



Executive Summary

The Middle Manager in UK Local Government - change victim or change agent?

A study of the role of third and fourth tier managers in effecting change, and implications for their development

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Abstract

This study fills a gap in the literature about the role of the middle manager in delivering change in UK local government. Local government has to respond to many drivers for change, whilst delivering a wide range of diverse services. This thesis shows that practical change is delivered primarily by middle managers, often by a process of “bridge-building,” with an increasingly wide range of stakeholders. There are cohorts of “positive deviants” who make a difference.

The research reveals that most of the effort and attention in developing change capacity has been focused on the apex of local government organisations, on top managers, and political leaders, and is centred mainly on theories of leadership. In this study, middle managers speak for themselves about their experiences of delivering change, their perceptions of the knowledge, skills and attitudes required, and how they were prepared for this role. It reveals discrepancies between actual learning needs and what has been delivered, and indicates that there is a risk of compromising the future change capability of local authorities if middle managers do not have the support they need. Recommendations are then presented about the future development of middle managers as change leaders.

The Middle Manager in UK Local Government - change victim or change agent?

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1. Introduction

I have worked as a consultant with local government for many years. Although senior management commissions the projects, I have most often worked with third and fourth tier managers. I have observed their involvement in delivering service improvement initiatives, and in maintaining progress during periods of external change. I wanted to test my impression that, far from being passive or actively resistant change victims, as they are portrayed in some quarters, many are in fact leaders of change.

The objectives of this research therefore are:

- To assess the role of middle managers in delivering change in local authorities
- To investigate whether management capabilities or competencies have been correctly identified for this level of manager, and
- To review whether they receive support appropriately, to the benefit of the individual and their employer.

My aim is to formulate recommendations for the future development of middle managers as change leaders. The value of this research will be a contribution to a very topical debate on the role of change agents in local authorities, and their development, and a better understanding of an important, and potentially undervalued, tier of management.

The research was in two parts, a detailed literature review, and qualitative field research.

2. Literature review results

The literature review covered the nature of change in local government, current thinking on the best way of delivering change, and research into the role of middle management. A full bibliography is set out at the end of this document, but I have used footnotes to highlight particularly relevant sources.

There is no shortage of literature to explain the contextual changes in local government, and the roles of senior management and the partnership at the “apex” in leading change¹. The literature recognises:

- the complexity of managing in a political environment
- the fast pace of change in local government
- potential conflicts between the community leadership agenda and the value-for-money, audit-driven approach to change
- the need for “bridge-building” between a wide range of stakeholders and increasing interdependence of various agencies²

Current change management prescriptions from central government seem to be focused on performance management and leadership. The models they advocate do not really address the complexity and potential for conflict in local government management. Leading academics advocate an approach to leading change based on complexity theory and the concepts of emergent change³. These concepts have been picked up in thinking about the nature of Chief Executives’ roles, but have not filtered down into the discussion on the development of middle management.

The partnership-, or bridge-building aspect is recognised in the wide range of capacity or competency frameworks available, with similar themes, that identify change leadership attributes in local government, but these frameworks are aimed at first and second tier management. One example is the SOLACE summary of the capacities of a Chief Executive.

The new national occupational standards for management include understanding of change models and theories, of the barriers to change, working through potential consequences of proposed actions and of the need to manage stakeholder expectations, but these competencies are absent in the capacity frameworks mentioned above.

Although thinking on change leadership is well-developed for senior management in this field, and underpins the support that is available for their development, there has been comparatively little discussion of the role of middle managers, and the support they will need to be effective in the changing context.

There is, however, a growing literature on the strategic role of middle managers⁴. They have a role in interpreting senior management strategy, championing

¹ Mouritzen, PE and Svava, JH (2005), *Leadership at the Apex, politicians and administrators in western local governments*, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, PA

² Nalbandian, J (2004) *Professionals and the Conflicting Forces of Administrative Modernization and Civic Engagement* - unpublished article based on a paper presented at the City Futures Conference, Chicago, July 2004

³ Hartley, J (2002) *Leading Communities: capabilities and cultures*, Leadership and Organization Development Journal, vol 23, no 8, pp 419 - 429

⁴ Dopson, S, Risk, A, and Stewart, R, (1992) *The changing role of the middle manager in the United Kingdom*, International Studies of Management and Organisation, vol 22, no 1 pp 40 - 53

alternative courses of action, facilitating adaptation, and synthesising information. There is a question as to whether they might be change managers, delivering senior management's vision, or change leaders, setting a vision and inspiring in their own areas⁵. The qualities identified for each are as follows:

Change Leadership	Change Management
• Inspiring vision	• Empowering others
• Entrepreneurship	• Team building
• Integrity and honesty	• Learning from others
• Learning from others	• Adaptability and flexibility
• Openness to new ideas	• Openness to new ideas
• Risk-taking	• Managing resistance
• Adaptability and flexibility	• Conflict resolution
• Creativity	• Networking
• Experimentation	• Knowledge of the business
• Using power	• Empowering others
	• Team building

Maccoby identifies that change requires effective interaction between strategic and operational leadership. Effective middle managers are likely to fall into the latter category, building team collaboration and performance, co-production relationships with stakeholders, implementing change in an entrepreneurial way, reducing bureaucracy, and increasing empowerment through developing their teams.

The literature review showed that there is room for more investigation of the role of middle managers in local government, as there have been no studies specific to them.

3. The field research

3.1 Design

The field research was designed to test the role of middle managers in delivering change. Questions prompted by the literature review were:

- What is middle management's role in delivering change?
- If they deliver change, how do they approach this?
- How did they learn how to do this?
- What skills, knowledge and attitudes are required?
- What support would be most effective for middle management in the future?

⁵ Caldwell, R, (2003), *Change leaders and change managers: different or complementary?* *Leadership and Organization Development Journal*, vol 24 no 5 pp 285 - 293

I interviewed a sample of 22 third and fourth tier managers in four neighbouring authorities. Two authorities were district Councils, second tier councils under the same County Council, and two were unitary, single-tier authorities. One of the unitary authorities had provided a leadership development programme to selected middle managers, which was also offered to two of the other authorities in the sample.

To gain an additional perspective, a Chief Executive and three second-tier officers were also interviewed about the role of third and fourth tier managers in their authority.

3.2 Findings

3.2.1 Middle managers deliver change

The interviews demonstrated that most of the sample had been responsible for the practical delivery of a range of changes, particularly those whose roles had been created in response to the community leadership agenda. Specific examples of changes delivered by third and fourth tier managers in the sample included:

- Setting up and developing a successful Community Safety Partnership that had reduced crime on a notorious estate
- Leadership of a neighbourhood renewal programme in an area affected significantly by Ministry of Defence cutbacks
- A new performance management system and quality checking process for the audit functions of three Councils
- A pro-active campaign to raise awareness of Trading Standards and consumer rights, in conjunction with the Department of Trade and Industry and neighbouring local authorities
- Development of a Private Finance Initiative bid for highways, which is being presented to central Government; this involved finding and aligning potential partner organisations
- New procedures for dealing with decriminalisation of parking, in conjunction with the Police
- Health Development Projects, working with the local Primary Care Trust, to reduce teenage pregnancy and drug-taking

In the relatively random sample of 22 managers selected primarily by availability there was about a third who saw change as a challenge and an opportunity, and described their pro-active approach to it. They had received support but had also fought to ensure they got it. There were two who clearly resented recent developments, and the remainder fell somewhere in between, from the positive but possibly less assertive, to the mildly negative. All had achieved change of one sort or another, but for many the journey had been fairly painful at the time.

3.2.2 Middle managers can be both change leaders and change managers

It was clear that those managers who had discrete, specific projects to lead displayed both change leadership and change management skills, as defined by Caldwell, or operational leadership skills as defined by Maccoby. Those who had to adopt different ways of working as a response to regulation and audit tended to show only the change management skills. Two managers in particular had shown a creative, entrepreneurial approach to different regulatory functions, moving from enforcement and review to awareness raising and prevention. Two managers felt that they had a wider repertoire of management and leadership skills than their own, second-tier, managers.

The more pro-active managers in the sample had ensured that their achievements were recognised by senior management and elected members. Some, who had delivered changes, but who were perhaps more self-effacing, and those who appeared reluctant to change, but had delivered changes within their service, did not feel that senior management and members realised the extent of their impact on change.

A notable gap in the autonomy and empowerment of third tier managers was budgetary responsibility, in all four authorities. *“I spend until someone tells me to stop,”* said one.

3.2.3 The middle manager’s stakeholder map is broadening

All confirmed that their “relationship map” with stakeholders had increased in the last five years, with more relationships to be managed, and changed power dynamics. Some partnerships were more developed than others. There was frustration that some bodies did not seem to have the right membership, but others were reported to be working to deliver improved services, despite difficulties in keeping track of key people.

Professional networking and benchmarking had become a more normal part of a manager’s life than it had been five years ago, and its value was accepted.

3.2.4 Barriers to change leadership at third and fourth tier level

Lack of resources was most often cited as a barrier to change, but it was clear that the most pro-active managers actively campaigned for resources by presenting business cases. Where possible they identified additional sources of funding and creative ways of acquiring people’s time.

The greatest barrier for change was seen as the attitudes of a “hard core” of managers and staff who resisted change of any kind. Age and status did not seem to determine the attitude. This was the greatest barrier, because of the perceived lack of scope to do anything about influencing them or, at worst, removing them. It was reported in three of the Councils that recent staff turnover had helped but that the problem remained.

3.25 Perceptions of the skills, knowledge and attitudes required to be an effective middle manager

The managers all reported that “management” of their teams had become a greater part of their role over the last five years. This included business planning, setting objectives and reviewing the performance of their teams. This performance management focus was seen as a useful way of delivering change, and none of the managers in the sample appeared to resent it or see it as inappropriate, although it was reported that these same managers were often reluctant to deliver the management information on which performance could be measured.

A minority had been trained in project management skills and also found the tools helpful to organise and resource their projects. They felt that this “process” approach to change was complementary to the softer skills, but their unanimous opinion was that “soft skills” were the “making or breaking” of a good local authority change manager at any level. They highlighted the need for good influencing and negotiating skills when delivering services through partners, and working in a political environment whilst becoming more distant from elected members. Many indicated that they managed the various relationships in quite different ways.

The views expressed above were common to the entire sample, although there were different attitudes to the community leadership agenda itself, and to relationships with service users and stakeholders. This was what divided the managers into two camps. The concept of “old school” and “new school” managers came up in all of the four authorities without prompting. The “new school” managers had a “can-do” attitude, and were frustrated with the “old school” managers. *“I’d define it as the person in the grey suit, down by the photocopier, raving about how things have changed and how it was much better before. At their level they should be thinking out of the box. That’s what I think team managers are paid for, not just turning the handle.”* Many were frustrated by their own lack of ability to break people out of entrenched mind-sets, and by the limitations of capability procedures to remove those staff who had proved to be beyond support.

The “old school” managers were unhappy with their relationship with the public and with their managers, and with increasing expectations.

3.2.6 Awareness of tools for change

The managers were mostly aware of leadership and performance management as change tools, and, in contrast to the academic literature, felt that is not a question of either one or the other. Both are useful, as are project management skills. They recognised that they needed to be able to diagnose the best tool for the situation, and the universal benefit of a repertoire of good interpersonal skills.

It seems that when the managers talked about the “soft skills” necessary to succeed, they meant influencing and negotiating skills, in order to move forward reluctant members of staff and stakeholders with a variety of motivations and interests. They focused on reaching consensus and avoided conflict. However, the only leadership model that the sample had been exposed to was Covey. None of the latest thinking on leadership and complex organisations has as yet filtered down to them.

Very few had formal knowledge of key process-based techniques. Those mentioned were value analysis, project management (including PRINCE2) and process mapping, and quality assurance. Their experiences of these techniques were mixed, and the sample admitted, with three exceptions who had been through specialist training or coaching, to having limited technical understanding.

3.2.7 Development options used

The most used, popular and most often effective option was learning by experience with mentoring and support from senior management. This was the way that most of the managers had learned, but they reported widely varying experiences. The most pro-active had found themselves a skilled mentor outside of their reporting line if they did not receive appropriate support from their line manager. All felt that they, and senior managers should have formal training in these skills, and that the importance of mentoring should be more widely and explicitly recognised.

Formal training in project management, including PRINCE2, was also seen as helpful, as was process mapping.

Six of the sample had been through a leadership development programme, which has been widely praised as an example of good practice. The six had been through a selection process based on attitude and ability to be admitted to the programme.

This focused on a number of elements, including Stephen Covey’s Seven Habits of Highly Effective People⁶, managing in a political environment and performance management. It involved action learning on projects, and exposure to senior management and politicians. The programme taught an approach that the six participants I met appeared to use instinctively, although they found Covey’s Seven Habits useful, and many commented that the action learning sets were a great way of learning. The participants said that it had been a wonderful experience, but that it did not focus sufficiently on the soft skills that they needed. There was a huge sense of anti-climax when the programme ended. *“It raised expectations; people started “courting” us and we developed a close relationship with the Chief Exec and the Leader, but only about the course. We got sort of “dropped”. It was a bit like being dumped by your girlfriend.”*

⁶ Covey, SR, (1989) *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, restoring the character ethic*, Simon and Schuster, London

Many of the participants left the Council that provided the programme, as they felt that there was nowhere for them to go to apply the skills they had learned. Opinions varied as to whether participants' expectations of promotion had been unfairly raised. A second-tier manager in the authority said that, with the benefit of hindsight, this kind of programme should not have been run without a succession planning process alongside it. However, those who had attended the programme whilst employed by another Council seemed to have applied what they learned in their current roles, and to have stayed put.

The two unitary Councils provided management development and some of the managers in the other Councils had done management training. Several had an NVQ level 4 in management. Very few of the managers in one district Council had been through any formal training, although several had been on courses with previous employers. Although both the unitary authorities had competency frameworks, in one they were not used across the Council, and in the other, did not seem to have gained much currency as part of performance management. The district Councils had no means of measuring management effectiveness other than annual appraisals against targets.

4. Conclusions

4.1 Third and fourth tier managers are vital to change but are at risk

4.1.1 The increasing complexity of top management roles is mirrored at third and fourth tier level

The research confirms and highlights the role of third and fourth tier managers as both change leaders and managers, so for brevity, I will call them change agents.

These managers make the difference, by putting policies and strategies into action. The academic literature on middle management has missed the unique issues faced in local authorities. Middle managers encounter very similar issues to those already recognised as those tackled by Chief Executives, and have to operate through an increasingly complex web of interdependent agencies to deliver services to increasingly diverse stakeholders. They have to consult with a wide range of stakeholders, build bridges with other agencies, manage relationships with (increasingly distant) political leaders, but their focus is narrower. They still have to balance both the community leadership and efficiency agendas. Their scope and authority is more restricted, and they often have less control over the resources available, but their performance is critical to the success of first and second tier managers.

The research raises serious questions of the appropriateness and availability of support for them. There is a risk that failure to invest in support for third tier managers and below will have a long-term impact on the success of local authorities.

4.1.2 Risks affecting middle management effectiveness as change agents

Whilst all the managers in the sample were survivors, some, including those at the positive end of the “change-readiness” spectrum, had taken time off with stress-related complaints. The managers concerned attributed the stress to a lack of capability to deal with difficult, non-performing team members, who gained support and backing from the unions and fellow colleagues.

Traditional options, such as reorganisation, would not have addressed the issue, and capability procedures seem too long-winded and painful to both sides to implement. Managers feared short-term negative impacts because of the time input required from them, the risk of damaging relationships with their teams, and the ability of those going through the capability procedure to adapt to a minimum level of performance whilst lobbying their colleagues against the manager.

The managers felt that they were just expected to know how to deal with the problem at the time, but in two cases their line manager had change since, and they felt much better. A productive and supportive relationship between second and third tier officers is critical to sustain the delivery of change, but a wider support network of peers was also seen to be helpful.

Recruitment and retention is already an issue, and if gaps open up at third and fourth tier level because of lack of support for change, this causes immense pressure and compromises the possibility of achieving strategic aims.

It is therefore essential for local government to:

- Develop critical skills and knowledge for change before managers achieve first tier status
- Understand the value of a support network for managers across the organisation, both to help individuals learn, and to break out of the silo mentality and see the bigger picture of the interdependency of diverse services
- Help to develop a culture across the organisation that supports everyone to be “change-ready”

4.1.3 The portfolio of skills and knowledge to be a change agent

The key elements of a change agent’s portfolio, which have already been recognised widely in local government, are leadership, performance management and project management - capacity gaps identified by the ODPM, but demonstrated by examples given in the research. The existence of a skilled cohort of middle managers is not celebrated either in their authorities or in the literature.

Academics have identified “bridge-building” and understanding of complexity as other areas, and this has been picked up for senior management and politicians, but not as a specific skill for middle managers.

There are other change management interpersonal skills and techniques, linked to leadership, that are needed, such as understanding and managing resistance to change, and working with conflict to deliver change. Conflict is seen as universally negative in local government, and its role in change needs to be better understood.

Another element for the portfolio, which is being picked up for senior management and promoted through the ODPM and SOLACE, is the concept of individuals within a system, and the need to balance individual, personal needs and system needs, the idea of “leading the whole”.

The concept of a clear vision and sense of purpose, seen as so important for leadership, unites the individuals within a system, based on the evolving needs of the users of that system. The trick for local government management is to make good choices based on an understanding of which stakeholders’ needs should prevail, and seeing stakeholders as part of the system.

It was clear from the research that the “new school” managers demonstrated the partnership-building skills that were identified in the literature as essential, and these seem close to the emotional competencies identified by Hay/McBer in the 80s and Goleman’s⁷ emotional intelligence.

4.1.4 Is current investment in change leadership capacity “hitting the spot”?

Wrong level?

Although “capacity” and “capability” have been identified by the Audit Commission and the ODPM as fundamental to the development of local government, funding has been focused on developing resources for top management and politicians. Whilst developing leadership capability at this level is very important, middle managers believe that behaviour and understanding at this level might be difficult to change.

Many programmes for top management, such as IDeA’s leadership academy, are high cost, but high quality, involving management colleges and universities. Nonetheless, it is important that senior managers understand their leadership ability and role, and these programmes can help them to realise the positive impact they can have on the motivation of their third tier managers, especially, as the research project shows, if they acquire coaching and mentoring skills, and the investment in their development can be transferred into the organisation.

The research shows that middle managers are not always enjoying the same level of externally-funded investment.

⁷ Goleman, D (1998) Working with Emotional Intelligence, Bloomsbury, London

Wrong approach?

Taught, class-room courses are most extensively used, but, as shown by the research, action learning and learning by experience helped the sample translate the learning into action and consolidate it. The findings show that action learning and mentoring seem to be the most effective approaches to learning, provided group events are well facilitated. Learning by working with external experts who can help launch and implement change projects is also good value for money.

These programmes are not always available to those in smaller authorities, and even within larger ones, only a relatively small proportion of managers go through the programme.

Wrong content?

Development tends to follow “flavours of the month” which are important elements of delivering change but do not give the whole picture. Leadership, performance management, project management and process improvement are important, but there is more to be learned about delivering change. For example, on the process side, there is information management, systems thinking, organisation design, and models for change. There is much to be understood about culture, mental models and resistance to change.

The focus of training received by the research sample was about “what” rather than “why” or “how”, and “soft skills” training does not seem to accommodate the new portfolio of relationships required by middle managers.

Whilst there have been leadership programmes delivered to some middle managers in our sample, their focus has been only on Covey as a leadership model, which has a relatively simplistic view based on dyadic, two-way relationships and not on balancing the needs of a varied range of stakeholders and dealing with multiple conflicts of interest.

Senge’s “Fifth Discipline”⁸ might be a better starting point than Covey’s Seven Habits, as he recognises the range of disciplines required to deliver change, and to become a “learning organisation”. His approach is a synthesis of several well-known areas of research. It combines an understanding of many change models, the human aspects of change with the process aspects, including systems thinking. It looks at teams and how they react and learn. A key strand in his thinking is that there is no blame, but that relationships are critical to success, and we need to review our impact on relationships. This is very apposite for a local authority middle manager with so many to balance.

⁸ Senge, P (1990), *The Fifth Discipline, the art and practice of the learning organisation*, Random House, London

Other leadership models can be considered, such as Heifetz's⁹ adaptive leadership model, which addresses interdependence, authority, and conflict. It includes many of the concepts that emerge from this research project, and is focused on making things happen rather than heroics and inspiration. It is particularly appropriate for middle managers because it is based on the principles of "being in and out of the game". Its seven principles are:

1. Get on the balcony

Maintain your perspective, find the real issues, identify the gap between the shared values of people affected by change and their reality, regulate distress, pay disciplined attention to the issues, and give the work of change to the people, orchestrating conflict by helping competing interests understand the potential losses and gains, emotionally and practically

2. Distinguish yourself from your role

Do not be drawn into emotional decisions and learn not to take criticism and negative behaviour personally, focus attention on the issues and give conflict back to its rightful owners to resolve.

3. Externalise conflict

Help stakeholders to understand that their fight is not with you - conflict during change is not about individuals, but about issues and what you as a leader represent

4. Use partners

Do not carry the weight of others' hopes and fears alone - find allies and confidants

5. Listen

Test your own perceptions, and reflect

6. Find a sanctuary

Find a place where you can be away from the "cacophony of change"

7. Preserve a sense of purpose

A clearly defined purpose is essential, and an understanding of the values that underpin the purpose.

Theories about complexity are coming to the fore in senior management development, and middle managers can gain wider understanding of the

⁹ Heifetz, RA, and Linsky, M, (2002) *Leadership on the Line, Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*, Harvard Business School Press, Cambridge MA.

importance of dialogue and feedback (also part of systems thinking) to fine-tune and readjust action towards a goal in a complex environment.

4.1.5 The resource constraints and value for money

At the moment, whether for senior or middle management, change management and leadership skills are learned primarily in classroom situations, although action learning is becoming more widely used. Formal programmes are expensive in terms of fees, time away from the job, and because learning degrades before it can be applied. Delegates on the formal leadership programme left because they could not try out in practice what they had learned, and because the programme created an artificial situation with open access to politicians and top management, which did not exist back on the job.

If senior management are being helped to learn transformational leadership skills, and can pass these on informally, by role modelling, coaching and mentoring, as our sample suggested, then perhaps resources become less of an issue, provided it is acceptable for senior managers to spend more time with their direct reports. Building learning into change projects was also considered a good idea, by using experienced facilitators who had a contract to transfer skills.

If managers become competent change leaders, in the longer term Councils may not need permanent organisational development and policy and performance teams, although some resources will always be needed to plan and initiate change, and to support learning.

Some managers in the sample were growing their own trainees, and felt the benefits. If trainees also learn key change management skills and add to them as they progress, it is to be hoped that from the top down, and bottom up, local government managers can become more uniformly competent change leaders, with a focus on integrating and assimilating improvement rather than setting up new departments and adding to costs. If local government is to be adaptive and quicker to respond, capability is already recognised as the key. The systems thinking philosophy fits here too - it is better for managers to be guiding adaptation and improvement, than always to have major reengineering projects imposed by others.

Even though performance related pay is not always an option, reward is an issue, but reward in its broadest sense. There is no point in managers learning new skills if the system rewards old behaviours. Where budgeting is based on headcount, what incentive is there to be leaner and smarter? Those managers who deliver and offer up cash savings to the corporate whole will only continue to do this if there is some benefit in it for them.

4.2 Options for moving forward

4.2.1 Establish a “change-friendly” working environment over time

Capacity for change needs to be built from the bottom up and the top down, and across the organisation. The capacity building “system” is not just formal training.

There needs to be a consistent message aligning capacity with the strategy of the authority, that will develop a more open approach to change, whilst retaining the benefits of the traditional employee-centred, protective culture of local authorities, and third and fourth tier managers have a critical role in giving and living the message. However, local authorities lag behind the private sector in their use of internal communication and PR, probably because it is seen as an unnecessary cost. However much management time can be saved with innovative communication using intranets and multi-media, for example, although there is still much to be said for focused two-way team meetings and management roadshows, round-tables and “surgery sessions”.

Everyone can learn about how to manage interpersonal relationships in organisations if team development is done, as well as individual learning. This can be focused on real work issues, why changes are necessary, and introduces ideas and concepts of how to work better together to deliver change. Expectations can be clarified formally through performance management, but team project and review activities can help everyone understand what is working and barriers to change, provided feedback skills are learned and feedback is facilitated to achieve understanding. Learning by working with an experienced external expert on a specific technique applied to real problem is another important option.

Confidence can be built if the “system” recognises transferable skills and knowledge. Individuals learn that even if change happens, they are likely to be able to cope with it. The authority will benefit if people at all levels recognise they may have alternative career paths. Cross-functional project teams are already widely used to break down silos, but management progression needs to be based on transferable management skills and encouraged between functions.

Everyone needs help to understand how to manage conflict constructively, especially middle managers. It is inevitable, and avoiding it is not helping to achieve change. Induction of new staff should include the explicit expectation that people will need to evolve. That expectation needs to be communicated regularly and constructively in team meetings, performance management meetings and it is critical for managers to be able to identify the “what’s in it for me?” for their teams. Capability procedures can be shorter without being unfair - extending the pain helps no-one, causes stress to managers, and affects morale in teams.

4.2.2 Develop from the middle out and widen the repertoire of change tools and skills

Change can happen “from the middle out” if middle managers are selected and developed, as they have been in the research sample. It is therefore vital to ensure that their development covers not only leadership, (perhaps using a more appropriate model than Covey), performance management, and project management, but also change management skills including:

- Systems thinking - understanding connections, where to gain leverage, and avoiding unintended consequences
- Change models - ways of setting up change to minimise opportunities for resistance, but also thinking about the need to disturb systems to promote change
- Techniques for managing resistance where it occurs - the diagnosis of the issues, understanding culture and mental models, and working through conflicts, understanding the shifting expectations of younger people and how to gain the most from diversity.
- Managing interdependency and influencing and negotiating with external partners
- Managing complexity and the power of conversation in emergent change

Over time, assuming leadership development is continued at senior levels, and middle managers are developed, it is likely that a substantial shift in culture can be achieved.

Competency frameworks may be helpful to identify learning needs and progress, but capability needs to be considered in terms of results, and it is important to ensure that competencies are not used to try to make everyone the same. Middle managers will not be good at everything - interpersonal skills are important, but those who are less good at interpersonal skills may be excellent at process improvement, lean thinking and performance measures.

4.2.3 Use external resources to better effect

Consider how to drop learning activities into change projects, rather than sending people on class-room-based courses. The fees spent on classroom courses may be wasted because managers do not immediately have the opportunity to put what they have learned into practice, in a safe environment.

Ensure external change consultants pass on their skills to internal managers by choosing those who will work with internal teams specifically to help them learn. They may be better value than trainers who know the theory but who have not been involved in implementation. They will also have the expertise to avoid some of the change pitfalls that a manager new to change projects may fall into.

Blended learning and working with actors can be relatively low-cost development options to practise new skills.

The managers in the sample learned much from benchmarking and professional networking, and this needs to be encouraged more widely.

4.2.4 Help senior management pass on their expertise

Ensure senior management are educated as change leaders and mentors. There is currently funding from the ODPM to support leadership development for first tier managers and political leaders, based on many of the leadership concepts outlined above.

In particular, this development needs to include mentoring skills, as this was so important in the research. Some private sector organisations organise a kind of “speed dating” between new recruits and mentors, to ensure that a mentoring relationship is set up which has good rapport between mentors and mentees.

Consider “positive deviants” in your own organisation - those who are particularly good at change management, and help others to work with them and understand how they operate.

4.2.5 Help managers to build support networks

Wherever possible, encourage all managers to build support networks of peers to whom they can turn when they have a problem. Dealing with conflict can feel isolating and stressful, and those managers in the sample who had successfully worked with conflict had good networks to bounce ideas off and to “offload” on.

External networking is already recognised as a key element of change leadership.

4.2.6 Recognise good change leadership

Within teams in the sample, achievement is celebrated socially, and with small gifts. However, management performance does not appear to be celebrated by any of the organisations in the sample, neither within the authority itself, nor to its stakeholders in external communications.

Councils are improving their stakeholder communication, but managers’ achievements are not promoted. Several of the managers in the sample said that it had been “therapy” to talk to me as it had helped them to realise what had been achieved.

The “new school” managers in the sample appear to have had a role in making sure that their contribution was recognised by senior managers and members. However, the literature review indicates that lack of recognition is damaging morale. The original research shows that not all managers will take this pro-active approach to being recognised, and a significant reinforcement of positive behaviour might help unblock some of the “old school”, and encourage some of those in the middle of the “old school, new school” spectrum.

There is a tradition, stronger in some Councils in our sample than others, that only first tier officers may address members, and that directors and senior management teams will only be addressed by second tier officers. Continuing to allow, or enabling middle managers to make presentations at top-level meetings about their change projects would at least allow them to take the credit and the responsibility for their progress.

Although a few managers in the research mentioned financial reward, most would have been happier if they felt that their contribution to change, most tangibly measured through community projects delivered “on the ground” and improved audit, inspection and CPA results, had been recognised more widely, and their achievements promoted to the relevant stakeholders.

4.2.7 Upgrade middle management recruitment and promotion processes

There is a shortage of good middle managers, according to the Audit Commission, and SOLACE. Councils therefore need to ensure that their recruitment processes are not only fair, but also enhance the reputation of the organisation. The process also should select for change leadership skills.

My research confirmed Kessler’s (2003) findings that “new school” managers look for organisations with a good reputation, and also identified that they judged the reputation of their potential employer by the “can-do” attitude of the senior managers they met and the quality of the recruitment process. . Maccoby¹⁰ describes leadership as a relationship and management as a task, and identifies good leaders has having several key kinds of intelligence, analytic, political, emotional and creative. The process needs to seek evidence against these criteria to be successful

Councils run the risk of losing the best change leaders if they do not back up their good recruitment practice with effective development, and use what they learn in the recruitment process to focus induction and inform the development plans of the new managers.

4.3 Review

The research project highlights the positive contribution of a strong cohort of effective middle managers but reveals that there is a high risk of losing their commitment. They are likely to be the most stable element of change leadership in local authorities, with far lower “churn” rates than senior managers and politicians, and it makes sense to look after them. Overall, the “new school” middle managers prove to be change leaders, demonstrating not only change

¹⁰ Maccoby, M (2005) Coaching Leaders, lecture to CCC Programme, Oxford

management attributes, but also change leadership traits and skills in line with Covey, Maccoby and Heifetz. They are “positive deviants”.¹¹

The change victims are the “old school”, who do not seem open to new ideas, and whose choices have been limited by their own mental models. However, there must be many managers who are in the middle of this spectrum, who can be “saved” and supported to become change managers, if not change leaders. If they are not supported, they are likely to become change victims, and their employers will suffer as a result. The support cannot depend on only one model of change, such as transformational leadership or performance management.

Future development needs to balance the process-based approach to change, including performance and project management and systems thinking, with the human aspects of change, in particular how to identify and manage resistance to change, and should be, where possible, focused on “learning by doing”, ideally with your own “positive deviants”.

Jane Lewis
December 2005

¹¹ Pascale, RT, and Sternin, J, (2005) Your Company’s Secret Change Agents, Harvard Business Review vol 83 issue 2.

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