seidl, 2010). Within the SAP approach, strategy is understood to be a complex set of strategic activities and practices rather than a property of an organization (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009). From a SAP perspective, strategy has been defined "as a situated, socially accomplished activity, while strategizing comprises those actions, interactions and negotiations of multiple actors and the situated practices that they draw upon in accomplishing that activity" (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007, pp. 7–8). This socially based view of strategy has allowed SAP to establish itself as a distinct subfield within strategy research (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009).

In addition to providing an organizational perspective on strategy, the SAP view offers a strategic angle for examining strategic activities and practices, and thereby serves as a useful research paradigm to complement contemporary strategic management research. In contrast to the mainstream strategy research, which focuses on the effect of strategies on organizational performance, the SAP perspective calls for an "in-depth analysis of what actually takes place in strategic planning, strategy implementation and other activities that deal with strategy" (Golsorkhi et al., 2010, p. 1). By drawing on theories and applying methods that are different from the

common practices of strategy scholars, studies following the SAP approach can contribute to the development of strategic management as a discipline and a body of knowledge.

There has been an increasing body of research in the SAP field in the last decade. Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009) reviewed the existing SAP literature and identified some key domains of SAP research. Those research domains revolve around three main interrelated concepts: "practitioners (those people who do the work of strategy); practices (the social, symbolic and material tools through which strategy work is done); and praxis (the flow of activity in which strategy is accomplished)" (p. 70). Some research studies have focused on individual strategy practitioners and their perspectives on organizational issues (Bourque & Johnson, 2008; Hodgkinson & Clark, 2007; Mantere, 2008). Other studies have centered on aggregate practitioners, such as middle managers (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; Teulier & Rouleau, 2013). Within those domains, SAP researchers have explored a wide range of strategic issues with a focus on microlevel strategic phenomena. Further, SAP scholars have developed an interest in studying strategy practitioners and their activities, emotions, practices, and behaviors (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009). Our study complements the SAP studies by focusing upon middle managers as strategy practitioners who are key players in the strategy implementation process.

3. Middle Managers and Strategic Practices

Wooldridge et al. (2008) conducted an extensive review of the research on strategic management and found that "literature on the strategy process evolved to support a middle management perspective" (p. 1192). Within their strategic roles, middle managers use a range of ways in which they contribute to organizational strategy. Work in this area has concentrated on techniques and practices used by middle managers to influence strategy (Wooldridge et al., 2008). In particular, researchers have conceptualized the various strategic roles of middle managers (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992) and examined the influence of middle managers on strategy development and implementation (Hutzschenreuter & Kleindienst, 2006; Mair & Thurner, 2008). Further, middle management strategic role expectations (Mantere, 2008) and role conflict, caused by different interpretations of environmental conditions, were explored (Herzig & Jimmieson, 2006; Mair & Thurner, 2008). In addition, researchers have shown that middle managers use their internal and external network relationships to contribute to strategic activities (Pappas & Wooldridge, 2007; Shi, Markoczy & Dess, 2009).

Middle managers hold unique positions within organizations providing them with the opportunity to influence an organization's strategic activities. Seen as key strategic actors, middle managers play several strategic roles within organizations. The role of middle managers as change agents would grow as organizations continue to become global and more complex (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). In order for middle managers to become proactively involved in strategies, it is essential for them to believe they are owners of the outcome of strategic initiatives (Mair & Thurner, 2008). Hope (2010) examined middle management's political actions during the implementation of planned change and found that middle managers were in a position to use different types of political powers in order to influence strategic sensemaking of others in their organizations. This manipulation of political power enabled middle managers to mobilize various sources of power to influence meaning construction to promote or suppress the implementation of new strategies (Guth & MacMillan, 1986).

One aspect of the organizational position of middle managers is their knowledge of external environments and internal operations. Being closer to the markets and to customers than top managers, middle managers have the knowledge to assess the viability of proposed strategies (Hutzschenreuter & Kleindienst, 2006; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011) and the influence to create an alignment between external market demands and the value of strategic initiatives. With the view that middle managers are an integral part of a control system within organizations, Floyd and Wooldridge (1994) suggested that middle managers, through the implementation of strategies, perform the following three tasks: (a) articulating tactics and allocating budgets that are necessary for achieving a strategy, (b) monitoring the performance of individuals and groups who are tasked with strategy implementation, and (c) taking corrective measures when behavior falls below expectations.

4. Method

In order to achieve depth of insight into views of middle managers on strategy implementation, we employed a qualitative interpretative research approach (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) with the aim of constructing a holistic, rich, and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2009). The application of qualitative methods in management research has increased in recent years (Johnson, Buehring, Casse & Symon, 2007). Our data consist of one set of 12 interviews with middle managers working in various types of organizations in the United States. Data were collected by conducting in-depth interviews through email. Email interviewing was particularly well suited for this study as it produced rich written accounts of participants'

perspectives on the implementation of organizational strategies. Online semistructured interviewing is particularly beneficial for interpretive researchers (Curasi, 2001).

The 12 interview transcripts were read several times to gain insight and achieve familiarity with the data. Once an overall sense of the data and obtained, some initial notes of interesting and significant accounts in the transcript were made, describing any striking issues. This step involved making exploratory coding without categorizing the text into certain meaning units. At this descriptive level of the initial noting stage, key words, sentences, and phrases were recorded. An initial list of provisional codes was then generated with an attempt to capture the ideas that mattered to the participants in terms of their subjective views. Those provisional codes were examined to see if they could be grouped together in meaningful ways. Emerging themes from the exploratory codes were developed, noting any connections between them. At this stage of the analysis, the interpretative aspect was emphasized where we began to make sense of what the participants have said with the intent of "mapping the interrelationships, connections and patterns between exploratory notes" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 91).

5. Findings and Discussion

The emphasis throughout the study was on letting the participants speak for themselves. Attempting to portray multiple participant perspectives and capture some of the richness and complexity of the subject matter, illustrative quotations were taken from the interview transcript. The findings represent a thematically organized synthesis of the views and perceptions of the 12 participants on strategy implementation. The findings of this study are grouped into three main categories. First, the results related to the organizational factors influencing strategy implementation are reported. These factors are participative management style, strategic alignments, and internal communication. Second, the findings regarding the contribution of middle managers to strategy implementation are presented. Finally, themes related to the challenges associated with strategy implementation are discussed.

5.1 Participative Management Style

The majority of the participants pointed to a participative management style as a style that inspires employee engagement as one of the key factors influencing strategy implementation. According to the participants, adopting a participative management style by engaging key employees in the early stages of strategy planning and development has important implications, which include (a) being closer to those who do the actual work of implementation, (b) inclusion of staff input, (c) obtaining multiple perspectives and being open to new ideas, and (d) reducing potential resistance. Participants indicated it is critical to engage middle managers and employees from other levels in the organization in the strategy work because those organizational members are normally closer to the execution lines.

Engaging representative groups from different functions in the organization, especially those who have insights and information about customers, would allow for various perspectives, generate new ideas, and ensures the management becomes engaged in exploring how to refine and implement the strategy. Further, involving managers and front-line employees in strategic conversations facilitates understanding the purpose of the strategy by those who are responsible for execution (Vilà & Canales, 2008). Strategic initiatives are more likely to be implemented when they are "designed not for the convenience of top management but for the comfortable execution of middle management and the front line," as one participant put it. The perception of the majority of the participants was that a participative and supportive management style is necessary for strategy implementation; this perception may explain why participants also reported that including middle managers in the strategy development phase facilitates engagement and buy-in. When middle managers are included in formulating strategic initiatives, they feel they have contributed in the strategic efforts and develop a sense of ownership. It is argued that employee engagement encourages a sense of ownership of the strategy and further develops organizational capabilities (Shirey, 2011). However, empirical research to support such claim is lacking.

There is an increasing interest in the topic of employee engagement from scholars within the field of human resource management (Guest, 2013; Keenoy, 2013; Rees, Alfes, & Gatenby, 2013). There is an accumulating body of evidence suggesting that "high levels of engagement are associated with high levels of performance, citizenship behaviour and individual wellbeing" (Truss, Shantz, Soane, Alfes, & Delbridge, 2013, p. 2658). However, the identification of a mechanism to enhance employee engagement remains a challenge (Truss et al., 2013). From an organizational leadership perspective, a significant relationship has been found between participative leadership at supervisor level and employee commitment and trust (Miao, Newman, Schwarz, & Xu, 2013). As the global business environment continues to be more competitive and complex, there is an

increasing recognition of the need to adopt participatory leadership styles that promote corporate entrepreneurship (Morrisette & Oberman, 2013). Despite the emerging body of research from the human resource management field proposing a positive relationship between employee engagement and performance outcomes, there is little empirical evidence to suggest that engagement enhances strategic practice, particularly in relation to strategy implementation.

5.2 Strategic Alignment

The positive relationship between organizational alignment and successful strategy implementation was one of the primary findings of this study. The order of magnitude in terms of the number of participants who spoke about the importance of strategic alignment was evident in the data. However, as with other emerging themes, the participants offered rich descriptions of views and a diverse set of perceptions about the various aspects of alignment that are critical to strategy implementation. Most of the participants emphasized that organizations need to ensure alignment between strategic intentions and employee actions and activities. Recent research findings suggest that there is strong relationship between consensus and performance, particularly for lower levels of strategic alignment (Walter, Kellermanns, Floyd, Veiga, & Matherne, 2013).

Few participants expressed their views of the importance of having mental alignment among organizational members regarding the designed processes, objectives, activities, and needed skills. Participants commented on the potential misalignment between the developed strategic plans and organizational and environmental realities, which would lead to a gap between strategy and implementation. In the words of one of the participants, "Failure to execute successfully is essentially reflective of an inability to align the mental construction (plan) with the reality—the strategy gap." One aspect of strategic alignment is the required consistency between the actions of those involved in the implementation process and the strategy. The understanding, awareness, and positive behavior toward the new strategic objectives are required for achieving alignment with the new strategy (van Riel, Berens & Dijkstra, 2009).

5.3 Internal Communication

The overwhelming majority of the participants indicated that internal communication is a critical factor influencing strategy implementation. Participants shared their views of the importance of internal communication at various levels in the organization and how effective communication leads to positive outcomes. One middle manager commented on the role of leadership in clearly communicating strategic goals to the staff: "Organizations (the leader) must be clear on communicated intentions and remain visibly/fully committed to the intentions". Some participants posited that ongoing, personal communication from organizational leaders helps in achieving commitment from the employees. Other participants maintained that when the strategy is clearly communicated and the objectives are adequately shared, intentions could be easily followed.

Communication has been a major recurring theme in the literature related to strategy implementation (Balogun, 2006; Forman & Argenti, 2005; Martin, 2010). Okumus (2003) defined communication within the context of strategy implementation as "the mechanisms that send formal and informal messages about the new strategy" (p. 877). Understanding the strategy and the strategic intent of an organization requires effective and continuous communication. Turning strategy into action entails conveying and clarifying individual responsibilities and expected outcomes to key people in the organization. As one middle manager commented: "Typically, implementation requires careful and precise communication throughout the organization, particularly to those who will be required to participate in some way in the implementation." According to Cocks (2010), failing to communicate the organization's strategic direction to all the employees is likely to lead to misinterpretation of strategic intents, which might cause a strategy execution failure.

5.4 Middle Management Contribution to Strategy Implementation

The participants stressed the unique position of middle managers in the organization that enabled them to influence others and manage the day-to-day operations. Moreover, the participants described middle managers' familiarity with the operations and organizational processes, which placed them in a better position to advise upper management on strategic directions and anticipate potential obstacles to strategy implementation. One of the middle managers emphasized the importance of the structural position of middle managers in terms their "ability to influence others" and responsibility to "manage the daily efforts of the organization." Middle managers are more likely to be familiar with the implementation process and therefore can anticipate potential barriers. Given their familiarity with day-to-day work, employees' skill sets and general market dynamics, these middle managers are able to help evaluate the strategic direction in line with market trends and internal

capabilities, while also flagging risks or tradeoffs that might be required if the strategy is pursued. They can also help set expectations with senior management about the resource requirements for successful strategy execution.

Several participants noted the role of middle managers as communicators and translators of the top management strategic intentions. One middle manager wrote: "Middle managers help with the downward flow of information and the horizontal alignment between the enterprise functional areas." Another manager asserted, "The role of the middle manager here is to do the translation on behalf of the executive and generate the need for the strategy." One of our informants claimed that middle managers are in a better position than executive management to convey information throughout the organization, as they are able to preserve the content of the message. He wrote: "Left to the C-suite to relay information obtained from middle level managers, the content is almost always over-generalized and much is lost in the translation as it moves its way up the corporate ladder."

One of the key objectives of this study was to shed some light onto the ways in which middle managers might contribute to the implementation of organizational strategies. Given the fundamental role played by middle managers in the strategic process (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011), middle managers' commitment to strategy implementation becomes critical. Floyd and Wooldridge (1994) noted, "Strategies that lack middle management commitment suffer serious implementation problems" (p. 49). Further, middle managers are a valuable source of knowledge and information that is needed for the implementation process.

Because of their structural position, middle managers can be seen as a channel for the translation of top management strategic intents as well as an important force for managing the daily organizational operations. Given their proximity to the operational activities, coupled with access to senior management, middle managers occupy a unique position in organizations. Floyd and Wooldridge (1994) noted that middle managers contribute greatly to strategy implementation by translating organizational strategies into operational actions through monitoring individual performance, developing methods to achieve a strategy, and taking the necessary adjustment to ensure alignment between the strategy and the expected behavior.

5.5 Challenges in Strategy Implementation

One of the obstacles to strategy implementation uncovered in this study was the ineffective management of change. One middle manager admitted that change is difficult: "Implementation represents change and, for some, change is very difficult." Because the purpose of developing new strategies is normally linked to an organization's future vision to gain a competitive advantage, it is likely that executing those strategies requires changes in current organizational processes, systems, structures, and culture (Saunders, Mann, & Smith, 2008). Therefore, when implementing planned strategies, change seems inevitable. Even though management can evaluate risks, uncertain consequences of change are always difficult to describe or estimate. It is important, therefore, to understand the dynamics and consequences of change in the context of strategies proposed. Such understanding can be applied to suggest how a change process can be managed in principle. A participant explained how handling change at an organizational level is much more difficult than managing change at an individual level.

Managing change is a complex process because of the interconnectedness of causes and consequences. Sequences of events unfold over time and may affect both the strategy of the organization and the people who work within the organization. Sometimes, people resist proposals for change and make strategy difficult to implement; sometimes, they are enthusiastic and willing to contribute significantly towards proposed ideas for change (Kotter, 2007). For managers, handling the change process requires an awareness of the overall strategic direction of the organization as well as deep knowledge of its operational activities at the individual level.

Poor communication was stressed by most of the participants as one of the key challenges relating to strategy implementation. These participants spoke about effective communication being a challenge and how the absence of thoughtful communication could lead to misinterpretation and a loss of meaning as the message travels from one level to another, or even give way to the spread of rumors. A middle manager commented on how poor communication might undermine efforts in strategy implementation: "Too often, information about implementations is inaccurate, poorly stated, sent to the wrong individuals, or otherwise problematic."

The majority of the participants indicated that it is critical for organizations to maintain the needed discipline to support strategy implementation. The participants suggested that the absence of a supportive discipline is one of the pressing problems facing organizations. Some aspects of such an unsupportive discipline, as highlighted by the participants, include having a reactionary management style, being too tactical and less strategic, the presence of conflicting perspectives within organizations, the focus on day-to-day urgent matters, and the performance-driven culture that dominates the current corporate world, which impedes strategic thinking, reflection, creativity, and innovation.

6. Conclusion

The outcomes of the study are relevant to improving business practices in several ways. The struggle of most organizations to implement intended strategies is well documented in the literature related to strategic management (Hrebiniak, 2006; Neilson, Martin, & Powers, 2008; Schaap, 2012). Providing a deeper understanding of the common challenges to strategy implementation could assist business leaders to overcome potential barriers to strategy implementation by embedding the analysis of possible problems during the strategy development and planning. Results of this study add to the body of knowledge related to barriers to strategy implementation by uncovering potential obstacles from the viewpoint of middle managers who play a key role in organizational strategic activities in general and strategy implementation in particular.

Another contribution of this study to the academic and professional literature is the exploration of some of the key organizational factors influencing strategy implementation. These factors are participative management style, strategic alignment, and internal communication. By adopting a participative management style, ensuring strategic alignment of various organizational elements, and enhancing internal communication, organizations are more likely to succeed in implementing their planned and emergent strategies. Additionally, the information emerging from this study could help organizational practitioners be mindful of the internal factors that might influence the strategy besides the attention given to external factors such as competition, economic conditions, and the industry forces determining the attractiveness of a given market.

In conclusion, the findings regarding the contribution of middle managers to strategy implementation could provide insights to organizational leaders on ways to engage middle managers in strategic practices. Due to their structural positions, middle managers play a key role in managing resources, providing information to decision makers, giving emotional support to their subordinates, and communicating the strategic intent of senior management throughout the organization. It is our intention organizational leaders might use these findings to develop mechanisms to engage middle managers in the strategy implementation efforts and ensure their commitment.

References

Balogun, J. (2006). Managing change: Steering a course between intended strategies and unanticipated outcomes. *Long Range Planning, 39*(1), 29–49. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.bbr.2011.03.031

Bourque, N., & Johnson, G. (2008). Strategy workshops and 'away-days' as ritual. In G. Hodgkinson & W. Starbuck (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of organizational decision making* (pp. 552–564). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Cocks, G. (2010). Emerging concepts for implementing strategy. *The TQM Journal, 22*(3), 260–266. http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/17542731011035505

Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Curasi, C. F. (2001). A critical exploration of face-to-face interviewing vs. computer-mediated interviewing. *International Journal of Market Research, 43*(4), 361–375.

Floyd S. W., & Wooldridge, B. (1992). Middle management involvement in strategy and its association with strategic type: A research note. *Strategic Management Journal: Special Issue, 13*, 153–167. http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/smj.4250131012

Floyd, S. W., & Wooldridge, B. (1994). Dinosaurs or dynamos? Recognizing middle management's strategic role. *Academy of Management Executive, 8*(4), 47–57. http://dx.doi.org/10.5465/AME.1994.9412071702

Forman, J., & Argenti, P. A. (2005). How corporate communication influences strategy implementation, reputation and the corporate brand: An exploratory qualitative study. *Corporate Reputation Review, 8*(3), 245–264. http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.crr.1540253

Golsorkhi, D., Rouleau, L., Seidl, D., & Vaara, E. (2010). *Cambridge handbook of strategy as practice*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Guest, D. E. (2013). Employee engagement: Fashionable fad or long-term fixture? In C. Truss, K. Alfes, R. Delbridge, A. Shantz, & E. C. Soane (Eds.), *Employee engagement in theory and practice*. London: Routledge.

Guth, W. D., & MacMillan, I. C. (1986). Strategy implementation versus middle management self interest. *Strategic Management Journal, 7*(4), 313–327. http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/smj.4250070403

Hakonsson, D. D., Burton, R. M., Obel, B., & Lauridsen, J. T. (2012). Strategy implementation requires the right executive style: Evidence from Danish SMEs. *Long Range Planning, 45*(1), 182–208. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.lrp.2012.02.004

Herzig, S. E., & Jammieson, N. L. (2006). Middle managers' uncertainty management during organizational change. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, *27*(8), 628–648. http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/01437730610709264

Hodgkinson, G., & Clarke, I. (2007). Conceptual note, exploring the cognitive significance of organizational strategizing: A dual-process framework and research agenda. *Human Relations*, *60*(1), 243–255. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0018726707075297

Hope, O. (2010). The politics of middle management sensemaking and sensegiving. *Journal of Change Management*, *10*(2), 195–215. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14697011003795669

Hrebiniak, L. G. (2006). Obstacles to effective strategy implementation. *Organizational Dynamics, 35*(1), 12–31. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.orgdyn.2005.12.001

Hutzschenreuter, T., & Kleindienst, I. (2006). Strategy-process research: What have we learned and what is still to be explored. *Journal of Management, 32*(5), 673–720. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0149206306291485

Huy, Q. (2011). How middle managers' group-focus emotions and organizational social identities influence strategy implementation. *Strategic Management Journal*, *32*(13), 1387–1410. http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/smj.961

Jarzabkowski, P., Balogun, J., & Seidl, D. (2007). Strategizing: The challenges of a practice perspective. *Human Relations, 60*(1), 5–27. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0018726707075703

Jarzabkowski, P., & Spee, P. (2009). Strategy-as-practice: A review and future directions for the field. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, *11*(1), 69–95. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2370.2008.00250.x

Johnson, P., Buehring, A., Cassell, C., & Symon, G. (2007). Defining qualitative management research: An empirical investigation. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management*, *2*(1), 23–42. http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/17465640710749108

Keenoy, T. (2013). Engagement: A murmuration of objects. In C. Truss, K. Alfes, R. Delbridge, A. Shantz, & E. C. Soane (Eds.), *Employee engagement in theory and practice.* London: Routledge.

Kotter, J. (2007). Leading change: Why transformation efforts fail. *Harvard Business Review, 85*(1), 92–107.

Mair, J. & Thurner, J. (2008). Going global: How middle managers approach the process in medium-sized firms. *Strategic Change*, *17*(3–4), 83–99. http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/jsc.818

Mantere, S. (2008). Role expectations and middle manager strategic agency. *Journal of Management Studies, 45*(2), 294–316. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2007.00744.x

Martin, R. L. (2010). The execution trap (cover story). *Harvard Business Review, 88*(7), 64–71.

Miao, Q., Newman, A., Schwarz, G., & Xu, L. (2013). Participative leadership and the organizational commitment of civil servants in China: the mediating effects of trust in supervisor. *British Journal of Management*, *24*(S1), S76–S92. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1467-8551.12025

Morrisette, S., & Oberman, W. (2013). Shifting strategic imperatives: A stages of leadership perspective on the adoption of corporate entrepreneurship. *Journal of Applied Management and Entrepreneurship*, *18*(2), 59–82.

Neilson, G., Martin, K., & Powers, E. (2008). The secrets to successful strategy execution. *Harvard Business Review*, *86*(6), 60–70.

Okumus, F. (2003). A framework to implement strategies in organizations. *Management Decision, 41*(9), 871–882. http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/00251740310499555

Pappas, J. M., & Wooldridge, B. (2007). Middle managers' divergent strategic activity: An investigation of multiple measures of network centrality. *Journal of Management Studies*, *44*(3), 323–341. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2007.00681.x

Paroutis, S., Heracleous, L., & Angwin, D. (2013). *Practicing Strategy: Text and Cases*. London: Sage.

Rees, C., Alfes, K., & Gatenby, M. (2013). Employee voice and engagement: Connections and consequences. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management, 24*(14), 2780–2798. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2013.763843

Rouleau, L., & Balogun, J. (2011). Middle managers, strategic sensemaking, and discursive competence. *Journal of Management Studies, 48*(5), 953–983. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2010.00941.x

Saunders, M., Mann, R., & Smith, R. (2008). Implementing strategic initiatives: A framework of leading practices. *International Journal of Operations & Production Management, 28*(11), 1095–1123. http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/01443570810910908

Schaap, J. I. (2012). Strategy implementations—can organizations attain outstanding performance? *Strategic Management Review, 6*(1), 98–121.

Shi, W., Markoczy, L., & Dess, G. G. (2009). The role of middle management in the strategy process: Group affiliation, structural holes, and tertius iungens. *Journal of Management, 35*(6), 1453–1480. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0149206309346338

Shirey, M. R. (2011). Addressing strategy execution challenges to lead sustainable change. *Journal of Nursing Administration, 41*(1), 1–4. http://dx.doi.org/10.1097/NNA.0b013e318200288a

Sillince, J., & Mueller, F. (2007). Switching strategic perspective: The reframing of accounts of responsibility. *Organization Studies, 28*(2), 155–176. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0170840606067989

Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research*. London: SAGE.

Teulier, R., & Rouleau, L. (2013). Middle managers' sensemaking and interorganizational change initiation: Translation spaces and editing practices. *Journal of Change Management, 13*(3), 308–337. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14697017.2013.822674

Truss, C., Shantz, A., Soane, E., Alfes, K., & Delbridge, R. (2013). Employee engagement, organisational performance and individual well-being: Exploring the evidence, developing the theory. *The international Journal of Human Resource Management, 24*(14), 2657–2669. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2013.798921

Van Riel, C., Berens, G., & Dijkstra, M. (2009). Stimulating strategically aligned behaviour among employees. *Journal of Management Studies, 46*(7), 1197–1226. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2009.00837.x

Vaara, E., & Whittington, R. (2012). Strategy-as-practice: taking social practices seriously. *The Academy of Management Annals, 6*(1), 285–336. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080%2F19416520.2012.672039

Vilà, J., & Canales, J. I. (2008). Can strategic planning make strategy more relevant and build commitment over time? The case of RACC. *Long Range Planning, 41*(3), 273–290. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016%2Fj.lrp.2008.02.009

Walter, J., Kellermanns, F. W., Floyd, S. W., Veiga, J. F., & Matherne, C. (2013). Strategic alignment: A missing link in the relationship between strategic consensus and organizational performance. *Strategic Organization, 11*(3), 304–328. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177%2F1476127013481155

Wooldridge, B., Schmid, T., & Floyd, S. W. (2008). The middle management perspective on strategy process: Contributions, synthesis, and future research. *Journal of Management, 34*(6), 1190–1221. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0149206308324326