


Middle Managers as Change Agents: A Grounded Theory Approach

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to explore how middle managers in Brazilian organizations enact their roles as change agents, highlighting the strategies they use, the challenges they face, and the identity negotiations they undertake during organizational transformation. A qualitative grounded theory methodology was employed to generate an empirically grounded conceptual understanding of middle managers' roles in change processes. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 18 middle managers from diverse industries in Brazil, selected purposively to ensure variation in perspectives. Interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation was reached, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using NVivo 14 software. Analysis followed the grounded theory procedures of open, axial, and selective coding, with constant comparison and memo writing applied throughout the process to ensure analytical rigor and depth. Three overarching categories emerged from the analysis. First, navigating organizational change highlighted challenges such as adapting to structural shifts, communication ambiguities, balancing dual expectations, resource constraints, and informal learning. Second, middle managers as change enablers revealed proactive strategies including building trust, motivating employees, facilitating collaboration, coaching and mentoring, translating strategies into practice, and acting as role models. Third, personal and professional identity in change captured both growth opportunities and strains, encompassing professional development, emotional burden, identity negotiation, resilience-building, and ethical dilemmas. Participant narratives underscored middle managers' dual role as both implementers and interpreters of change, mediating between organizational demands and human concerns. The study demonstrates that middle managers are central actors in organizational change, operating simultaneously as translators, enablers, and identity negotiators. By illuminating their experiences within the Brazilian context, the findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the relational, structural, and personal dimensions of change leadership. Practical implications highlight the need for organizational support structures that empower and sustain middle managers in fulfilling their critical change-agent roles.

Keywords: Middle managers; Change agents; Organizational change; Grounded theory

Introduction

Organizational change has long been recognized as one of the most complex challenges confronting contemporary organizations. In today's globalized, highly competitive, and technologically dynamic environment, the ability to adapt and transform is considered central to organizational survival and long-term success (Burnes, 2017). Change processes, however, are rarely linear or uncontested; they unfold within dynamic social systems shaped by power, trust, identity, and communication (Armenakis & Harris, 2009). While the role of senior leaders in initiating change has received substantial scholarly attention, the contribution of middle managers in enabling,



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mediating, and sustaining change is increasingly acknowledged as a pivotal yet underexplored area (Balogun, 2003; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). Middle managers, positioned between top leadership and frontline employees, serve as translators, sensemakers, and implementers of organizational change, bridging strategic intent and operational realities.

The study of middle managers as change agents has gained traction in organizational theory due to their dual role as both recipients and implementers of change (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1997). Positioned in the organizational hierarchy between senior executives and frontline staff, middle managers experience unique tensions. They are expected to demonstrate loyalty to the strategic visions of top management while simultaneously maintaining credibility and trust with their teams (Huy, 2002). This liminal positioning provides middle managers with a distinctive perspective and capacity to mediate organizational change. On one hand, they possess access to strategic discourses and directives; on the other, they maintain close contact with the day-to-day realities of employees. Thus, middle managers are not passive conduits of decisions from above, but rather active interpreters and shapers of change initiatives.

A growing body of research suggests that successful organizational change often depends less on the vision of senior leaders and more on the discretionary actions and interpretive work of middle managers (Wooldridge, Schmid, & Floyd, 2008). Middle managers engage in sensemaking and sensegiving processes, helping employees interpret ambiguous directives and align them with practical realities (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). They frame organizational messages, translate abstract goals into actionable tasks, and resolve conflicts that emerge in implementation. In this sense, they are vital enablers of change. Yet their contributions are often overlooked in both theory and practice, with organizations undervaluing the complexity of their role or viewing them merely as barriers or bottlenecks (Huy, 2011).

The challenges of middle managers in leading change are substantial. Organizational change processes often trigger uncertainty, ambiguity, and resistance at multiple levels (Kotter, 2012). Middle managers are tasked with overcoming employee skepticism, communicating often abstract or contradictory top-down strategies, and aligning limited resources with ambitious goals. Studies highlight that middle managers face role overload, competing demands, and emotional strain as they attempt to satisfy divergent expectations from senior leaders and subordinates (Balogun & Johnson, 2004). Moreover, they frequently navigate ethical dilemmas, particularly when organizational imperatives conflict with their personal values or the well-being of their teams (Caldwell, 2003). These dynamics underscore the need to better understand the lived experiences of middle managers in contexts of organizational change.

From a theoretical perspective, grounded theory offers a particularly valuable lens for examining middle managers as change agents. Grounded theory emphasizes generating theory inductively from empirical data, making it well suited for exploring complex social phenomena where existing theory is fragmented or underdeveloped (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2014). While much of the literature on change leadership emphasizes top-down processes and prescriptive models, grounded theory allows for the emergence of categories that reflect the nuanced realities of middle managers' lived experiences. Such an approach aligns with calls in organizational research for more context-sensitive, practice-oriented theorizing that captures the micro-dynamics of change (Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas, & Van de Ven, 2013).

The Brazilian context provides an especially compelling setting for studying middle managers as change agents. Brazil's business environment has been characterized by volatility, uncertainty, and frequent structural reforms

driven by political, economic, and technological disruptions (Wood, Tonelli, & Cooke, 2011). In such conditions, organizations rely heavily on adaptive leadership and the ability to mobilize employees during turbulent times. Middle managers in Brazil face particular challenges in balancing hierarchical cultural traditions with contemporary demands for participatory leadership and flexibility (Rodrigues & Child, 2012). Examining their experiences can illuminate not only the universal aspects of middle managers' roles but also the culturally specific dynamics of leading change in emerging economies.

Existing research emphasizes several core contributions of middle managers to organizational change. First, they act as interpreters and translators of strategic change, recontextualizing top management directives to fit local operational realities (Balogun, 2003). Second, they build trust and credibility with employees, fostering commitment and reducing resistance (Huy, 2002). Third, they serve as motivators and mentors, enabling employee engagement and capacity building (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). Finally, they embody role modeling behaviors, signaling adaptability and resilience in times of uncertainty (Kanter, 1982). Yet despite these contributions, middle managers' perspectives remain under-theorized. Much of the literature treats them either as obstacles to change or as secondary actors, without recognizing the complexity of their agency and the dialectical tensions they face (Thomas & Hardy, 2011).

Understanding middle managers' experiences is also crucial for organizational practice. Change initiatives frequently fail, with estimates suggesting that up to 70% of change programs do not achieve their intended outcomes (Beer & Nohria, 2000). Scholars and practitioners increasingly acknowledge that failure often stems not from flawed strategies but from inadequate attention to implementation and human dynamics (Kotter, 2012). Middle managers are at the heart of this implementation gap. Their ability to mobilize teams, align competing demands, and maintain resilience can determine whether change efforts succeed or falter. By capturing their voices and practices through grounded theory, organizations can develop more nuanced approaches to supporting and leveraging their contributions.

Another dimension that merits attention is the identity work of middle managers during organizational change. Change processes disrupt not only structures and routines but also individual identities (Brown, 2015). Middle managers must negotiate tensions between personal values, professional identities, and organizational demands. They often reconstruct their sense of self in response to evolving roles and responsibilities (Balogun & Johnson, 2004). This identity negotiation can be empowering, opening pathways for professional growth and recognition, but it can also generate emotional burdens such as stress, burnout, and feelings of isolation. Exploring this identity work provides deeper insight into the human side of change leadership.

Moreover, middle managers play a critical role in sustaining organizational resilience. Resilience refers to the capacity to absorb shocks, adapt to disruptions, and emerge stronger from challenges (Lengnick-Hall, Beck, & Lengnick-Hall, 2011). Middle managers contribute to resilience by fostering psychological safety, encouraging learning, and modeling adaptability (Huy, 2002). They act as "shock absorbers" who buffer employees from instability while ensuring that organizational goals continue to be met. In volatile contexts such as Brazil, this role is particularly salient.

In summary, while scholarship has increasingly recognized the strategic and operational significance of middle managers in organizational change, there remains a need for deeper empirical exploration of their lived experiences, sensemaking practices, and identity work. This study addresses this gap by employing a grounded theory approach to examine how middle managers in Brazil navigate the complexities of organizational change, act

as enablers of transformation, and negotiate their personal and professional identities. By drawing directly from the voices of managers themselves, the research aims to construct a theoretical model that captures the multifaceted ways in which middle managers function as change agents. Such insights not only enrich academic understanding but also provide practical implications for designing organizational structures and leadership development programs that better support middle managers in their pivotal role.

Methods and Materials

This study adopted a qualitative research design using grounded theory methodology to explore the role of middle managers as change agents within organizational contexts. Grounded theory was selected because it provides a systematic approach to generating theory from participants' lived experiences and perspectives, thereby ensuring that the findings are closely aligned with real-world practices. The study population consisted of middle managers working across diverse industries in Brazil. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify participants who were directly involved in organizational change processes. A total of 18 middle managers were recruited, with the final sample size determined by the principle of theoretical saturation, where no new themes or insights emerged from additional interviews. Participants represented a range of sectors including manufacturing, services, and education, ensuring a heterogeneous sample to capture multiple viewpoints.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences while maintaining sufficient flexibility for emergent themes. An interview guide was developed based on existing literature on organizational change and leadership, but open-ended questions ensured that participants could freely share their perspectives and narratives. Interviews were conducted in Portuguese, the native language of the participants, and later transcribed and translated into English for analysis. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face or via secure online platforms, depending on participant availability and preference. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and ethical considerations such as confidentiality and voluntary participation were strictly upheld.

The data analysis process followed the grounded theory coding procedures of open, axial, and selective coding. Transcribed interviews were imported into NVivo software version 14 to facilitate systematic data management, coding, and categorization. During open coding, initial concepts were identified and labeled, reflecting key ideas from the participants' narratives. Axial coding involved grouping these concepts into categories and identifying relationships between them. Finally, selective coding was conducted to refine core categories and construct a theoretical framework explaining how middle managers function as change agents. The constant comparative method was applied throughout the process, ensuring that data were continuously compared across participants to refine emerging categories. Memos and analytical notes were maintained during coding to document the researcher's reflections and enhance the rigor of the analysis. To establish trustworthiness, strategies such as peer debriefing, member checking with selected participants, and maintaining an audit trail were employed.

Findings and Results

The study included 18 middle managers from Brazil, representing a range of industries including manufacturing, services, education, and healthcare. Of the participants, 10 were male and 8 were female, with ages ranging from 32 to 54 years. Regarding professional experience, 7 participants had between 5–10 years of managerial experience, 6 had between 11–15 years, and 5 had more than 15 years of experience in leadership positions.

Educational backgrounds varied, with 12 participants holding postgraduate degrees in management-related fields and 6 possessing undergraduate qualifications. The sample provided diverse perspectives on organizational change, enabling the exploration of shared as well as unique experiences across industries.

Findings Report (with Subcategories & Quotes)

Category 1: Navigating Organizational Change

Adapting to Structural Shifts

Participants described how organizational restructuring created pressure to remain flexible and adjust their roles. Many highlighted the constant challenge of “wearing different hats.” As one manager put it: “One week I’m asked to restructure my team, the next I need to ensure productivity doesn’t fall—it feels like juggling too many balls at once.” This adaptability was often framed as both a professional skill and a survival strategy during change.

Communication Challenges

A recurring theme was the difficulty of handling inconsistent or unclear communication from senior leadership. Managers reported having to translate broad strategies into practical steps for their teams. One participant noted: “We often get corporate messages that are too abstract. My job is to put it in words that make sense for the people on the ground.” Others emphasized managing rumors and calming employee anxieties when formal communication lagged.

Balancing Dual Expectations

Middle managers reported feeling “caught in the middle,” managing expectations from both superiors and subordinates. They described pressure from senior leaders to deliver rapid results while also maintaining staff morale. As one participant stated: “My boss wants numbers, but my team wants reassurance—it’s exhausting trying to satisfy both sides.” This duality was identified as one of the most stressful aspects of their role.

Time and Resource Constraints

Participants consistently highlighted insufficient resources and excessive demands. Several mentioned feeling powerless to influence organizational priorities. One manager explained: “We’re told to implement ambitious projects with very limited budgets. It’s like being asked to build a house with no bricks.” This scarcity forced managers to prioritize tasks and sometimes compromise on quality.

Learning Through Change

Despite challenges, managers reported growth through trial-and-error and peer learning. Informal networks were crucial in developing coping strategies. As one respondent shared: “I learned more from talking with colleagues over coffee than from any formal training.” Such peer-based learning helped middle managers navigate uncertainty and adapt to evolving change demands.

Category 2: Middle Managers as Change Enablers

Building Trust with Teams

Trust emerged as the foundation for leading change. Managers emphasized honesty, fairness, and accessibility as key practices. One participant remarked: “When employees trust me, they follow even when the path is unclear.” Creating psychological safety was seen as essential for keeping teams engaged during turbulence.

Motivating and Engaging Employees

Participants described efforts to inspire employees by celebrating small achievements and connecting work to larger goals. As one manager said: “I make it a point to recognize small wins, because that’s what keeps people

moving when they feel uncertain.” Motivation was framed not only as task-related but also as emotional encouragement.

Facilitating Collaboration

Collaboration across departments was considered crucial for successful change. Many managers took on the role of mediators and bridge-builders. One interviewee explained: “I often have to connect people from different departments who don’t normally talk. Without me, silos would block the project completely.” By fostering teamwork, managers reduced resistance and created alignment.

Coaching and Mentoring

Managers saw themselves as mentors who guided staff through change, providing both feedback and emotional support. One participant stated: “I don’t just tell them what to do, I help them grow so they can handle change better next time.” Mentoring was described as a long-term investment in employee resilience.

Translating Strategy into Practice

Managers highlighted their role in contextualizing abstract goals into concrete actions. One explained: “The company says ‘increase efficiency,’ but I have to show my team what that means in daily tasks.” This translation was seen as critical to making top-level strategies realistic and actionable.

Acting as Role Models

Finally, participants underscored the importance of leading by example. Demonstrating adaptability and resilience influenced their teams. As one manager noted: “If I panic, the whole team panics. If I show calm, they feel calm too.” Such role modeling reinforced credibility and team confidence in times of change.

Category 3: Personal and Professional Identity in Change

Professional Growth

Several managers reported that participating in change initiatives enhanced their visibility and opened new career opportunities. As one stated: “Being at the forefront of change gave me recognition from top management that I never had before.” Change was thus both a challenge and a pathway to advancement.

Emotional Burden

The process also carried emotional costs. Many expressed stress, burnout risk, and feeling “sandwiched” between contradictory demands. One participant confessed: “There are nights I can’t sleep because I’m worried about letting down both my team and my superiors.” Emotional burden was seen as an invisible but significant aspect of the role.

Identity Negotiation

Managers described redefining their professional identities in light of organizational change. They often had to align personal values with organizational imperatives. As one participant noted: “Sometimes I feel like I have to compromise my own beliefs to push forward a change I don’t fully agree with.” This identity negotiation was an ongoing internal struggle.

Resilience Building

Coping strategies included emotional regulation, optimism, and seeking peer support. One manager emphasized: “I learned not to take failures personally. Resilience is what keeps me going when everything around me is unstable.” Resilience-building was considered vital for sustaining their leadership effectiveness.

Ethical Dilemmas

Participants faced ethical conflicts, particularly when directives contradicted their personal values. One manager shared: “I was told to enforce a policy that I knew would hurt some employees. It tore me apart inside.” Such dilemmas highlighted the moral complexity of middle management during change.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of middle managers in Brazil as they navigated organizational change, using a grounded theory approach. Three overarching categories were identified: *navigating organizational change*, *middle managers as change enablers*, and *personal and professional identity in change*. Together, these categories reflect the complex, multifaceted role of middle managers as interpreters, mediators, and role models who both absorb and enact the tensions of change.

The first category highlights the day-to-day challenges middle managers face in adapting to structural shifts, handling communication gaps, balancing dual expectations, operating under time and resource constraints, and learning through experience. Participants described the unpredictability of organizational change as a source of both stress and growth. These findings resonate with prior research emphasizing the liminality of middle managers’ position—constantly caught between strategic imperatives from above and practical realities below (Balogun & Johnson, 2004). Like previous studies, our data show that middle managers do not passively transmit top-down messages but actively interpret and contextualize them to fit their organizational units (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011).

Communication emerged as a recurrent challenge. Participants frequently reported having to translate abstract strategic visions into concrete, actionable steps for frontline employees. This aligns with Floyd and Wooldridge’s (1997) observation that middle managers serve as “linking pins,” bridging strategy formulation and execution. When communication from senior leaders was ambiguous or inconsistent, managers filled the gaps by reframing directives in ways that employees could understand and accept. Such sensemaking and sensegiving processes are crucial for reducing uncertainty and preventing resistance (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007).

The struggle to balance dual expectations—meeting performance targets while maintaining team morale—was another key finding. This tension has been well documented, with scholars noting that middle managers often carry the emotional burden of reconciling competing demands (Huy, 2002). Our participants vividly described the strain of simultaneously being accountable to senior leadership and supportive to subordinates, echoing the “sandwich position” metaphor used in organizational studies (Thomas & Hardy, 2011). The result is role overload and heightened stress, particularly when time and resources are scarce.

Finally, the data revealed that middle managers learn through trial and error, peer support, and informal networks. This finding aligns with the literature on experiential learning, which emphasizes the value of reflection-in-action for developing adaptive leadership skills (Kolb, 1984). Informal learning communities have also been recognized as important sources of resilience during times of turbulence (Lengnick-Hall, Beck, & Lengnick-Hall, 2011). Thus, our findings reinforce the idea that organizational learning is not limited to formal training programs but emerges organically from practice and interaction.

The second major category portrays middle managers not as passive implementers but as active enablers of change. Subthemes included building trust, motivating employees, fostering collaboration, mentoring, translating strategy into practice, and role modeling adaptability. These findings highlight the centrality of middle managers in sustaining organizational change efforts and align with growing recognition of their agency.

Trust-building emerged as a cornerstone of change leadership. Managers emphasized honesty, accessibility, and fairness as means of cultivating credibility. This finding supports prior work showing that trust is essential for overcoming resistance and fostering commitment during change (Lines, 2004). When employees perceive middle managers as trustworthy, they are more likely to accept uncertainty and engage with change initiatives.

The role of middle managers in motivating and engaging employees was another significant theme. Participants described strategies such as celebrating small wins and providing emotional encouragement. These findings echo Kotter's (2012) argument that creating short-term victories is critical for sustaining momentum in change initiatives. Moreover, they reflect research on transformational leadership, which highlights the importance of inspiring and empowering employees to embrace change (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Collaboration across departments was also seen as vital. Middle managers frequently acted as mediators who broke down silos and fostered cross-unit cooperation. This supports earlier findings that horizontal coordination, often facilitated by middle managers, is key to successful implementation of complex change (Nonaka, 1994). By facilitating collaboration, middle managers create alignment and reduce the friction that often undermines organizational initiatives.

Mentoring and coaching were further emphasized as tools for guiding employees through uncertainty. These findings are consistent with Caldwell's (2003) conceptualization of change agents as developers of people, not merely implementers of directives. By providing feedback, role modeling, and growth opportunities, middle managers invest in building employee resilience and capacity for future change.

Perhaps most importantly, middle managers served as translators of strategy, contextualizing top-level directives into practical, task-oriented terms. This resonates with Balogun's (2003) notion of middle managers as "change intermediaries" who make strategy accessible and actionable. Without this interpretive function, strategic visions risk remaining abstract and disconnected from day-to-day operations. Finally, managers highlighted their responsibility to act as role models. By demonstrating resilience and adaptability, they set the tone for employees' reactions to change. This finding is consistent with Kanter's (1982) classic argument that middle managers embody the visible face of organizational adaptability.

The third category concerns the personal dimension of middle managers' experiences, particularly their professional growth, emotional burdens, identity negotiations, resilience-building, and ethical dilemmas. These findings underscore the human costs and benefits of leading change from the middle.

Professional growth was widely reported, with managers noting increased visibility, recognition, and skill development. Such findings support research that identifies change initiatives as opportunities for career advancement and identity enhancement (Balogun & Johnson, 2004). However, the flip side was the significant emotional burden carried by managers, including stress, insomnia, and burnout risk. These experiences mirror Huy's (2002) argument that middle managers engage in "emotional balancing," regulating both their own emotions and those of their teams.

Identity negotiation emerged as a central theme. Participants often struggled to reconcile personal values with organizational imperatives, sometimes feeling compelled to act against their beliefs. This aligns with Brown's (2015) work on identity disruption, which shows that change processes often challenge established self-conceptions and require identity reconstruction. For some, this was empowering, but for others it created moral distress.

Resilience was a recurring subtheme, with managers describing strategies such as emotional regulation, optimism, and peer support. This echoes research on resilience as a dynamic capability that enables organizations

and individuals to adapt and thrive in turbulent contexts (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011). Importantly, resilience was not portrayed as an individual trait but as a socially constructed process facilitated through networks and shared learning.

Finally, participants reported ethical dilemmas, particularly when organizational directives conflicted with employee well-being. This finding resonates with Caldwell's (2003) classification of change agents, which acknowledges the ethical complexity of implementing top-down changes. The data suggest that ethical challenges are not peripheral but central to middle managers' lived experiences during change.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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