



## Research paper

# Navigating crisis from the backseat? How top managers can support radical change initiatives by middle managers<sup>☆</sup>

Mariano L.M. Heyden<sup>a,\*</sup>, Ralf Wilden<sup>b</sup>, Chelsea Wise<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Monash Business School, Department of Management, Monash University, 900 Dandenong Rd, Caulfield East, VIC 3145, Australia

<sup>b</sup> Macquarie Business School, Department of Marketing, Macquarie University, 3 Management Drive, Sydney, NSW 2109, Australia

<sup>c</sup> Hyper Anna, 1 York St, Sydney, NSW 2000, Australia

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## ABSTRACT

We advance the premise that to navigate crisis, rather than reactively cutting costs by culling middle management, top managers can benefit from enabling radical change initiatives by middle managers. Contextualizing this idea to the marketing function and the COVID-19 crisis, we ask: How can Chief Marketing Officers (CMOs) support marketing middle managers (MMMs) in initiating radical change in crisis situations? We take the position that marketing managers' distinctive functional influence on radical change is in driving product and service innovations that are new-to-the-firm. We then argue that crisis situations present an opportunity for top and middle managers to rethink assumptions about 'who does what' in radical change initiatives from the marketing function, focusing on the underemphasized possibility of MMMs initiating change and CMOs implementing. Building on recent findings on 'change role reversal', we unpack the notion that change initiatives may be most effective when middle managers initiate, while top managers implement. This unconventional change route would see CMOs taking a deliberate and supportive back seat in navigating crisis, while MMMs take the wheel in driving radical change initiatives. We identify duties and hurdles to a change role reversal— approach faced by MMMs throughout three stages of innovation-enabled radical change proposed by [Burgelman \(1991; variation-selection-retention\)](#) and chart corresponding roles that CMOs can play to support MMMs: advisor, judge, and guardian. Three tangible final questions addressed to CMOs guide managerial applications, while considerations outside scope are also discussed.

## 1. Introduction

The systemic shock caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has put many companies against the ropes. The kneejerk response to crisis by many top managers is commonly to downsize the workforce (often disproportionately culling middle managers), cut costs, and concentrate decision-making at the top. For instance, a recent global survey of over 3600 B2B managers conducted by [McKinsey and Company \(2020\)](#) reveals that approximately 50% of B2B companies had already reduced their budgets in response to the COVID-19 crisis. Some, like AirBnB, recently culled over 150 marketing jobs in response to the crisis ([Deighton, 2020](#)). Others will likely follow crisis management recommendations advocated by leading consultants to navigate centrally from the top, with executives very much in the driving seat. [Deloitte \(2019, p. 7\)](#) for instance, recommends that 'crisis response is firmly in the domain of the executive, requiring executive direction and hands-

on operational intervention.' But are such responses always the best way top managers can navigate crisis?

The responses to crisis just canvassed are prevalent, endorsed by some respectable consultancies, and sometimes a necessary last resort. Too often, though, they are myopic, reactionary, or even premature. As one cautionary tale, a large residential roofing business initially furloughed the majority of its workforce and struggled to reopen manufacturing when demand did not actually decrease ([Hill & Jacobs, 2020](#)). As such, these band-aid solutions are unlikely to equip firms to create the new normal and 'hit the ground running' when the dust settles. Rather, companies that respond to crises with innovations tend to perform better in the long term ([Jansen, Van Den Bosch, & Volberda, 2006](#)). Studies have suggested that companies that pursued more radical innovations in new product and market developments responded most effectively to previous global crises ([Archibugi, Filippetti, & Frenz, 2013](#)). As such, top managers have an opportunity to interpret crisis as

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\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [pitosh.heyden@monash.edu](mailto:pitosh.heyden@monash.edu) (M.L.M. Heyden), [ralf.wilden@mq.edu.au](mailto:ralf.wilden@mq.edu.au) (R. Wilden), [chelsea@hyperanna.com](mailto:chelsea@hyperanna.com) (C. Wise).

an opportunity for companies to innovate for the future (Yadav, Prabhu, & Chandy, 2007). However, top managers cannot do it alone (Raes, Heijltjes, Glunk, & Roe, 2011).

Middle managers are boundary-spanning actors who operate at a key intersection between the firm and its environment, while also connecting executive and supervisory tiers within the organization (Randhawa, Wilden, & West, 2019; Reimer, Van Doorn, & Heyden, 2016). For B2B firms, marketing managers are a main interface between the company and core customers. As such, they are the first to sense ripples in the environment, while also being – correspondingly – entrusted as first responders (Huy, 2001; Mantere, 2008). By virtue of this unique position, marketing managers are well-positioned to help firms traverse crises by devising innovative products and services that are new-to-the-firm (Han, Kim, & Srivastava, 1998). For marketing managers, radical innovation and organizational change are two sides of a coin, as these initiatives nudge the organization to learn, develop, reconfigure its capabilities, and break path dependencies (Burgelman, 1991; Mom, Van Den Bosch, & Volberda, 2009; Wilden, Devinney, & Dowling, 2016). However, no one level of marketing managers can drive change alone (D. L. Day, 1994; Heyden, Fourné, Koene, Werkman, & Ansari, 2017; Raes et al., 2011).

Top and middle managers are co-dependent managerial echelons involved in radical change initiatives. Given the central role of the marketing function in innovation (Theodosiou, Kehagias, & Katsikea, 2012), in this article we emphasize how top and middle managers in the marketing function can jointly drive radical change in response to crisis such as the COVID-19 shock. Specifically, we draw on recent developments in managerial change role theory that have suggested that an underapplied way to effectively navigate change, is through reversal of conventional change roles: Middle managers, who would once have merely implemented changes, need to initiate the change, while top managers need to support them in that initiation (Heyden, Fourné, et al., 2017). Building on these advances and applying them to the marketing function, our motivating question asks: How can Chief Marketing Officers (CMOs) support marketing middle managers (MMMs) in initiating radical change in crisis situations?

We posit that the COVID-19 crisis is an opportunity for organizations to rethink the ‘strategic’ and ‘tactical’ roles of CMOs and MMMs in radical change initiatives, and we provide some tools to do so. We propose that CMOs need to consider taking a supportive and watchful back seat and encourage MMMs to take the wheel in driving radical change initiatives. We draw on key findings at the intersection of the following three streams of literature to address our question: the joint influence of top and middle managers on organizational effectiveness (Heyden, Sidhu, & Volberda, 2018; Raes et al., 2011); internal sourcing of radical innovation (Burgelman, 1991; Day, 1994); and managerial roles in initiating and implementing major organizational change (Heyden, Fourné, et al., 2017; Huy, Corley, & Kraatz, 2014; Mantere, 2008).

The essay is structured as follows. First, section 2 discusses the traditional change roles of top and middle managers as commonly advanced in strategic leadership research (Menz, 2012; Nath & Bharadwaj, 2020; Raes et al., 2011): strategic change initiation by executives and tactical change implementation by middle managers (sections 2.1 and 2.2). Then, in section 2.3, we consolidate recent research that shows that middle managers can be able and willing actors in initiating radical change (i.e., taking on the strategic change role), especially when complemented by supportive top managers playing a non-traditional implementation role (Heyden, Fourné, et al., 2017; Mantere, 2008; Wooldridge, Schmid, & Floyd, 2008). Next, section 3 unpacks the specific supporting roles CMOs can play in helping MMMs overcome hurdles to radical change initiation, by revisiting Burgelman's (1991) stage-based model of radical change initiatives: variation, selection, and retention. Section 3 also highlights the challenges CMOs themselves face in effectuating role reversals in driving radical change. In section 4, focusing on managerial implications, we set out a brief

summary and some key questions CMOs can ask themselves right now in the COVID-19 crisis in order to play the right supporting roles. Finally, section 5 briefly zooms out to other considerations beyond our scope that managers should nevertheless be alive to, and presents an overall conclusion.

## 2. Strategic and tactical roles of marketing managers

Within the larger literature on strategic leadership (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Samimi, Cortes, Anderson, & Herrmann, 2020), there has been increasing emphasis on the roles of functional managers (Menz, 2012). Roles can be understood as the characteristic patterns of behaviors enacted by actors in a social system (Georgakakis, Heyden, Oehmichen, & Ekanayake, 2019). Mantere (2008, p. 296) suggested that these ‘[f]unctional roles can be thought of as if organizational members were organs in a body, each serving a specified purpose in the complete system of the body.’ Recently, research seeking to understand the roles of managers has thrust the marketing manager into the spotlight (Germann, Ebbes, & Grewal, 2015; Nath & Bharadwaj, 2020; R. Wang, Saboo, & Grewal, 2015). These marketing managers inhabit different levels of the hierarchy, with different strategic and tactical role expectations (Browne, Sharkey-Scott, Mangematin, Lawlor, & Cuddihy, 2014).

### 2.1. Traditional strategic role of the Chief Marketing Officer

At the strategic apex of the firm, Nath and Mahajan (2017) note that the presence of CMOs underscores the firm's market orientation. B2B firms particularly signal the importance of the marketing function through dedicated executives commonly operating under the title of CMO (Nath & Mahajan, 2008). The general conclusion is that CMOs matter (Aaker, 2008; Wilden & Gudergan, 2015). Indeed, firms can expect to benefit financially, some estimates suggesting up to 15%, from giving CMOs a seat at the strategy table (Germann et al., 2015; Nath & Bharadwaj, 2020; see Ullah, Zaefarian, & Ullah, 2020 on the causality of this link). CMOs ensure that a firm's strategy has a non-trivial market orientation, bridging across functional siloes to create synergy through activities such as shared marketing planning processes (Menz, 2012). The CMO role has thus become a fixture in well-performing companies (Auh & Merlo, 2012).

Marketing capabilities in the executive suite have been shown to be particularly valuable in fast-changing environments (Morgan, Slotegraaf, & Vorhies, 2009; Morgan, Vorhies, & Mason, 2009; Theodosiou et al., 2012). In these situations, Buyl, Boone, Hendriks, and Matthyssens (2011) note that marketing expertise at the strategic level helps in recognizing client needs and preferences in developing new offerings; reducing time to market of innovative offerings; and ensuring new offerings are better aligned with the firm's capabilities. This reasoning is consistent with studies establishing the importance of marketing capabilities for innovation (Grinstein, 2008; Han et al., 1998; Liao, Chang, Wu, & Katrichis, 2011; Theodosiou et al., 2012; Wilden, Gudergan, & Lings, 2019). Thus, CMOs are expected to play a leading role at the strategic level in developing, sustaining, and (re)deploying marketing capabilities in pursuit of innovation. It follows in the traditional view that *initiation* of change, and especially for our purposes radical innovation to overcome crises, is often assumed to be the domain of the CMO.

### 2.2. Traditional tactical role of marketing middle managers

Although CMOs are expected to play a strategic role in driving innovation and allied organizational change, they are not traditionally cast as lone rangers in deploying marketing capabilities. Complementing upper echelons research into the role of C-level functional executives (Menz, 2012; Reimer, Van Doorn, & Heyden, 2018), the Middle Manager Perspective to strategy process research has

solidified the value of middle managers in the tactical implementation of change (Wooldridge et al., 2008). Middle managers are decision-makers, typically with functional scope of authority, below top executive level but above supervisory ranks (Glaser, Fourné, & Elfring, 2015). The Middle Management Perspective highlights that functional strategic roles only become realized through middle managers who tactically translate strategic concepts into concrete actions (Anicich & Hirsh, 2017; Heyden et al., 2018; Radaelli & Sitton-Kent, 2016; Raes et al., 2011).

Under this conception, marketing middle managers (MMMs) can be expected to play an imperative tactical role in *implementing the initiatives of CMOs*. Middle managers, for instance, serve as technological linkages when firms transition between stability and change (Taylor & Helfat, 2009); engage in extra-role behaviors to translate new ideas from top managers into actionable practices (Heyden et al., 2018); realize the implementation of open innovation strategies (Randhawa et al., 2019); and affect the actual implementation outcomes of innovation processes, in particular successful product innovations and their degree of market novelty (Schubert & Tavassoli, 2020). Thus, traditionally, MMMs are expected to help realize the marketing capabilities of the firm by implementing the radical innovation initiatives of CMOs.

### 2.3. Reversing roles of Chief Marketing Officer and marketing middle managers

In line with Mantere's (2008) metaphor of functional roles as organs in a body, the traditional interpretation just outlined in sections 2.1 and 2.2 assumes that the anatomy of change places top managers at the head in roles deemed strategic as change initiators, whereas middle managers in tactical roles are change implementers (D. Wang, Su, & Guo, 2019). That implementation is not necessarily portrayed as faithful though: The same tradition often assumes middle managers are resistant to change and frequently respond to change initiatives from the top with cynicism, deliberate delay, and even sabotage (Barton & Ambrosini, 2013; Giangreco & Peccei, 2005; Piderit, 2000). Adjusting the anatomical metaphor, this would make them less like willing hands than, at best, dragging feet. Certainly, middle managers are in a precarious position when it comes to change (Huy, 2002; Huy et al., 2014) and are commonly scapegoated when change fails (Fenton-O'Creevy, 2001). This reputation is far from necessarily warranted, as change often fails due to lack of support from top managers or failure to give middle managers ownership over change initiatives (Kotter, 1995; Randhawa et al., 2019). Rather, middle managers have been shown to be receptive to change and, in fact, may be motivated to initiate change, especially by championing radical innovations that have an enduring impact on the fate of organizations (Burgelman, 1991; D. L. Day, 1994).

Homing in from middle managers more generally to the marketing function, research has found that MMMs have skills relevant to change initiation through three core practices: sensing (anticipatory sensing and internal sensing); challenging (encouraging direct feedback and embracing debate and discussion); and transmitting (unravelling conflicting messages and upward and downward information funneling) (Browne et al., 2014). This observation is in line with recent developments in managerial change role theory, which have highlighted the need to rethink, and indeed sometimes reverse, managerial change roles (Heyden, Fourné, et al., 2017). These findings on 'change role reversal' draw attention to the fact that strategic and tactical roles need not be hierarchically pre-defined. Rather, both top and/or middle managers can initiate and/or implement change.

An influential recent study by Heyden, Fourné, et al. (2017) found that of those 'and/or' combinations change efforts received greatest support from employees when they were initiated by middle managers but implemented by top managers. Yet despite its potential to be the most effective, change initiated by middle managers and implemented by top managers is the least common way of managers across the hierarchy combining to drive change. As such, change role reversal

offers an under-applied opportunity for navigating crisis. It deserves consideration both routinely and, more so, when a crisis ups the stakes, and before the crisis pushes firms to oft-promoted defensive measures such as cost-cutting. Early anecdotal evidence from shocks due to the current pandemic corroborates the practical application of a change role reversal lens to navigate crisis. For instance, Serco, a large UK-based B2B public service provider, has fared well so far during COVID-19 by delegating local decision power to a smaller set of middle managers, a practice it had established already before the crisis, thus loosening control by the top management (Hill & Jacobs, 2020).

Applying such flipped thinking to the marketing function, we argue that change role reversals in the CMO–MMM interface can be central to navigating a crisis. Thus, as a first step in that navigation, we need to challenge our assumptions of the roles that CMOs and MMMs occupy in radical change initiatives. In so doing, one way of traversing a crisis may be through reversals of traditional change roles of marketing managers. We posit that top managers benefit from loosening their grip during crises as Serco did, enabling managers 'closer to the action' to creatively and intuitively respond to crisis (Anicich & Hirsh, 2017). MMMs may be particularly well situated to respond to this call to arms. After all, they are often the key link between the organization and its customers as well as having direct and unfiltered input from the shop floor (Randhawa et al., 2019) but are also in direct touch with the CMO. Thus, we explore the idea that MMMs are not only able, but also potentially willing, participants in radical change initiatives in response to crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

### 2.4. MMMs' motives for, and advantages in, initiating radical change

If firms rethink 'who does what' during a crisis, MMMs can step up and enact a so-called strategic role typically assumed to be the domain of top managers: change initiation. The change initiation role usually entails what is known as sparking change through activities such as sensing and shaping a unique opportunity, establishing its business case and resource requirements, and selling ideas to gain support from powerful stakeholders (Ahearne, Lam, & Kraus, 2014; Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Heyden, Fourné, et al., 2017). The marketing function's distinctive influence on the fate of organizations, especially amidst crisis, rests in devising product-market and service offerings that are new-to-the-firm (Heyden, Reimer, & Van Doorn, 2017). As such, they may be particularly able to drive radical change initiatives. However, by pursuing radical innovations, MMMs increase their own learning costs, as well as potentially cannibalizing their product portfolios (Chandy & Tellis, 1998). Despite this precarious position in change, there are several reasons why marketing middle managers may be both highly motivated and well placed to initiate radical change.

#### 2.4.1. Initiating change to capitalize on opportunities

MMMs inherently are output-oriented boundary spanners (Heyden et al., 2018). More generally, managers in output-oriented functions have been shown to 'favor innovation strategies because these business functions emphasize growth through discovering new products and markets' (Barker III & Mueller, 2002, p. 786; see also Heyden et al., 2018). Due to their structural position, they are more likely to have precise and up-to-date competitive intelligence and insights (Reimer et al., 2016). MMMs' close connections to internal and external stakeholders afford them a more intimate understanding of emerging technologies and competitive offerings and thus they are the first in the organization to experience mismatches between the firm's offerings and customer requirements (Mom et al., 2009; Mom, Van Den Bosch, & Volberda, 2007). MMMs particularly control another set of interpersonal relationships with a key stakeholder: the customer. As such, they are also among the first to experience dissonance between the firm's offerings and customer perceptions and, since marketing capabilities are embedded in boundary-spanning relationships between the company and its customers, MMMs are key conduits for sensing new

opportunities and co-creating radical new product and service offerings. This apt positioning also gives them a motive to initiate change. As a critical point of contact with customers, MMMs have the incentive to act and create initiatives that satisfy the changing needs of relevant stakeholders. Therefore, they are ideally situated, and motivated, to connect the organization to customers and differentiate its offerings from those of its competitors through innovative offerings.

As a unique channel for knowledge flows from inside (e.g., by being close to lower-level marketing managers and frontline service staff) and outside the organization (Mom et al., 2007; Mom et al., 2009), MMMs can read the winds of change (Dutton, Ashford, O'neill, Hayes, & Wierba, 1997). This means they can serve as early-warning systems for identifying changing customer preferences and shifting priorities from clients, as well as detecting weak signals from the environment. Due to CMOs' more generalist interpretations of the environment, this top echelon may fail to pick up on subtle ripples that signal upcoming crises. MMMs in turn may have the richest information to make sense of these changes as they emerge. As such, through early identification, MMMs may be more likely to see potential changes as an opportunity rather than a threat (Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Dutton & Jackson, 1987). When issues in a crisis or otherwise are framed as an opportunity, decision-makers are more likely to be receptive and act upon them (Staw, Sandelands, & Dutton, 1981). In the context of B2B firms and COVID-19, for example, we have seen several commercial hand sanitizer manufacturers provide their products to consumers, thus pivoting to a B2C orientation and redefining their markets.

#### 2.4.2. Initiating change for self-preservation

Second, middle managers are in a precarious position when organizations try to change. Especially in times of crisis, when cost-cutting measures become advocated as quick fixes, middle managers are often among the casualties. Consequently, what is being called the second wave of layoffs in the US during the coronavirus crisis is expected to largely affect middle managers (Mutikani, 2020). As such, middle managers have a personal incentive to find innovative ways to maintain and generate revenue, particularly during crises, as they would be among the first to suffer when companies face performance shortfalls (Tarakci, Ateş, Floyd, Ahn, & Wooldridge, 2018).

In addition, even if not culled, middle managers are often scapegoated for failed strategic initiatives (Fenton-O'Creedy, 2001). This gives them an incentive to make change efforts successful (Guth & MacMillan, 1986). From this defensive agency interpretation, middle managers are spurred to proactively champion changes that sensibly leverage the nuanced capabilities of the firm, meet customer needs, and in turn make sense to employees, improving the likelihood of success; otherwise they may be singled out for failure to realize the expected outcomes of generic top-down plans (Ahearne et al., 2014; Glaser, Stam, & Takeuchi, 2015).

#### 2.4.3. Initiating change for career progression strategy

Finally, from a career progression standpoint, middle managers whether in marketing or elsewhere have an incentive to demonstrate that they have initiated, championed, and successfully implemented change (D. L. Day, 1994). Middle manager ranks can be a career catapult or a dead-end (Fairburn & Malcomson, 2001) and managers have an incentive to progress through these ranks swiftly. From a more offensive agency interpretation, crisis situations may thus represent an opportunity for career progression. By initiating change, middle managers can showcase their potential to exercise strategic leadership under uncertainty, garner experience with navigating between stability and change, and build their own legacy to enable pursuit of future career opportunities (D. L. Day, 1994; Ren & Guo, 2011).

MMMs may thus actively search for promising opportunities even at the best of times, and more urgently at the worst (Dutton et al., 1997; Hornsby, Kuratko, Shepherd, & Bott, 2009; Kuratko, Ireland, Covin, & Hornsby, 2005). A case in point: During COVID-19, many MMMs of B2B

firms have had to develop innovative customer engagement strategies to reposition the firm, as their traditional model was largely based on attending and presenting at large face-to-face exhibitions to acquire and retain customers. For example, the Australia-based AI and analytics start-up Hyper Anna moved all its client engagement activities online, creating a series of webinars and thought-leadership articles on crisis-relevant topics such as leadership and preparing for a possible recession, with a focus on helping customers through the crisis rather than selling its software solution first and foremost.

These three motives and advantages favoring MMMs' leading involvement in radical change initiatives are consistent with findings documenting how iconic companies (e.g., Intel) that have made the most radical renewals were characterized by middle managers leading the charge (Burgelman, 1991; Day, 1994). Companies that failed were the ones who did not include middle managers prominently in change initiation, or even blocked their attempts (Lamberg, Lubinaité, Ojala, & Tikkanen, 2019; Vuori & Huy, 2016). Some studies have long suggested that middle managers can play a pivotal role in driving radical innovation more generally (Burgelman, 1991; Day, 1994). Yet, despite their favorable position to initiate change, middle managers still require top manager support to ideate, filter, and introduce radical innovations organization-wide. We turn next to specifically how (and when) CMOs can provide that support.

### 3. How CMOs can enable radical change initiatives by MMMs

Although we have reasoned that MMMs may be best suited to initiate the key changes to traverse the COVID-19 crisis, they cannot do it by themselves any more than CMOs can. In terms of our driving metaphor, the CMO has not stepped out of the vehicle but only retired to the back seat, from where they continue to navigate and assist the MMMs who are now at the wheel. Specifically, although we advocate MMMs initiating radical innovation, as a role reversal this brings unaccustomed challenges and requires certain support that only CMOs can provide. Top management support for middle managers is important, more generally (Barton & Ambrosini, 2013). Key findings would thus point to the intuition that CMOs who are perceived to be supportive of their MMMs are more likely to win additional effort and less cynicism from employees (and not only from MMMs themselves) (Barton & Ambrosini, 2013; Heyden et al., 2018). Support from top managers also carries symbolic value. For, knowing they enjoy support from the very top can incentivize those who have to implement strategies to take pride in their change efforts (Huy, 2011; Huy et al., 2014; Noble & Mokwa, 1999). But just what forms should CMOs' support of MMM initiatives take?

Drawing on Burgelman's (1991) seminal three-stage model and recent advances in managerial change role theory (Heyden, Fourné, et al., 2017), we provide an overview of how CMOs can enable MMMs' radical change initiatives by way of innovation as an adaptive response to crisis. Burgelman suggested that middle managers can play a pivotal role in internally driven radical innovation, whose adoption has the potential to fundamentally change the organization, renewing its basis for competitive supremacy. As the first stage, Burgelman's model highlights the need for *variation*. Variation comprises variety-inducing processes that generate diverse internal ideas, some of which could form the basis of radical innovations. Out of this proliferation of starter ideas, the most promising candidates are then chosen through a *selection* process of filtering at the second stage, where the best are prioritized for resource allocations. Finally, at stage three the organization co-creates supporting structures, systems, and processes for *retention* right into implementation (i.e., past initiation) of a further subset, the most viable ideas for radical change.

Against this backdrop, we next elucidate how CMOs can assist MMMs in driving change in Table 1 and the following three stage-linked subsections. Drawing on the literature on executive and middle manager roles in change, we label and describe three change support



**Table 1**  
Chief Marketing Officer (CMO) Support Roles for marketing middle managers (MMMs) across stages of radical change initiation.

Stage of radical change initiation	MMMs' initiation activities	CMO role	CMOs' supporting actions
Variation	MMMs identify opportunities for product-service offerings currently not addressed by firm. They invent, experiment, and trial ideas. Sunk costs are high.	Advisor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Encourage exploration and experimentation to develop new dimensions of 'know-how' knowledge (Garud, 1997; Garud &amp; Karnøe, 2001).</li> <li>Encourage dissenting perspectives (Pappas &amp; Wooldridge, 2007).</li> <li>Delineate bounds of acceptable proactive behavior (Glaser, Stam, &amp; Takeuchi, 2015; Mantere, 2008).</li> <li>Emotional support in anticipation of sunk costs in ideation (Huy, 2002).</li> </ul>
Selection	Feedback stage, where early proofs of concepts are presented to CMO, who critically judges most promising concepts and/or attributes.	Judge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Incentivize and reward ideation (Baumann &amp; Stieglitz, 2014).</li> <li>Ensure failure does not deter future submission of ideas (Deichmann &amp; van den Ende, 2014).</li> <li>Develop dedicated channels for short-cycle and informal feed-up and feed-down knowledge flows (Mom et al., 2007; Rouleau, 2005).</li> <li>Reframe failure as learning opportunity to establish a 'fail-and-learn-quick' mindset (Cannon &amp; Edmondson, 2005).</li> </ul>
Retention	Commitment stage, where resources are devoted to a subset of minimum viable offerings that survived and evolved through previous stages and business case before implementation is developed.	Guardian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Navigate socio-political environment to secure resources for implementation (D. L. Day, 1994)</li> <li>Install structural safeguards for protecting radical ideas from incremental ones (e.g., cost-cutting focused) (Tushman et al., 2010)</li> <li>Sponsor new ideas internally and legitimize them externally (Nicolai et al., 2010).</li> <li>Encourage probe-and-learn experimentation to speed up implementation (G. S. Day &amp; Schoemaker, 2016).</li> </ul>

roles CMOs need to perform in order to tangibly facilitate MMMs in navigating various obstacles, while also rising to their own challenges. Note that the 'supporting roles' for CMOs here are not among the traditional roles that are getting reversed and were not previously carried out by MMMs; rather, they are particular, supporting activities CMOs have to take on in order to enable the main role reversal whereby MMMs initiate change. At the same time, we observe some practices of MMMs at different stages. We provide a synthesizing overview in Table 1.

3.1. Stage-based CMO roles for supporting radical change initiation by MMMs

3.1.1. CMO advisor role at the variation stage

First, CMOs need to play the role of *advisor* in the variation stage, where the tone of the CMO is encouraging. Besides the sources cited in Table 1, this supporting role is grounded in the literature on advice-seeking from internal and external sources (Heyden, Van Doorn, Reimer, Van Den Bosch, & Volberda, 2013; Lim, Tai, Bamberger, & Morrison, 2020). This literature suggests that executives search for informal inputs from both internal and external sources to make decisions. However, although there is a tendency to prefer external sources (McDonald & Westphal, 2003; Menon & Pfeffer, 2003; Menon, Thompson, & Choi, 2006), internal sources of advice represent an under-tapped source of creative ideas during crisis (Gino, 2008). More importantly, consistent with the role reversal logic, as opposed to their traditional role as advice-seekers (Ma, Kor, & Seidl, 2019), top managers need to become advisors themselves to middle managers.

In the variation stage of radical innovation initiation, MMMs search out and contrive new concepts and ideas, knowing that many will fail. At this stage, the CMO as advisor needs to play a counselling role, stimulating MMMs to come up with unconventional ideas, encouraging them to think from different perspectives, and empowering them to be proactive. This stage has characterized a key initiative implemented during the COVID-19 crisis by Shapiro Negotiations Institute, a Baltimore-based B2B training and consulting company (Knight, 2020). The goal at this stage is to populate the choice set of unconventional ideas, irrespective of ultimate viability. Supportive CMOs notably encourage dissenting perspectives (Pappas & Wooldridge, 2007); delineate bounds of acceptable, ethicality of proactive behavior (Glaser, Stam, & Takeuchi, 2015; Mantere, 2008); and provide emotional support in anticipation of sunk costs in ideation (Huy, 2002). At this stage, as has happened with Serco delegating power in the UK, MMMs are given the autonomy to come up with ideas that deviate from established and accepted products and services in the firm. This corresponds to the identified MMM practice of sensing (anticipatory sensing and internal sensing) (Browne et al., 2014).

3.1.2. CMO judge role at the selection stage

Next, at the selection stage, in which MMMs use the practice of challenging (seeking direct feedback and embracing debate and discussion) (Browne et al., 2014), CMOs play the role of a judge and their tone must modulate to become more critical. This role is grounded in the judge-advisor model of decisions, where executives evaluate and filter through ideas from key stakeholders to prioritize the most promising ones (Arendt, Priem, & Ndofor, 2005). The goal of this stage is to provide regular short-cycle feedback to chisel out more finely the shape of each rough-hewn idea and identify the most unconventional ones that can leverage current capabilities as a starting point. Notably the CMO needs to incentivize and reward MMMs (Baumann & Stieglitz, 2014), ensure ideas that feedback on ideas that are not currently viable does not deter future submission of ideas (Deichmann & van den Ende, 2014); and develop dedicated, often informal, channels for short-cycle and feed-up and feed-down knowledge flows (Mom et al., 2007; Rouleau, 2005).

### 3.1.3. CMO guardian role at the retention stage

Finally, in the retention stage, the CMO's tone becomes supportive in another sense, as they take on the mantle of guardian of a new idea or concept that has survived and evolved through the previous stages. This stage shades out of initiation and into the early phases of implementation. Besides the sources listed in Table 1, the guardian role stems from the literature on instilling competing radical ideas in strategy (Day, 1994; Smith & Tushman, 2005). Here, MMMs' main practice becomes transmitting as they need to unpack possibly conflicting messages within the organization and manage the flow of upward and downward information (Browne et al., 2014). The point at this stage is to retain radical ideas to give them a fighting chance to be implemented. At this stage, the CMO supports the MMM notably by navigating the socio-political environment to secure resources for scaling and implementation (D. L. Day, 1994); installing structural safeguards for protecting radical ideas from competing with resources against incremental ones (e.g., focused on cost-cutting) (Fourné, Rosenbusch, Heyden, & Jansen, 2019; Tushman, Smith, Wood, Westerman, & O'Reilly, 2010); and internally sponsoring and externally legitimizing new, unconventional ideas (Nicolai, Schulz, & Thomas, 2010).

### 3.2. Challenges for CMOs in effectuating change role reversal

The three CMO roles highlighted in section 3.1 can be counter-intuitive to executives and not without their challenges. This is unsurprising since, just like MMMs, the CMOs are reversing their customary role and assuming unfamiliar functions. We now pinpoint and expand on three challenges that CMOs need to account for when considering taking a back seat in supporting MMMs through each stage. First, in enacting their advisor role in the variation stage, CMOs in particular have to realize that change initiation is an emotional exercise for MMMs (Huy, 2002). In doing so, they ought to be cognizant of feelings triggered, as some may prompt middle managers 'dismiss a particular strategic initiative even when their immediate personal interests are not directly under threat' (Huy, 2011, p. 1387). Allaying MMMs' emotional concerns will be pivotal to combatting organizational change cynicism (Barton & Ambrosini, 2013) and ensuring middle managers still energetically and diligently come up with divergent ideas (D. L. Day, 1994). Managing middle managers' emotional exhaustion of at this stage will be crucial, especially as most ideas generated will never see the light of day. Given the high emotional sunk cost in ideation, CMOs need to ensure consistent emotional support to clear the lane for creative efforts. That this task is especially critical during the COVID-19 crisis has been indicated already in several reports (Mullen, 2020). Of course, in the midst of a crisis emotional states will already be ragged and jagged on all sides.

Second, CMOs must be wary of sub-group favoritism and biases in the range of bottom-up initiatives they encourage and select (Reitzig & Sorenson, 2013). The temptation for CMOs will be to gravitate to ideas that make immediate intuitive sense to them, discount ideas from members in more distant organizational sub-units, and favor ideas that confirm their prior beliefs. Our recommendation is to engage with ideas that feel uncomfortable to ensure that sufficient weighting is assigned to entertaining ideas that do not immediately sound feasible (Ren & Guo, 2011). This includes articulating an explicit preference for radical ideas to avoid MMMs only advancing ideas that they expect will immediately please the CMO (Dutton et al., 1997), while also ensuring that ideas coming from less visible and/or underrepresented groups are given sufficient audience (Richard, Murthi, & Ismail, 2007).

Third, although consistency in functional worldviews helps managers drive change across managerial cadres (Waller, Huber, & Glick, 1995), the risk here is that members gravitate to those who are functionally similar (Boone, Van Olffen, Van Witteloostuijn, & De Brabander, 2004). A natural response to crisis is to unwittingly rely on socio-professional certainty to help navigate environmental

uncertainty. Whilst this may give the semblance of consensus and efficiency in implementing change (Heyden et al., 2018; Tarakci et al., 2018), it can also crowd out radical new ideas (which would incite more cognitive discomfort and conflict) due to siloed thinking (Aaker, 2008). On the other hand, consensus-seeking may pose a particular risk if a radical new notion does win acceptance: debate may then close behind it. Some degree of dissent must be maintained to keep organizational members searching with eyes peeled for better ways of adopting radical change.

## 4. Summary and managerial guidelines: key questions for CMOs to ask themselves right now

In this essay, we have engaged with an urgent managerial question: CMOs support MMMs in initiating radical change in crisis situations? Put differently, how can CMOs and MMMs collaborate by essentially reversing their traditional expectations as regards who should initiate radical change? Our inquiry follows from not only sound theory but the real-world evidence that during COVID-19, as of early May 2020 we have already seen organizations giving middle management more autonomy and including them in key strategic decisions (Knight, 2020). That behavior bucks received wisdom to centralize on top management and cut the middle, which we claim is more like cutting off one's nose to spite one's face.

As to specific managerial implications, after establishing necessary theory and state-of-the-art evidence in section 2 for how to reverse the traditional so-called strategic versus tactical change roles assigned to top and middle managers, we have provided insights especially in section 3 into how CMOs can practically support innovation and change initiated by MMMs in response to a systemic shock such as COVID-19. In practical terms too, section 3 addressed overcoming obstacles that MMMs and CMOs themselves might face. This already animates a discussion into one with tangible and immediate executive relevance. We now further bring that to life with key questions for CMOs. As organizations have, or choose, to look towards innovation after the initial shock of COVID-19, CMOs can start to apply the lessons from this essay by asking themselves the following three questions, to ensure they play the right role in supporting MMMs.

### 4.1. Am I in regular contact with my marketing middle managers?

It is important CMOs engage with their MMMs more often than pre-crisis. This fact is often reported already during COVID-19, where regular group crisis meetings have rapidly become a new norm. However, it is also important that more personal meetings between CMOs and MMMs take place (Knight, 2020), especially as CMOs try to communicate with managers working remotely (Zoom or similar platforms, a hallmark of the times, make their inevitable and invaluable appearance). This is for several reasons already outlined. To recap three: First, CMOs need to be up to date with key market information, which MMMs can supply thanks to their regular contact with key stakeholders. Second, only if CMOs understand which stage of the change process the MMM is up to (variation, selection, or retention) can they modulate to the required role (advisor, judge, or guardian). This is crucial, to ensure the commensurate support is provided at the right stage, otherwise the frequency of interaction may be experienced as micro-management. Finally, CMOs need to understand MMMs' emotional state, both professional and private, given the emotional costs MMMs face in innovating generally and in the heightened stress of crises such as COVID-19 specifically.

### 4.2. Have I created a culture and incentives for my marketing middle managers to initiate change?

Taking time for regular meetings with MMMs not only ensures CMOs up-to-the-minute insights into critical developments, but also

helps to make MMMs feel empowered and listened to. This matters especially during the variation stage of radical innovation initiation, when MMMs are searching for new solutions. Here, MMMs need to know that they are allowed, and even invited, to fail. Consequently, CMOs should create and live a culture fostering open communication, critique, and risk-taking. Furthermore, we have seen MMMs differ in their motives for initiating radical change. First, MMMs have an incentive to ensure the wellbeing of their direct stakeholders, above all customers. Thus, they need to be encouraged to interpret issues as opportunities. Second, to preserve themselves from scapegoating MMMs may be motivated by defensive agency to only advance incremental. Thus, CMOs need to ensure MMMs feel secure to 'think big', while critically evaluating an MMM's change initiatives on their value to the firm and not only as it were to keep the MMM's job. Third, flipping this more negative view of motives for MMMs to initiate change, offensive rather than defensive agency incentivizes them to initiate radical change not only to keep their jobs, but to actually progress their career. Thus, CMOs must chart and make widely known a course whereby change initiation can help MMMs' career progression, instead of defensive career preservation.

#### 4.3. Can I protect the best new ideas and give them a fighting chance?

Finally, once MMMs have identified a suitable opportunity and initiated change, CMOs need to ensure that the change initiative survives. In their role as guardian during the retention stage they have to support the MMM to successfully navigate and coordinate internal and external stakeholders during implementation, for example through creating safeguards to protect the change initiative from competing with resources needed for doing business-as-usual. Here, CMOs can especially help their MMMs by creating the organization-wide rhetoric – sincerely backed, one hopes, by attitudes and action – that radical ideas are supported and nurtured. This can reduce or even eliminate internal resistance to change, which otherwise may ultimately lead MMMs to only push for ideas they expect other organizational members will welcome.

## 5. Conclusion and other considerations

This final section puts the essay in context by noting considerations beyond its immediate scope that managers should nevertheless be alive to. It then presents a conclusion.

### 5.1. Other considerations

The essay has not directly examined the implementation aspect of role reversal, concentrating instead on initiation. We have also reiterated that our scope runs to a focus on MMMs but that lower level managers' input, too, should be considered. Beyond the scope of this essay, we nevertheless encourage CMOs to evaluate the discretion and power given to other functional executives, both by virtue of structural, but also social and political dynamics (Georgakakis et al., 2019; Menz, 2012). Issues such as personality and organizational culture may also factor into the effectiveness of MMM efforts to innovate and change (Ou et al., 2014). Further, CMOs and MMMs should acknowledge the strategic foci of the firm, as some firms may not have developed sufficient marketing capabilities prior to the crisis, leaving them too debilitated to respond swiftly. This aspect may ultimately be the domain of the board, which has an active role of its own to play. In addition, our focus here has been on product and service innovations, but middle managers in throughput-oriented functions may play a leading role in initiating administrative or management innovation, too (Heyden et al., 2018). Finally, as a boundary consideration, on a more micro level, the quality of the relationship between MMM and frontline managers needs to be accounted for as well (Yang, Zhang, & Tsui, 2010).

## 5.2. Conclusion

In this action-oriented, theory-based, and evidence-synthesizing essay, we have explained the potential of reversing traditional change roles and putting MMMs at the wheel of initiating innovation while CMOs navigate the crisis by taking a watchful and supportive back seat. We have also traced the more intricate nuances of the dance between top and middle marketing managers that this reversal entails, with each partner finding itself unaccustomed to the new role, MMMs in particular needing support from the CMOs but CMOs also having their own novel challenges to address. Elaborating, we have sought to provide actionable guidelines on just how and when CMOs can support change-initiating MMMs during the current coronavirus crisis, and in the managerially oriented section 4 a series of action-prompting questions were provided.

Supporting MMMs to tackle the crisis head-on with radical innovation represents one proactive response. It is akin to fighting fire with fire: meeting radical imposed change with radical chosen change. This has its risks and tradeoffs in the short-term, and as such may not be feasible or appropriate for every company. However, for those who do choose to embrace the crisis as an opportunity for MMMs to drive change initiatives, at least before the company reaches reflexively for damage-control measures, this more empowering framework can help guide CMOs in understanding the roles through which they can support their MMMs to maximize chances of the company surviving and thriving. Ultimately, we hope these insights from connecting established but little-actioned theory and building on the latest real-world evidence fresh from businesses COVID-19 will equip B2B marketing managers up and down the hierarchy with timely ideas on how to drive radical-innovation change in response to both the pandemic and indeed future crises.

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