

## **Professional middle managers' strategising practices to effect strategic change**

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#### Declaration

We the authors, Dr Kirstin van Niekerk and Prof Mari Jansen van Rensburg, declare that the article is our own original work and that all the sources that we have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references. We further declare that the article has not been previously published. The manuscript has been submitted to the Journal of Change Management and it is not under consideration or peer review or accepted for publication or in press or published elsewhere.

#### Ethical considerations

Consent forms were given to participants before the face-to-face semi-structured interviews commenced. Written approval to conduct the research study at the selected case university was obtained from management. Ethical clearance was approved by the case university's Ethics Committee. Before the research commenced, the research proposal was presented to the Unisa School of Business Leadership Ethics Committee for approval. Approval was duly given before the data gathering process commenced.

#### Disclosure / competing interests

This is to state that we the authors have no competing interests to declare.

# **Middle managers' strategising practices to effect strategic change**

## **ABSTRACT**

Strategic organizational changes in the higher education sector are costly and resource intensive but considered crucial for the longevity and feasibility of organizations in this sector. Faced with major reforms of government-imposed funding, pressures from internationalization, digitalization and globalization, many Higher Educational Institutions had to reconsider governance, organizational structures and the roles and responsibilities of actors. The purpose of the empirical qualitative research study was to investigate the professional middle managers' strategising practices to effect strategic change. The study context was a South African higher education institution undergoing substantial organizational change due to an institutional restructuring. An interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to describe participants' cognitive, emotional, and physical nature which confirmed six holistic and comprehensive strategising practices namely adapting, effecting change, collaborating, mobilizing, peacekeeping and overseeing. The findings confirmed that strategising practices were not the result of actions only but were also influenced by cognitive, rational, and emotional experiences.

## **KEYWORDS**

middle manager perspective, strategic change, practices, strategising, strategy as practice (SAP).

## **MAD STATEMENT**

Change is difficult for everyone, but even more so for middle managers who are not only strategy implementors but also recipients of change. Findings provide insight to how middle managers handle change contexts in which changes are multiple and overlapping.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Faced with major reforms of government-imposed funding, pressures from internationalization, digitalization and globalization, Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) have been forced, almost

universally, to reconsider governance, organizational structures and the roles and responsibilities of actors in this sector (Kováts, 2018). These strategic organizational changes are costly and resource intensive (Wiedner et al., 2017) but considered crucial for the longevity and feasibility of organizations (Sonenshein & Dholakia, 2012). However, despite significant commitments, success is not guaranteed, and restructuring can either lead to an organization that is more efficient and modernized or to catastrophic outcomes (Sonenshein, 2010). The purpose of this single-case study, on which this article reports, was to explore and interpret the strategising practices of professional middle managers to effect change during the restructuring of a prominent South African University.

Literature on organizational structures of higher education institutions is mostly focused on the state and reforms of this sector with inadequate analysis of the transformation that has taken place at organizational level (Kováts, 2018; Leisyte, 2014). In view of the importance of management agency and practice during strategic change, the current study adopted a contextual-processual approach to explore and ‘make sense of the micro-processes and practices that compose strategic change’ during an organizational restructure (Dutton et al., 2001, p. 732). The study furthermore applied the strategy-as-practise (SAP) perspective as the ontological and methodological foundation. Within the SAP research agenda, there is a growing interest on the focus of strategic change and how individuals and groups respond to strategic change (e.g. Balogun et al., 2015; Jarzabkowski, 2008; Spee & Jarzabkwocki, 2017). This approach supports renewed calls for phenomenon-driven research (PDR) to identify, capture, document, and conceptualize real organizational and managerial challenges ‘as an avenue for pushing us beyond incremental advancements in theory to generate new and bold knowledge and thereby open up the field of organisational change’ (Schwarz & Stensaker, 2014, p. 146). The current paper focuses on the role of professional middle managers tasked to implement a new operational structural blueprint created by others. This role should not be underestimated as middle managers are not only ‘recipients of organisational design or obstacles that can hinder implementation but take an active role in designing the system below them and ensuring coordination across the hierarchy’ (Livijn, 2019, n.p.). Middle managers thus have a key leadership role during the implementation of strategic change.

The focus of this study extends work on the role of middle managers to implement change to enhance understanding of strategising practices that effect change within a university context. Following a review of the research context and literature, the article presents the research design used to uncover six practices that underpinned and strengthened the formal strategic roles of middle managers. The article is concluded with a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of the research.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The changing and uncertain university landscape is a far cry from ‘the certainty of Cardinal Newman’s (1907) nineteenth-century ‘Idea of a University’ as a small and cloistered group of intellectuals pursuing the truth for the truth’s sake and turning out well-rounded students versed in the liberal arts’ (Burnes et al., 2013, p. 1). Globally, HEIs are forced to become more corporate in nature and are driven by economic rationalization, quality improvement, and reputation building (Czerniewicz, 2020; Geschwind, 2019; Kováts, 2018). HEIs had no choice but to transform because of austerity and marketization (infiltration of big corporate forces reshaping the sector through digitalization, private universities, and open access free

courseware). The scope of the current article is not to extend the literature on the purpose and impact of higher education on the economy or the broader society nor is it to question political regimes or institutional policy dynamics. Instead, this article reviews how change is affected during expected transformation. In this regard, context cannot be neglected as the South African HE sector provides a particularly challenging landscape.

Indeed, the South African higher education sector is described as being in a 'state of crisis' or in a 'fragile condition' (Bawa, 2019; Czerniewicz, 2020; Universities of South Africa, 2016). Failures in the sector have led to many strikes and protests by those employed or enrolled in higher education in the past decade. These failures include exclusion (practical, cultural, epistemological), increasingly onerous conditions of service and the rapid casualization of academic labour. Specifically, the 2016 academic year, within the context of South Africa, has been described as one of continued disruption. During this year mass student protests led several institutions to close campuses for extended periods. South African HEIs were expected to respond to demands to increase access to quality higher education and drive institutional transformation albeit public underfunding and calls for free education (Universities of South Africa, 2016). The selected HEI, serving as the single case study for the research, adopted a proactive approach in anticipation of increasing sector turbulence. Introducing the review of the institution's professional services available to students, the Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the university is quoted, 'in the context of multiple change and changing demands – nationally, regionally and globally – it is crucial that we continuously assess whether we are optimally positioned to meet these demands' (University of Pretoria, 2014, n.p.). This article reports on changes required to enhance student-related services and support. These changes were guided by the institution's strategic objectives of the revised Strategic Plan: 2017–2021 and include the revision and redesign of processes and functions pertaining to the student life value chain to enhance overall service delivery (University of Pretoria, 2016). The scope of the organizational restructure included all professional services that provided administration support to students and the rest of the institution.

Similar to most strategic change events (see for example Balogun & Johnson, 2005), this project was driven from a centralized top-down approach and launched under the sponsorship of the Vice-Chancellor and Principal. 'Top management-driven change focuses first on changing strategies, structures, and systems – the "hardware" of the organisation' with the focus on achieving desired goals through a well sequenced plan (Torraco, 2005, p. 306). Whether goals are achieved is often determined by management agency, demonstrating the resilience of management practices to align strategic change with operational restructuring (Taplin, 2006).

'Organizations do not create, implement or renew strategies. People do' (Mantere, 2008, p. 312). Shifting the focus from top-managers/executives as strategists, the role of the middle manager as strategic practitioner, and importance thereof, has gained prominence (Davis et al., 2016; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Mantere, 2008; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; van Rensburg et al., 2014; Wooldridge et al., 2008). It has been established that middle managers can and do make an important contribution and play a pivotal role in strategic situations, such as change and restructuring, and their contributions should not be undervalued (Balogun, 2007; van Rensburg et al., 2014). Yet despite increasing responsibilities, middle managers have faced onslaught as their numbers have been reduced due to organizational downsizing or reengineering (Balogun, 2003; Livijn, 2019). Doyle et al. (2000, S66) found that organizational change within the public sector was 'more likely to lead to middle-management disillusionment'. They have also been

subject to criticism, such as being resistant, self-seeking and change saboteurs (Balogun, 2007). Resistance to change in higher education typically stems from strong existing traditions or paradigms; lack of perceived need for change; lack of time to study or implement change; fear of loss of resources and fear or loss of accreditation (Lane, 2007).

A call for further empirical research into the identification of who strategists are and the experiences that these actors bring to the role of strategising, with particular reference to the nexus between practices and practitioners, has been made (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). This call was extended to focus specifically on professional middle managers' activities of strategy work at Universities (Bryman, 2007; Davis et al., 2016; Floyd, 2012; Stander & Pretorius, 2016; Wolverson et al., 2005). Furthermore, 'there is a lack of knowledge on how middle managers handle change contexts in which changes are multiple and overlapping' (Rydland, 2020). The purpose of the empirical study was to explore how professional middle managers' strategising practices effect change within a university context amidst turbulent external higher education sector changes. The investigation sought to understand how actors go about the 'doing of strategy' work during organizational change (Harbour & Kisfalvi, 2014). Practices have been defined as behaviour, which is routine in nature, comprising interrelated components, such as bodily and mental activities, know-how, use of things, emotional states, language or discourse and knowledge of background and motivations (Reckwitz, 2002). The doing of strategy was linked to practices such as 'they provide the behavioural, cognitive, procedural, discursive and physical resources through which multiple actors are able to interact in order to socially accomplish collective activity' (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007, p. 9).

SAP researchers have identified a wide range of practices, such as:

- strategic planning (Giraudeau, 2008; Hendry et al., 2010; Jarzabkowski, 2003; Ocasio & Joseph, 2008);
- analytical practices (Belmondo & Sargis-Roussel, 2015; Cabantous et al., 2010; Cuccurullo & Lega, 2013; Epper & Platts, 2009; Jarratt & Stiles, 2010; Moisander & Stenfors, 2009);
- socio-material practices (Dameron et al., 2015; Hodgkinson et al., 2006; Jarzabkowski et al., 2016; Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008; Johnson et al., 2010; Kaplan, 2011); as well as
- discursive practices (Balogun et al., 2014; Kornberger & Clegg, 2011; Teulier & Rouleau, 2013; Vaara et al., 2004; Vaara et al., 2010)

Investigating practices of strategic actors in response to planned strategic change within specified contextual settings could uncover emerging praxis in response to unplanned environmental dynamics (Paroutis & Pettigrew, 2007; Vaz, 2019). Strategising practices are thus context specific and further insight thereto can enhance performance during strategic implementation initiatives.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Phenomenon-driven research (PDR) was conducted utilizing a single case and qualitative research methodology. The phenomenon-driven approach was motivated by a need to

understand and explain emerging praxis of professional managers during an organizational restructure. Single-case-based research has been used extensively in practice-related studies over the years (Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Floyd, 2012; Frigotto et al., 2013; Kaplan, 2011; Lê & Jarzabkowski, 2015; Rouleau, 2005; Teulier & Rouleau, 2013). Furthermore, when studying phenomena which are complex, an inductive single-case study is deemed suitable (Eisenhardt, 1989; Siggelkow, 2007; Yin, 1981) as this approach is 'proved to be the source of rich and enduring insight' allowing for contextual and holistic understanding necessary for 'unpacking the complex driving forces of strategic change' (Johnson et al., 2003, p. 11).

The unit of analysis was identified as the professional middle manager, using the definition: 'Middle managers have managers reporting to them and are also required to report to managers at a more senior level' (Jansen van Rensburg et al., 2014, p. 167). This translated to the selected job titles of 'director', 'deputy director' and 'assistant director' appointed in non-academic positions. This classification excluded those with job titles of 'executive director', 'vice-principal' and 'vice-chancellor and principal' classified as senior management. The three identified levels of 'middle managers' had access to senior management / executive members and are all functionally responsible for key professional services functions. In addition, their roles are similar in that they provide leadership and direction to lower-level managers / supervisors / staff members reporting to them. PDR considers managers as a rich and infinite source of research ideas and advocate that 'only by carefully listening to the issues about organizational change and development that preoccupy managers today can we develop theories that are aligned with, explain and support practice' (Schwarz & Stensaker, 2014, pp. 493–494). This study identified a population size of 18 possible participants who were permanently employed and directly involved and affected by the strategic organizational change initiative (i.e. reporting lines changed, re-deployed, new or significantly changed role and responsibilities). In total, 11 participants were interviewed to reach data saturation.

The study adhered to the concept of crystallisation through data gathering and analysis of multiple data types. Data was gathered during and after the change event. The primary data gathering technique was face-to-face semi-structured interviews which occurred after the change event and offered participants an opportunity to share their reflective accounts of their experiences. Other data sources included field notes, internal reports, minutes of meetings, and survey findings produced during the change event and prior to the interviews. All relevant ethical principles were adhered to, and written consent was obtained from the participants.

It should be noted that at the time of the study the primary researcher was an employee of the university which served as a single case study. This insider perspective and proximity to the change event offered 'the benefit of being acutely tuned in to the experiences and meaning systems of the participants' (Davis, 2013, p. 228) and allowed direct access to participants and institutional resources. Field notes were taken after relevant encounters with the middle managers in both formal (meetings and workshops) and informal settings (coffee chats and corridor talk). The primary researcher followed a salience hierarchy strategy, writing down 'whatever observations struck' her 'as the most noteworthy, the most interesting or most telling' (Wolfinger, 2002, p. 89). Field notes taken included both descriptive and reflective summaries. These encounters and notes aided the design and development of the interview guide. A reflexivity journal was furthermore maintained to self-disclose assumptions, beliefs, and biases and to make these elements as explicit as possible (Gray, 2013). Journaling was conducted after each interview and captured non-verbal elements during the interview, such as

mood, emotions, tone, body language and attitude (Creswell & Miller, 2000). This process enhanced the validity and credibility of the research results and provided a stronger substantiation of the constructs (Eisenhardt, 1989).

An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was conducted to explore the rich experiences of participants and computer-aided qualitative data analysis software (ATLAS.ti™) was used to support the analysis of data. This approach considered various aspects at play during the strategic change event and allowed patterns and themes to emerge during data gathering and analysis (Lawrence, 2015). Inductive reasoning was appropriate for this study, as the ‘research setting [was] somewhat under-explored’ and therefore allowed for the ‘emergence of new insights’ (Darbi & Knott, 2016, p. 404). The middle managers were transparent and honest. They shared intimate experiences of their journey, and it was easy for the primary researcher to relate to it due to her involvement in the process. In addition, this open access to information may not have been shared with an outside researcher. A second qualitative coder verified the accuracy of the IPA process and checked for consistency and areas of ambiguity. The trustworthiness and plausibility of the research findings were demonstrated throughout the research process. Thick, rich, in-depth descriptions were provided backed by relevant quotes and field notes. By using the participants’ actual quotes and field notes, it was attempted to create a truly authentic representation of the middle managers’ experiences and perceptions. Making use of multiple data sources allowed for valuable complex, in-depth and rich (partial) understanding and for the participants’ full stories to unfold. Multivocality was achieved through collaboration with participants to ensure that the participants’ voices were heard. This included participant self-reflection assessments after the face-to-face interviews to provide further feedback thereby contributing to the credibility of the findings.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study inductively identified six practices supported by 113 codes. The practices, presented in Table 1, drew on the middle managers’ behavioural, cognitive, psychological and emotional resources while they strategised to effect change. Each of these practices displayed in Table 1 will be demonstrated by making use of selected illustrative middle managers’ quotes. The referencing method consists of a system-generated reference number of the primary document, followed by the quotation reference number together with a beginning line number.

**Table 1 Professional middle managers’ strategising practices**

<i>Practices</i>	<i>Definition</i>
<i>Adapting</i>	The ability to adapt to on-going changes in the internal and external environment through the capability to develop, learn, self-empower and grow.
<i>Effecting change</i>	The ability to bring about and/or deal with change within the environment, to influence others, regardless of position or hierarchy, and to be an information source to colleagues.
<i>Collaborating</i>	The ability to engage, participate and collaborate with colleagues.
<i>Mobilizing</i>	The ability to mobilise people and resources to ensure that they are ready to move or act.



<i>Peacekeeping</i>	The ability to manage and deal effectively with disagreement, confrontation, criticism as well as the ability to solve issues created because of conflict.
<i>Overseeing</i>	The ability to oversee and be responsible for operations, and to encourage, guide, lead, direct and empower staff.

## ***Adapting***

This practice incorporates the ability of middle managers to adapt to on-going changes in the internal and external environment through the capability to develop, learn, self-empower and grow. This practice emerged as middle managers had to respond to unplanned internal and external environmental dynamics; often perceived uncertainty due to new role expectations; conflicting messages and priorities set by senior/top managers; and self-doubt relating to their own skillsets and emotional adapting. All these elements represent the onus placed on middle managers to adapt voluntarily and to manage their ambiguous, complex and ever-changing circumstances in order to perform their roles and responsibilities productively. In most cases, adapting practices followed realization of participants that they had to change their own behaviour or approach or develop additional skills. Participants did not expect additional support from the institution or their line managers but instead found solutions on their own. Table 2 includes selected illustrative quotes to demonstrate this practice.

**Table 2: Illustrative quotes – Adapting**

### **Adapting**

P38:140 (271:271) and 38:81 (352:352)

It's not so much a question of easy or not easy; it's a question of survival. I think it's part of the growth. If you go through a thing like this and you're not learning from it, it's stupid.

P41:63 and 64 (207:207)

It was new for me and it's always a bit daunting going into a role and you know that the people that are reporting to you are checking you out saying, 'what does she know about this? Why [is] she here, she doesn't know anything?' So, I had to learn quickly just to have credibility. Well, I did some research on for instance, how [the function] operates and the latest technology. I must say, I learnt as I went along.

P42:44 (162:162)

You can to some extent reschedule, you can to some extent reprioritise but if the outside influences become too much, you have to start making choices and ... if the choice is not necessarily what I have planned then your own schedule needs to be adapted, and again that can only be done so much before things really start falling apart.

P44:45 (87:87) and 44:25 (45:45)

Yes, but that's okay, because ultimately again the job description is the framework within which I get paid. If I go outside of my job description with, let's say the blessing of my [manager] or everybody else, I'm just expanding my influence and my experience and my exposure. It's not too bad.

P49:73 (118:118) [Field note]

She [middle manager] also said that one is never too old to learn and that she feels in the last ten years of her life she has learnt more than the previous 30.

All participants were found to demonstrate the adapting practice thereby indicating that adapting is an important practice, which made a unique contribution to this study. Although authors have reported on middle managers adapting their work practices or existing practices (Horst & Järventie-Thesleff, 2016; Jarzabkowski, 2004; Whittington, 2006), the focus of earlier research did not cover other aspects of adapting on a behavioural, cognitive, psychological and

emotional level comprehensively. This study found that the practice of adapting often followed self-doubt which required self-assurance that it is not so bad and then active planning to find solutions and allow self-growth. It was clear that middle managers understood the need to self-develop, learn, self-empower and grow as they navigated uncertain and multifaceted situations in their new roles. Floyd (2016) examined the support required for academic middle managers 'taking on and adapting to this increasingly challenging role' (Floyd, 2016, p. 167). Floyd (2016) argues that individually tailored training is required. Further to this, Smollan and Morrison (2019) found that organizations should provide additional effort to support and ensure the well-being of staff thereby mitigating the stressful impacts of organizational change. The implication, therefore, is that for middle managers to adapt continually as a practitioner, not only is self-development and personal growth key, but also support from senior management and a strategic approach to leadership development of managers across different levels of seniority.

### ***Effecting change***

This practice is focused on the middle managers' ability to bring about and/or deal with change within the environment; to influence others, regardless of position or hierarchy; and to be an information source to colleagues. This practice extends the role of the middle manager from being a change agent or champion, to that of an active participant in change creation. Table 3 lists selected participant quotes to illustrate this practice.

**Table 3: Illustrative quotes: Effecting change**

#### **Effecting change**

P38:54 (88:88) and 38:68 (203:203)

That's what the role of a [manager] in this position is – to really change things. We kind of absorb the change and it remains to be reactive because we feel it so much but there's no point in resisting it, you've got to live the change and then think differently.

P40:50 (76:76)

I was very positive for change, I've tried to urge the executive member I'm reporting to, to change.

P43:9 (49:49) and 43:35 (119:119)

During the implementation [which] was now to introduce things that did not exist before, like the role of one of my line managers. We didn't know exactly how it would pan out but we realised that if we sit back and wait for things to happen, they will not happen. So, then I had to now become the change agent; I had to drive the change.

Then also there were key stakeholders that needed to be brought on board. Now advising, I don't want to use the word 'convincing', but in advising the key stakeholders that we [are] now dealing with a new strategy from a new department – though they see the old department and the old department staff, so to bring the stakeholders on board – onboarding of stakeholders – to execute that strategy. Yes, that's what I did.

The difficulties in effecting change from the top down or bottom up have been acknowledged, and therefore it is argued that this crucial role should emanate from the middle (Preston & Price, 2012). Effecting change, therefore, requires 'translating strategic thinking into strategic acting by adjusting the current realised strategy of an organisation to meet the requirements of the intended action' (Bartunek et al., 2011, p. 10).

Only one participant explicitly stated that she did not think it was her responsibility to effect change whereas another participant said,

P39:9 (45) 'It's difficult for me to say this is my role because at this stage I was, we were just trying to keep the wheels on in the [division] position'.

Two participants were newly appointed at middle management level and further prompting indicated a lack of role clarity and it was suggested that responsibilities and expectations were unclear. These insights emphasize the value of experience to effect change in a dynamic environment that requires action beyond role descriptions. Senior management should avoid making the assumption that a new appointee is able to automatically function effectively from day one. Additional support and guidance are required, not just related to work content but also the emotional and behavioural requirements of the new appointee.

### ***Collaborating***

This practice encompasses far more than merely communicating, in other words, the exchange of information. The focus of this practice highlighted the ability to work within and across teams to find solutions for shared challenges or ways to enhance shared understanding. Illustrative quotes in support of this practice are included in Table 4.

**Table 4: Illustrative quotes - Collaborating**

<b>Collaborating</b>	
P38:80 (336:336)	I've collaborated many times with the Strategy Execution Office on things that were not necessarily [restructuring]-related.
P40:56 (81:81)	It was really important, making sure that you get people, which were involved in the [change initiative] in general [...] getting them engaged, making sure that they participate as far as possible, communicate, make sure that they feel at ease.
P43:62 (209:209) and 43:49 (169:169)	I engaged with several managers. One, to hand over from the role that I was responsible for. I also engaged with the [division] [...] my counter-part in the [division] because now we needed to be handed over some of the responsibilities, and I also engaged with student administration because there's certain things that we needed to assist them with [...] I also needed to engage with other managers so that they can know how to channel information. Having close relationships with Facilities' Management, Security Services and Information Technology Services. I also then consult with them just to find out what is in the pipeline, what is happening, what can we improve, what are the complaints.
P45:12 (39:39)	We're lucky in the sense that we don't work within the normal [organisation], shall I say manner, we work in a participatory manner, we don't work in silos, we make sure everybody can do everything.
P51:31 (115:119)	I sat with my personnel and said, 'What can we, as admin [personnel] do to help academia to achieve this plan?' It was amazing what they said. They bought into it and we had a good discussion about it. People also need to just get out of the confusion and sit calmly and focus on what the objective is. (Translated)

The selected quotes in Table 4 emphasize the importance of actions related to engagement, participation and communication to facilitate collaboration. Paroutis and Pettigrew (2007) found collaborating to be a strategising practice amongst strategy teams whereas Davis (2013)

identified collaboration as a strategising practice with outside parties and experts. Comprehensive descriptions of this practice by most participants extended the scope of this practice from earlier literature. The collaborating practice incorporates communication, but is more comprehensive in that it encompasses proactive, two-way participation, collaboration, networking and engagement between middle managers and others (staff, colleagues and stakeholders), regardless of hierarchical level.

### ***Mobilizing***

This practice stood out as an important practice because the mobilizing of people (bringing them along) and other resources are fundamental during a strategic change initiative, such as restructuring. Restructuring necessitated the handing over of functions and responsibilities as well as receiving new functions, delegating tasks, and generally just getting work done utilizing the available resources. This practice covers aspects related to the managing of the handover process to ensure people are ready to commit to change or act. Table 5 below demonstrates some of the quotes relating to this sub theme.

Table 5: Illustrative quotes – Mobilizing

<b>Mobilizing</b>	
P42:14 (74:74)	To actually raise awareness amongst my colleagues as to, first of all, what I should be responsible for and what they would need to be responsible for that they previously haven't been, that my area has been responsible for.
P43:13 (49:49)	Then there was the issue of handing over now from the old function to the new function, to people that didn't understand. So you had to now become [the] training and development officer, to make sure that you implement correctly and at the same time you had to deal with yourself because some of the information that you're giving out ... it is not being understood, so you also need to make sure that you yourself remain motivated.
P39:56 (271:271)	As far as what I can, yes, again having a few personnel and certain people that don't have the know-how yet. It takes me more time to train than it does to do it myself, it's difficult now still but I try as much as I can.
P49:20 (50:50) [Field Note]	He [middle manager] did mention an incident with another manager in his division who he felt was not taking ownership of issues that now resorted under her [middle manager] portfolio and no longer his. He had sent a strongly worded email in this regard indicating that handover has taken long and that she needed to take ownership.
P39:13 (69:69)	I'm still struggling with a few of them because they [are] still sitting with other tasks that they couldn't shed, but I think generally they are still a bit demotivated because they feel I'm dumping a lot of stuff on them. I still haven't figured out who's doing well in what, in what role [and when] I've reasonably figured [it] out, when I've just figured out nicely, then another one resigns.

Proactively soliciting resources from other staff members, especially in an increasingly dynamic work context, is vital to be effective in achieving an intended result or goal (Lim et al., 2020). Middle managers play a central role in mobilizing resources (Dutton & Wierba, 1997). Furthermore, middle managers bring together and mobilize people and resources required to do strategy work (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). Although middle managers have been associated

with the act of mobilizing, or the functional role to manage resources, it has not yet been defined as a practice. It is also inferred that the middle managers found this practice to be challenging as they mentioned, 'one of my greatest challenges', 'not being understood', 'worried about the uptake' and 'fighting a losing battle'.

### ***Peacekeeping***

This practice refers to the middle managers' ability to manage and deal with disagreements, confrontations, and/or criticism effectively and to solve issues as a result of conflict in a peaceful manner. With any change process, conflict is bound to emanate, and this practice was identified as important during the strategic change initiative. The practice differs from the formal conflict resolution role, which is considered to be more structured, and reactive as opposed to the current practice which is informal, inclusive, proactive and required self-reflection on middle managers' own conduct. Table 6 presents selected illustrative quotes from participants in support of this practice.

**Table 6: Illustrative quotes – Peacekeeping**

<b>Peacekeeping</b>	
P41:75 (231:231) and 41:30 (107:107)	The most difficult things to handle of course is staff conflict – not to seem to take sides, but fortunately I've got managers that are quite cool-headed also which really helps. So it's not so much conflict maybe, but just being hindered from doing what you want to do.
P42:61 and 65 (202:202)	Where I had – let's call it conflict – it was very civilised and very rational. On a cognitive level, it's always difficult [...] I can only speak for myself, but you reflect it to yourself, to some extent you do self-searching. Have you caused the negativity? Is there something you could have done better? I think it's a good thing if you know, as long as you don't dwell on it, you just have to take note of it and move on.
P43:28 (86:86)	No I've learnt from it – from the episodes where there was a lot of conflict and change and also ... well conflict is an emotional situation, but where people felt 'you know what, I'd rather resign'. That's when I learned that actually my own shortcomings don't mean that I need to impose [it] on other people. So, I don't think, going forward, I will repeat what I [have] done because change – it's about the unit, it's not about the individual – yes, it starts with the individual but it's about the unit. So, should I be presented with the same situation again, [I] definitely will treat it differently from how I handled it from the past.
P44:34 (65:65), 44:86 (151:151) and 44:75 (135:135)	It, it's not easy, I think that, that should sum it up! For me, conflict is necessary because it shows the honesty and the passion and the commitment of the staff involved. One particular staff [...] that was transferred to me that had to report to another [middle manager] was very distrustful of the manager [...] I got a bit of that anger but then I could quickly tell them, 'Ooh! You're not angry with me; you're angry with the other person! Oh! But that person isn't here, so let's park that one side and let's look each other in the eye and say we're starting afresh and a new relationship.
P51:72 (277:277) and 51:66 (301:305)	There are always people who are not happy. [...] I believe a person should speak about these things. It does not help sitting in your office brooding, you need to immediately deal with the issue before it escalates. (Translated) I am relatively even-tempered [...] it doesn't make any sense to me that a person can be happy one day and the next day not. As I said, I throw things out of my cot, but then [...] I talk about it, and then we carry on again. I also don't bear grudges. I never dig up the past grievances, I

don't even remember past grievances. If someone has discussed something, then it's over and done with, then we move on. (Translated)

P39:48 (215:215)

Well, I listen and I don't answer usually immediately. I will listen to them and I don't make recommendations or anything, and then I speak to them I understand – is there anything that they feel that I can do and at this stage, I also use the higher authority at this stage because I'm still very new in the position.

P44:88 (151:151)

It's still a bit tender, it's still a bit early, and I think the key thing is to give people chance to understand the benefits of this process. Get to know the people involved and hopefully think, 'wait a minute, this is not so bad you know, this is not so bad, let's try the next thing' – and get a few champions going on a few things but if there's conflict like that, get it official as quickly as possible, try and resolve it, and in this instance it has been successful.

The participants' quotes suggest that they focused their energy on both cognitive conflict (task conflict) and affective conflict (relationship conflict) (Papenhausen & Parayitam, 2015). The cognitive conflict was mostly associated with the handover process and associated activities, which proved to be challenging. The participants did however demonstrate that approaching conflict as a shared problem – 'we are in this together' – did indeed facilitate the resolution of affective conflict, thereby supporting the findings by Papenhausen and Parayitam (2015). All participants implied that they had been personally involved in conflict and demonstrated through their quotes how they managed and dealt with the resulting emotional situations to keep the peace. Peacekeeping as a practice is a unique contribution of this study as it was not found in the literature that was reviewed. Listening, talking and consulting appeared to be the most common methods to manage conflict and maintain peace. These methods are essentially collegial as opposed to threatening and dismissive or the outcome of formal grievance and complaint procedures.

### ***Overseeing***

This practice refers to the middle managers' ability to oversee and be responsible for operations, and to encourage, guide, lead, direct and empower staff. Illustrative quotes for this sub theme are presented in Table 7.

**Table 7: Illustrative quotes – Overseeing**

#### **Overseeing**

P38:55 (96:96)

I was luckily involved in the appointments of my management team, I was involved in each of those appointments.

P40:57 (97:97)

You must allow staff in an operational environment to make decisions on a daily basis, and even accommodate mistakes they might make, because it's a learning process. It's a maturing process for staff, and you must make it, you must create an environment where staff experience their own achievement in making decisions.

P41:68 (211:211)

I will now – towards the end of the month – I'll have a formal session again just to say thank you for everybody 'cause I think they've done an amazing [job]. I think everybody in that unit especially in the [function], they've gone through an amazing growth phase – all of them, so I think one needs to recognise that.

P42:17 (82:82)

I think it's giving direction, I am not the functional expert in many of those areas – they are, but I know where I want to go, I know where the department needs to go and I know where the university needs to go. So, I actually just – from that perspective – give direction and then it is up to them to do what they need to do and I just monitor their outcomes.”

P39:15 (74:74)

I'd like to empower them all to know the entire system [...] I can see with the new personnel coming in, they don't have the bigger picture. So, to have the time to actually take them from step one [...] it's important that we empower everybody.

P49:66 (108:108) [Field Note]

She [middle manager] mentioned that the division would be going on a team building session. She said with all the crisis management taking up their time she has not had much time to do team building. She seemed excited about the team building and told me what they are all going to do. She thought this would be good for the team just to get them out of the office and give them a chance to get to know each other better. She hoped that all could attend and it seemed important to her that they feel that they are part of a team.

The overseeing practice incorporates operational activities and includes the aspect of providing oversight of strategic and operational portfolio aspects. However, this practice requires middle managers to gain trust through their own passion, commitment, and personal investment instead of relying only on their positional authority. Although organizational change may be beneficial to the success of the organization, it may affect staff well-being negatively (Turgut et al., 2016). Staff may display resistance to change and experience negative emotions, which may be as a result of previous unfavourable change experiences or the anticipation of adverse outcomes (Jones & Van de Ven, 2016). Overseeing is deemed as an important practice as all participants identified with this practice and demonstrated various aspects of the importance of their staffs' wellbeing as a key component to facilitate productivity and achieving performance success.

## CONCLUSION

The phenomenon-driven study sought to expand on the SAP body of knowledge in terms of strategising, focusing on the nexus between the practitioner and their practices. The contextual setting provided an opportunity to explore specific behaviour, cognition, and emotion of middle managers during an organizational change implemented during challenging and turbulent external environmental conditions that directly affected institutional operations. This multiple change context (Meyer & Stensaker, 2006) provided an appropriate setting to explore how practitioners, facing increased complexity, deal with and cope with their real lived situated problems and provides potential implications that may assist others in dealing with similar issues. The PDR approach also uncovered the differences between actual practises utilized compared to what we would expect from theory (Schwarz & Stensaker, 2014). Specifically, findings identified strategising practices of professional middle managers to effect change during the restructuring of a prominent South African HEI.

The phenomenon-driven approach produced six new constructions to enhance the understanding of strategising practices. These are adapting, effecting change, collaborating, mobilizing, peacekeeping and overseeing. The IPA method, which acknowledges the participants' cognitive, emotional and physical nature, provided a holistic perspective to describe the research. The approach confirmed that strategising practices were not the result of actions only but were also influenced by cognitive, rational and emotional experiences and is

therefore considered a valuable contribution of the study.

A key challenge for SAP research on middle managers as identified by Rouleau et al. (2015) is that the discussion of the practical relevance of research findings is underemphasized. This study addressed this challenge through PDR to map constructs on to the phenomenon. Through paying close 'attention to what bothers those experiencing change' (Schwarz & Stensaker, 2014, p. 293) the paper concludes by highlighting managerial implications associated with the new constructs. A key implication of the identified practices is that middle managers would benefit from senior management support and a strategic approach to leadership development. Senior management should provide on-going support to counteract the negative impacts of a stressful change initiative. Experience within the organization was a key enabler to drive changes outside planning parameters. However, new middle managers were cautious to initiate change and lacked the confidence in their new roles due to unclear work expectations. These managers would benefit from clear role descriptions and mentorship during change. A potential area for future research may therefore be to consider how senior management supports middle managers during a strategic change process and the various types of support that is required.

Finally, findings unanimously suggest an appreciation that change and adaption led to personal and professional growth. All practices furthermore highlighted the importance of building and nurturing relationships within and across teams. The research study adds value to theory by expanding the body of knowledge related to the middle manager perspective. For middle managers to fulfil their formal strategic responsibilities they use practices to enable them to achieve their objectives. In other words, participating middle managers' practices underpinned and strengthened their formal strategic roles.

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