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Empowering middle managers to free their strategic capabilities

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ABSTRACT

For over 30 years, organizations have been transforming themselves from inefficient bureaucracies into flatter and more dynamic organizations. While many of these new ways of organizing have challenged the utility of middle managers, a growing body of research contradicts this position, underlining instead the importance of middle managers' strategic role, especially during organizational change. These opposing perspectives prompted us to ask the following question: How empowered middle manager engage in change translation? Our empirical analysis relies on a qualitative case study of a French banking company that chose to run against the tide and created an additional middle management level during an organizational change implementation. Our findings contribute to recent literature on strategy-as-practice showing how building and dwelling strategizing can be articulated during organizational change translation. We also shed a new light on middle managers' strategizing by giving an empirical illustration of their strategic engagement when they are empowered by top management. Finally, our findings allow to understand how empowered middle managers can lead to empowering leadership development.

Key words: organizational change, middle managers, empowerment, change translation, strategizing

INTRODUCTION

Current new ways of organizing have underlined the disadvantages of a tall hierarchy, arguing that middle managers impede flexibility whereas flat organizations empower employees, enhance reactivity and performance (Carney & Getz, 2016; Hamel, 2011; Lee & Edmondson, 2017). In contrast, other scholars have emphasized middle managers' strategic role, especially during organizational change (Arnaud, Mills, Legrand, & Maton, 2016; Sukoco, Lestari, Susanto, Nasution, & Usman, 2021), and suggested that their leadership is often prevented by time-consuming administrative activities (Detchessahar, Gentil, Grevin, & Stimec, 2015; Kieran, MacMahon, & MacCurtain, 2020). These ambivalent perceptions of middle managers are problematic because they blur our understanding firstly of their value in an organization (Hamel & Zanini, 2016, 2020), and secondly of the conditions that could enable to release their strategic capabilities (Gomez & Rosen, 2001).

These insights motivated us to conduct a qualitative case study in a French bank (FB) that decided to fly in the face of contemporary thinking and provide middle managers with more time and resources to engage in change translation. Previous research has already emphasized the importance of empowering this 'interface' between top-management and front-line employees (Buick, Blackman, & Johnson, 2018; Raelin & Cataldo, 2011), and we aim to go further by asking the following question : How empowered middle manager engage in change translation?

We choose to rely on 'strategy as practice' as a theoretical framework (Johnson, Melin, & Whittington, 2003), which renewed concerns about the doing of strategy (Jarzabkowski et al., 2016). More precisely, we will build on the notions of building and dwelling strategizing proposed by Chia and Rasche (2015), to analyze the micro-practices of empowered middle managers during organizational change.

By doing so, this article aims to provide three major contributions. We first seek to enrich the strategy as practice stream of research by analyzing how building and dwelling strategic practices can be associated. By studying an original empirical context, we also aim to better understand the role of ‘disempowered’ middle managers during organizational change translation. Finally, this study allows to give practical insights on the conditions needed to release managers from managerialism and develop empowering leadership.

This paper begins by reviewing the ambivalent perceptions of middle managers in our contemporary organizations before presenting the ‘strategy as practice’ analytical grid, and the notions of building and dwelling strategizing. We then describe the context of our original case setting and the research design. The findings will follow, and lead to both theoretical and practical contributions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Middle managers perceived as obstacles to organizational efficiency

Many new ways of organizing such as sociocracy (Endenburg, 1988; Romme, 2017), Holacracy (Kumar & Mukherjee, 2018; Robertson, 2015) or ‘liberated organizations’ (Getz & Carney, 2012; Peters, 1993; Sferrazzo & Ruffini, 2019) are questioning hierarchical authority and encourage the redistribution of decision-making power from managers to frontline workers (Chen & Eriksson, 2019). In these initiatives, management is seen as something that concerns everyone, and everybody becomes a manager. Employees’ tasks are enriched with managerial attributions such as planification, resource repartition or control, and middle managers thus become potentially redundant (Hermkens & Romme, 2020).

Three main arguments support this criticism against middle managers. Firstly, middle managers are costly as they are often qualified or experienced workers, and their added value is difficult to measure (Hamel & Zanini, 2016, 2020). Secondly, middle managers are intermediaries in the decision-making line. Their presence makes thus the organization less flexible and increasingly disconnected from the real problems experienced by frontline workers (Gittell, 2001; Handel, 2014). These arguments foster the idea that middle managers are obsolete ‘dinosaurs’ (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1994; Holmemo & Ingvaldsen, 2016), all the more in a particularly unstable and turbulent environment. Thus, to be more responsive and agile, many organizations are motivated to flatten their structure (Bodrožić & Adler, 2018; Lee & Edmondson, 2017), by reengineering traditional hierarchies to create functional teams in order to eliminate management layers (Van De Kamp, 2014). Finally, literature on front-line employees’ empowerment suggests that many practices such as job enlargement and enrichment (Hut & Molleman, 1998) or delegating responsibilities (Kirkman & Rosen, 1999) have significant implications for organizational effectiveness (Rauch & Hatak, 2016). These studies highlight the utility of giving teams more autonomy and suggest that a reconsideration of middle managers’ contribution is needed. Such thinking give weight to calls to flatten hierarchies by reducing the number of middle managers in order to increase profitability: “the middle-manager role has been seen as one to eliminate. Pressures on organizations in the increasingly global marketplace to be more cost conscious, adaptable and flexible have made middle managers a target because they are seen to add costs, slow down decisions and obstruct the flow of information” (Balogun, 2003, p. 70).

Middle managers seen as impeded strategists

Alternatively, a growing body of research relying on Mintzberg (1973, 1975) and Floyd and Wooldridge's (1992) seminal works, has sought to underline the substantial role of middle

managers during strategic change (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Balogun & Rouleau, 2017; Heyden, Fourné, Koene, Werkman, & Ansari, 2016; McKenzie & Varney, 2018; Teulier & Rouleau, 2013; van der Voet & Vermeeren, 2017). For example, Rouleau and Balogun (2011) highlighted how middle managers, through their daily activities, interpret and "sell" strategic changes. Similarly, Arnaud, Mills and Legrand (2016) studied how middle managers participate in the process of worker liberation through discursive practices that contribute to the collective dynamics of sensemaking and sensegiving. It seems, middle managers' unique position enables them to facilitate change by helping employees to give meaning to it, and thus reduce resistance to change (Buick et al., 2018; Johannsdottir, Olafsson, & Davidsdottir, 2015; Radaelli & Sitton-Kent, 2016).

To pursue these thoughts, some studies have suggested that middle managers' lack of constructive engagement pointed out by some, might be explained not by their obsolescence, but because they are caught up in time-consuming duties, such as reporting and meetings, in order to meet the requirements of command-and-control bureaucracies (Denning, 2011; Walker, Stanton, & Jenkins, 2017). The consequence is that middle managers have less time to serve frontline activities and are impeded in developing and applying their strategic capabilities (Detchessahar, 2013). While some may consider this managerial absence as 'liberatory' (Carney & Getz, 2016; Hamel, 2011), these authors argue that such situations foster discomfort and disengagement among not only middle managers but also their subordinates who miss their support (Detchessahar et al., 2015). Thus, the main challenge is to support managers' to develop their change agent capabilities by giving them more time, resources and valuing their contribution to organizational change translation (Buick et al., 2018; Detchessahar, 2011; Kieran et al., 2020).

Strategic practices through a micro lens perspective

The purpose of this article is to analyze how empowered middle managers contribute to organizational change translation in practice. To do this, we choose to be guided by the ‘practice turn’ (Nicolini & Monteiro, 2017; Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, & Von Savigny, 2001). This approach introduced the ‘strategy as practice’ (SaP) conceptual framework which shifted the focus from strategy content to the micro strategic work (Jarzabkowski et al., 2015; Whittington, 2006, 2017).

This new conception of ‘strategizing’ had several implications in strategy analysis (cf. the special issue of British Journal of Management, 26, 2015; Chia & MacKay, 2007; Johnson, Melin, & Whittington, 2003; Miettinen et al., 2009). First, it encourages researchers to focus their attention on practitioners’ praxis – their sayings and doings as they enact their company strategy (Johnson et al., 2003). Second, it paves the way for all organizational members including middle managers to be recognized as strategy practitioners (Arnaud, Mills, Legrand, et al., 2016; Rouleau, 2005; Van Rensburg et al., 2014). Third, it introduced the idea that strategizing was not only elaborated with planned decisions but could also be conceived as an articulation of both planned and emergent practices (Chia & Holt, 2006; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002), that could lead to unintended outcomes (Balogun & Johnson, 2005).

These reflections were then pursued by more recent work of Chia and Rasche (2015) who proposed the notions of *building* and *dwelling* visions of strategizing (Chia, 2004; Chia & Holt, 2006; Chia & MacKay, 2007; Golsorkhi, Rouleau, Seidl, & Vaara, 2015; Rasche & Chia, 2009). By doing so, the authors encourage an extension in the understanding of strategy emergence process: “what is needed [...] is a redirection of attention from the declared overt activities traditionally associated with strategizing to the subtle maneuvers adopted by individuals, organizations and businesses over

the course of dealing with pressing immediate concerns that threaten their survival, growth and development” p.12).

Building mode	Dwelling mode
Strategizing is conducted in a distinct and detached space from the situation they are in.	Strategizing is intimately immersed and inextricably intertwined with the local context.
Actions are guided by predefined goals directing efforts towards outcomes – purposeful action.	Actions are directed towards overcoming immediate impediment – purposive practical coping.
Consistency of action assumed to be ordered by deliberate intent defined by top-management strategy.	Consistency of action assumed to be ordered by an internalized disposition of top-management strategy.

Table 1. Comparison of building and dwelling epistemology (adapted from Chia & Rasche, 2015, p.7)

The authors thus suggest that practice researchers should revise their understanding of the emergence process of strategy, giving better attention to “the myriad, micro activities that make up strategy and strategizing in practice” (Johnson et al., 2003). Dwelling and building perspectives of strategizing, however, should not be understood as independent. On the contrary, they should be treated as complementary perspectives necessary for fully analyzing strategy emergence.

Relying on this theoretical framework, we propose to examine both planned and spontaneous middle managers’ strategizing. To do this, we captured both ‘purposeful’ practices guided by top management’s strategic instructions and ‘purposively’ undertaken practices that emerged as workers dealt with the obstacles that reality presents. In both cases, the practices observed are considered as strategic for two main reasons. First, they deal with organizational change implementation, and more precisely to organizational restructuring (Balogun, 2007). Second, they

were enacted in order to cope with local issues in ‘the here and now’. As Chia and Rasche (2015) note, “attending to and dealing with the problems, obstacles and concerns confronted in the here and now may actually generate a surprising consistency of action that through hindsight may appear as a relatively stable pattern to which we might ascribe the label ‘strategy’” (Chia & Rasche, 2015, p.12).

METHODS

As stated previously, the aim of this study is to analyze middle managers’ organizational change translation micropractices. To do so, we opted for a qualitative approach that enable to observe and gather rich testimonies in two distinct banking branches belonging to a large French bank (FB). The two units of this embedded case study (Yin, 2014) were chosen for both their similarity and their distinctiveness. While both were located in urban areas, their size differed because one unit was composed of three branches while the other had four. This difference was significant as we reasoned that size could influence managers’ availability for strategic activity. Before describing our methodological design, we will present the empirical context of this study.

The case: a bank’s re-engineering project

Facing considerable transformations in technology, political regulations in retail banking and global competition (Łasak & Gancarczyk, 2021), FB decided to reconfigure its organizational structure to offer a better service to customers and increase its productivity.

FB’s first objective was to optimize the regional network grouping branches into larger entities, what we refer to as ‘units’ (see Figure 1), to avoid the understaffing and overworking problems, and thus to optimally meet customers’ real needs. Consequently, an updated governance manages the units: they are now led by a management team rather than a single branch manager. In practice,

each unit came to be managed by a Branch Manager (BM) who manages the Business Account Managers (Bus AM) and is the line manager of the other two members of the management team; an Assistant Branch Manager (ABM) who is therefore responsible for Personal Account Managers (Pers AM) in charge of the retail market, and an Operations Manager (OPM) in charge of regulatory and quality aspects. This OPM is also responsible for receptionists (RECs). Figure 1 depicts the previous structure on the left and this new structure on the right.

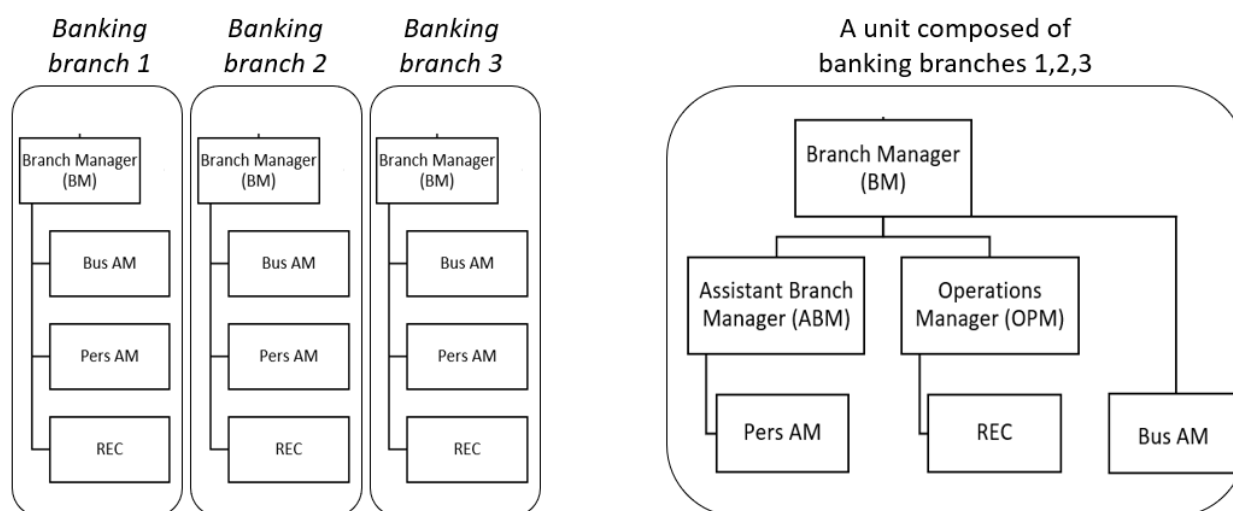


Figure 1. The organization structure before and after the organizational re-engineering

This new structure is designed to empower managers through different means. For example, middle managers are freed from direct customer accounts management so they can be dedicated to their managerial tasks. Also, with the implementation of the managerial team, the responsibilities are shared and each of them can focus on their team's expertise to better respond to their specific needs. This new structure also gives them the opportunity to discuss between middle managers, to share their difficulties and brainstorm on possible solutions.

Data collection and analysis

The qualitative data were collected from three different sources so that we gain a finely nuanced appreciation of not only actions and outcomes, but the circumstances in which these emerged.

Prior to the project implementation, we firstly analyzed a set of internal documents such as the organizational chart of the banking branches and the job descriptions for each functions, as well as the organizational change booklet distributed to all of the company's members which introduces the motivations, the main objectives and the implementation timeline of the organizational project.

The analysis of these secondary data enabled us to examine the top-management discourse explaining how the proposed organizational change was designed to address the strategic issues the company was facing, which justified the strategic nature of the transformations operated. It also allowed us to identify precise language elements that facilitate our interaction with the work teams, and thus ease our integration in the field. We then conducted 4 exploratory interviews with one top manager, the leader of the project and two region managers (see Appendix 1). These interviews were open ended aiming at understanding the organizational change context and gathering managers' prospective sense of the proposed organizational change. After the start of the organizational project implementation, we conducted 11 hours of non-participatory observations in the two different banking branches in order to capture *in situ* middle managers' change translation practices (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 139). These observations were recorded as field notes (Van Maanen, 2011), to better understand the "situated activity" of strategy practitioners (Johnson et al., 2003; Whittington, 2003). These observations also led to informal discussions and helped to gain employees' trust who feared that the presence of researchers would be used to ensure the proper implementation of the top management prescriptions. The PhD status of one of the co-authors on the field also helped to reassure interviewees that the study was undertaken

independently of top management surveillance. These precautions were necessary to take into account the ethical issues of this research and to obtain the consent of the respondents (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2017).

Finally, we conducted 28 semi-structured interviews with employees and managers from the two banking branches studied (see Appendix 1). These interviews were designed to discuss the managers' translation practices observed, and to identify new ones with questions such as 'what were, in your opinion, the main transformations following this project? How do they take shape in your daily work?', 'Do you know how the other banking branches are implementing this new way of working?', 'was this practice explicitly asked by the top management or written in the project booklet?', etc. The interview guide was used as a support for the exchange with the interviewees, but the order of the questions varied according to the interviews in order to keep the flow of the discussion fluid.

The interviewees were chosen to represent each of the banking branch functions and were contacted during the observations in order to obtain a heterogeneous sample in terms of gender, age and professional tenure (see Appendix 1). In total, we conducted 32 interviews in French in the employees' personal offices with an average length of 43 minutes (see Appendix 1), producing 310 pages of transcription. The verbatims used in the findings' session were then translated English by one of the co-authors and checked by the other co-author.

The data analysis was operated in two stages. First, one of the co-authors conducted an open coding of the observations field notes and interview transcripts to list and categorize all the middle managers practices aimed at translating the organizational change. This first open-coding process has then been discussed by the two other co-authors and ensured data saturation as the last interviews analyzed did not provide any new codes. By doing so, twelve translating micro-practices

were identified, grouped in three main categories emerged from the results, suggesting the consequences of these practices: (1) federate the team spirit to facilitate collaboration across the branches of a unit; (2) develop employees' capabilities to improve customer satisfaction, and (3) adjust managers' activity according to employees' needs so employee's role engagement, well-being and productivity were optimized (see Figure 2 below on the left). These three types of translating micro-practices were the first step of our findings, enabling us to answer our research question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p.203).

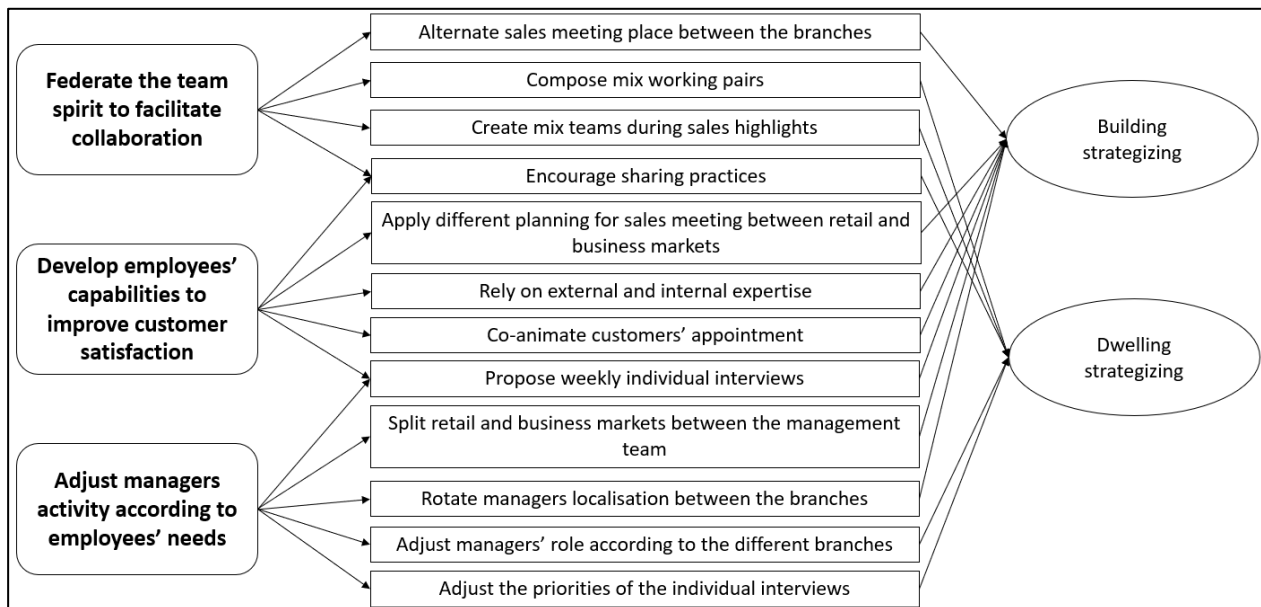


Figure 2. Empowered middle managers' micro-strategizing during organizational change

We then focused on how organizational change translation practices were enacted, distinguishing 'building strategizing' when middle managers were implementing the top-management prescriptions, and 'dwelling strategizing' when middle managers were adapting the prescriptions or applying novel practices that had not been expected by top-management (see Figure 2 above on the right).

FINDINGS

The findings present managers' organizational change translation micropractices when released from high levels of managerialism. The three following sections are structured depending on the outcome of manager's strategizing and distinguish building and dwelling practices.

Federate the team spirit to facilitate collaboration

One of the main challenges of the new organization structure was to enhance a sense of solidarity across the banking branches of one unit.

According to the prescriptions in the change booklet, both banking branches organized paired working between the banking branches of a unit. However, we observed dwelling strategizing in the way the pairs were conceived. In the first unit, the manager made duos within the same banking branch, while in the second the duos were created with members drawn from different banking branches of their unit:

"I don't think that it is in the [booklet] but the will was really to have a continuity in the response to our customers, it was the first objective I associated exchanges between sites and mobility between sites, that's why I actually made these pairs between sites" (BM#2).

Another dwelling strategizing practice concerned commercial challenges. As the following excerpts explains, the management team decided to create teams across the bank branches' activities. This meant that every team was composed of three people: one personal account managers, one business account manager and a receptionist:

"we made three teams which mixed the people from all the branches and all the markets, including the people from the reception. [...] As the leader, I used to send an email everyday with the daily results and I was supporting my team, giving advices or showing how to do if they needed to, because it may not have been their priority before" (Pers AM#4)

“Being mixed up between professions is good because I necessarily produce less than a particular account manager [...]. I think it's really nice to have mixed us by profession but also by agency because it allows us to be interested in other structures and to have interactions. I think that this is essential because otherwise it would put in opposition the agencies and then instead of creating emulation, it would create discord”. (Bus AM#7)

As mentioned by the employees above, this idea developed the solidarity and interdependence between the various professions. It also encouraged the collaboration between the banking branches and a combined sense of team spirit.

In the same perspective, we noted during our observations that logistic issues were also taken into consideration by managers. Indeed, one manager decided to alternate meetings' location between the different banking branches of his unit and made sure that every employee could attend by extending the duration of branch closures:

“my manager said ‘the meetings won't be all at [banking branch 1], so we have turns. He considers us equally, there is not the big agency and us, we are one unit” (Bus AM#1).

“Thursday meeting was supposed to happen from 1:45pm to 3pm, and we asked an exemption to extend the duration until 3:30pm for everyone go back in terms of journeys, it was too short and it creates useless stress” (ABM#2).

This is a clear example of a dwelling micro-strategizing designed to enhance inclusivity while advancing the objective of creating a sense of unity across diverse banking groups.

Develop employees' capabilities to improve customer satisfaction

The second main objective of the organization project was to improve customer satisfaction by developing employees' capabilities.

In line with top-management's prescription, we observed that both banking branches organized sales meetings that separated the retail market, business markets and receptionists. The meeting frequency proposed by top-management was also respected (i.e., once a week for the retail market and once every two weeks for the business market and the receptionists).

"This morning I animated my first business meeting with a specific part on the complete strategy that we are going to apply in their specific market with a focus on how their activities contribute to the banking branch results" (BM#1)

"Previously the business part was a bit concealed during our meetings and we were talking about it unofficially and today we have a meeting dedicated to our core business" (Bus AM#3)

"Sometimes during the meetings we were talking about the business part which didn't interest us particularly. Today our meetings are based on retail market so we have only what we need to know" (Pers AM#2)

Thus, complementary to this building strategizing, managers had the opportunity to innovate regarding the animation and the content transmitted during these meetings. One manager asked some external experts to intervene on specific topics, while the other invited employees to share their expertise and explained how they managed to reach their objectives. For example, during an observation of a retail market sales meeting, one employee took the floor and described the consequences of the 2018 new financial law for the customers and provided advice on what they could offer to different categories of customers.

These dwelling micro-strategizing progressively changed the dynamics of the discussions during the sale meetings:

"on a file presented by my fellow, my manager had a reserved opinion [...] but he did not give his opinion, he kept it to himself and asked us to give our opinion on that file, we exchanged all three of us, then he gave his opinion and we concluded together" (Bus AM#5).

“we validate technically between us our mortgage files so it allows us to exchange on our practices so it's still rather interesting to do this way even if everyone has their own work as well” (Pers AM#2).

As the above testimonies illustrate, this strategic practice allows both to discuss precise customers' issues and to enhance team collaboration by sharing practices.

Finally, the co-animation between an account manager and the (assistant) branch manager during customer appointments was progressively implemented as planned by top-management. This building strategizing allowed the account manager to receive feedback on their performance while the branch managers gained first-hand experience of the customer interface. The following interview excerpts describe how this co-animation was experienced as a source of useful performance feedback:

“It [customer appointment with the manager] is like the camera when you interpret a role play and then you watch your performance. You have someone next to you, like a mirror that provide his expertise ‘you should avoid this kind of things, you should go this way before going straight to the solution’” (BM#1)

“Since we debrief on the interviews, it gives us his opinion on the way we get into some issues and his feeling about what can be improved” (Bus AM#8)

This strategic practice was also applied to satisfy or legitimize the client rather than to shadow employees as they performed their tasks:

“He [the ABM] offered to do some with but they were important client with specific issues so he has been involved in the appointment. [...] No it was not for me, he was just here to support the proposition we made” (Pers AM#7)

“It is important for the business market, even if he will never be in charge on this client, it is important because the manager side for the client is a real plus. He is telling himself ‘Ok I know the manager’, it valorizes them. This is why he [BM] will meet all my big customers” (Bus AM#2)

Overall, the data suggested that co-animation was a constructive strategy that nurtured account managers’ skill levels through empirically based personal feedback. Co-animation also provided the opportunity to discuss technical issues and to provide a better service and improved customer satisfaction.

Adjust managers activity according to employees’ needs

The third main objective driving the project was to free managers from time-consuming administrative tasks to enable them to focus on their managerial duties.

To do so, the prescribed distinction between retail and business market was respected, as was the risk delegation within the management team to reduce their workload.

“before [our BM] was seeing everyone in the office so he was not always available, today with [our ABM] it is easier because obviously she is more focus on us, she has only us to care about whereas we had to share [our BM] with everybody” (Pers AM#4)

“the employee may not come to see you because you are overwhelmed by others things and you may not be available for him, with the new organization we won’t be in the same configuration. Tomorrow we will be much more likely to help him and give him a more precise solution. So it’s win-win” (BM#1)

This fostered managers visibility and mobility and allow them to adjust their activity according to the different needs of the local context:

“at the beginning of every week [our BM and ABM] send us a planning for one or two weeks of ‘who is where’ and ‘who does what’, it’s good because at least we know when there are meetings or absences” (Pers AM#6)

This latitude encourages managers' dwelling micro-strategizing. We observed that managers' mobility was initially organized by half-days to ensure they visited a banking branch several times each week but then the employees mentioned that it could be more appropriate for managers to stay in one place during an entire day in order to allow them to more easily have time to see a manager:

“It's more flexible when he's here during the whole day because there is always a moment of relief whereas when he [BM] stays for only 3 hours, I can have an appointment or my colleague can go and see him and then he has less time for me” (Bus AM#2)

“When he is here for the day, you can overflow a little bit on the midday break but when he must go somewhere else, he [BM] can't take 30 minutes during his break because he has the journey and even if we have phones or e-mails, there are cases that we need to talk in person” (Bus AM#3)

The consequence was that managers could also better adapt their activity depending to the needs of the particular banking branch. For example, one banking branch was without a receptionist, so the account manager had to welcome the customers during his appointment. After the re-engineering of the bank's structure, the management team decided to visit three days each week to ensure this reception role was covered and the account manager became more available for his scheduled appointments and sales activities. The following interview excerpt explains:

“Every Wednesday we have the operational manager coming to the agency, every Thursday we have the assistant director coming and every Saturday morning the branch manager coming, so I would say that we are very few times alone. [...] And when we have an appointment and there is a client who shows up at the reception desk, they take care of them” (Pers AM#8).

Concerning the individual interviews, empowering middle manager enable them to globally respect the weekly frequency:

“I have a global vision but the time I have [in the old organization] does not let me be sufficiently present behind each advisor. Tomorrow, as part of the business project [...] the weekly interviews, which are not always weekly, or not done, or not always done well, because of lack of time in the daily organization, will become regular so there will be better advisor steering.” (BM#1)

“From time to time we told them [our team]: we will assist and support you, but we never did it because we didn’t have time; now we will.” (BM#2)

“Before [in the old organization], I used to do episodic individual support. Now we can keep a calendar of the individual meetings and be more frequently present” (BM#2)

However, middle managers’ dwelling strategizing led them to adjust the priorities of these appointments according to their employees’ needs. Many of them took advantage of the opportunity to discuss complex files rather than focusing on their professional practices, as recommended by the new organization. As we see in the excerpts below, some account managers reported retaining non-urgent files to discuss during these interviews with their manager. This was an example of how one practice in the recommended organizational model evolved, widening in focus from managerial support to include discussions designed to enhance the customer relationship - the wider focus of the account managers’ professional activity.

“During this weekly interview, we can submit a case, if we have questions this is the moment, then we also debrief about the activity of the week” (Pers AM#2)

“My interview occurs every week on Thursday morning so we fixed a moment and we take this opportunity to speak about specific cases and validate them together. It’s an occasion to discuss, so after the cases, we provide an overview on my results and objectives” (Bus AM#6)

“I start each individual interview like that, no matter who the employee is, it is first of all his expectations, his grievances, what annoyed him for the last 15 days. It can be about everything and then it actually takes 10-15 minutes to process and they can arrive with a presentation files on which we are going to exchange” (BM#1).

The analysis of managers' change translating micro-practices were all designed to achieve the three main objectives of the organizational project but they reveal a clear combination between dwelling and building strategizing (see Figure 2 above). This can be explained by the fact that key principles of the organizational change project had already been assimilated by all managers as a result of a continuous communication campaign, both oral and material, linked to the project.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

When facing increasing competition, organizations tend to refine their structures to gain agility and competitive edge, calling into question the legitimacy of middle managers (Carney & Getz, 2016; Hamel, 2011; Lee & Edmondson, 2017). Other scholars have questioned the prudence of such approaches underlining the strategic role of middle managers (Arnaud, Mills, & Legrand, 2016; Detchessahar, 2011; Rouleau, 2005). In this article, we have examined what happens when an organization not only endorses the need for middle managers but also gives them greater latitude to engage in strategic organizational change. We see our contributions as threefold.

First, this study contributes to the rapidly developing and influential scholarship on strategy as practice (SaP) (Burgelman et al., 2017; Golsorkhi et al., 2015; Rouleau et al., 2010; Whittington, 2003, 2017), providing further evidence that strategizing is an ongoing flow of practices constructed by practitioners through their praxis *in situ* but aligned with strategic decisions taken by top management. Specifically, our empirical case study demonstrates how middle managers were instrumental in instigating strategic practices prescribed by top management's as well as contributing to spontaneous and undeliberated adaptations of the strategic prescriptions in order to achieve a better fit between frontline practice and the local context. These two types of strategy in practice mirror Chia and Holt's (2006) distinction between *building* and *dwelling* visions of

strategizing. Our results show that building strategizing preceded dwelling strategizing in order to allow managers to apply without delay top-managers' prescriptions in the first stage of change implementation but did not preclude transformation of these later if they were found not to fit with local circumstances. Moreover, some of these emergent strategic practices then became the new 'rules' as they were perceived as particularly pertinent by top-management. This result contrast with the assumptions of the strategy emergence sequence (Chia & Holt, 2006, p. 641; Chia & MacKay, 2007, p. 230), by showing that it is also conceivable to think of a retroactive relationship between building and dwelling strategizing (see Figure 3 below). This possibility was demonstrated empirically in our case by the way the prescriptions from the top management were implemented, as a form of planned organizational change (Rosenbaum, More, & Steane, 2018), and then adapted and transformed repeatedly to accommodate the emergent subjectivities of local practice. This iterative nature of strategic practice allowed the final outcome to be a highly refined blend of prescribed intervention and adaptation driven simultaneously by prospective and retrospective sensemaking as shown in the figure below (Figure 3).

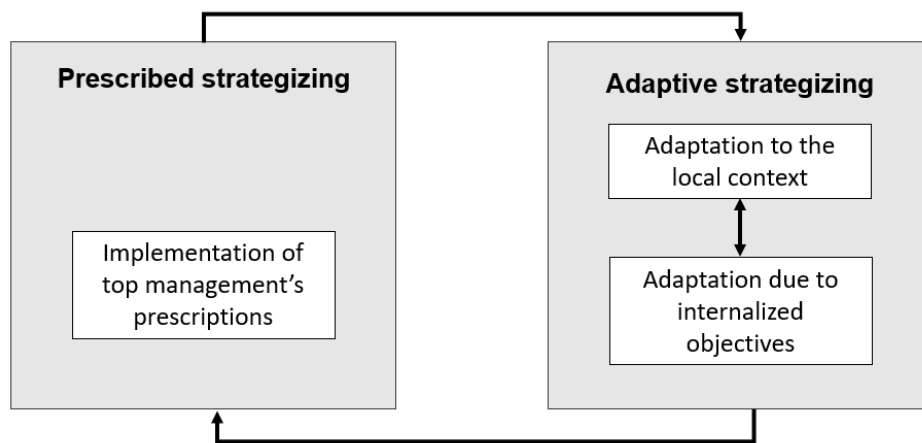


Figure 3. Prescribed and adaptive strategizing in change translation

Secondly, in opposition with mainstream managerial innovation discourses which propose self-management as a substitution for middle management (Carney & Getz, 2016; Hamel, 2011; Hamel & Breen, 2007; Magpili & Pazos, 2018), our study emphasizes middle manager's strategic role during organizational change (Arnaud, Mills, & Legrand, 2016; Radaelli & Sitton-Kent, 2016; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; Teulier & Rouleau, 2013). Our article thus adds an original case study to the scant research addressing the strategic value of middle managers emphasizing the idea that managers are not only change passive 'translators' but that they enact a real agency in the organizational change process.

Finally, from a managerial perspective, our findings enable to enlight what empowering middle managers means (Buick et al., 2018; Gomez & Rosen, 2001). Indeed, we show clear empirical illustrations of how middle managers can be empowered by both organizational structure and top-management support. Our results also allow to better understand how middle managers can foster their teams' development if empowered by top management to embrace their strategic role. Our findings indeed provide three types of strategic activities meant to encourage employees' empowerment: (1) federate the team spirit to facilitate collaboration; (2) develop employees' capabilities, and (3) adjust managers' activity according to employees' needs. These results go beyond the banking sector and allow to give an empirical illustration of the progressive development of empowering leadership micro-practices (Cheong, Spain, Yammarino, & Yun, 2016; Li, Liu, Han, & Zhang, 2016; Türkmendağ & Tuna, 2021).

Limitations and recommendations for future research

Our research was an in-depth case study and as such its findings cannot be generalized. Instead, its value lies in how the empirical analysis it offers provides a basis for further study. Firstly, it encourages to pursue our research on the meager literature on middle manager empowerment

(Block, 2016; Quinn & Spreitzer, 1997), by providing an original and finely nuanced case that reveals what this entails in practice in a large organization. Secondly, studying the implementation of a managerial team, our case study highlights the need to investigate further the practices that encourage leadership to be enacted as a distributed performance, shared across a management team (Brown et al., 2015; Pearce & Conger, 2002). These practices are more and more diffused, and their consequences remain under-explored (Sweeney, Clarke, & Higgs, 2019; Zhu, Liao, Yam, & Johnson, 2018). Following this perspective, future research could be interested in the evolution of the identity perceived by managers of their own role when it is impacted by organizational changes (Crook, Alakavuklar, & Bathurst, 2020), especially in times of increasing remote work or the introduction of algorithmic management (Galière, 2020).

DISCLOSURE OF INTEREST

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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APPENDIX A. INTERVIEWS INFORMATION

Informants	Function	Firm Seniority (years)	Age	Gender	Duration (min)
Exploratory interviews					
PL#1	Project Leader	33	53	M	62
Top M#1	Top Manager	25	54	M	36
Reg M#1	Region Manager	17	49	M	40
Reg M#2	Region Manager	13	51	M	39
Semi-structured interviews					
BM#1	Branch Manager	7	37	M	42
					37
BM#2	Branch Manager	12	38	M	39
					41
ABM#1	Assistant Branch Manager	5	33	M	47
					43
ABM#2	Assistant Branch Manager	6	34	F	38
					39
OPM#1	Operation Manager	8	38	F	51
					42
Bus AM#1	Business Account Manager	9	34	F	37
Bus AM#2	Business Account Manager	7	33	M	36
Bus AM#3	Business Account Manager	6	41	M	41
Bus AM#4	Business Account Manager	7	39	F	46
Bus AM#5	Business Account Manager	8	42	M	42
Bus AM#6	Business Account Manager	6	37	M	42
Bus AM#7	Business Account Manager	10	33	M	41
Bus AM#8	Business Account Manager	8	35	M	36
Pers AM#1	Personal Account Manager	5	28	F	44
Pers AM#2	Personal Account Manager	6	27	F	46
Pers AM#3	Personal Account Manager	4	25	M	48
Pers AM#4	Personal Account Manager	8	30	M	39
Pers AM#5	Personal Account Manager	3	29	F	62
Pers AM#6	Personal Account Manager	5	27	M	62
Pers AM#7	Personal Account Manager	4	28	M	38
Pers AM#8	Personal Account Manager	2	32	F	40
Pers AM#9	Personal Account Manager	3	35	F	39
REC#1	Receptionist	2	43	F	44