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**Middle managers' sensemaking practices in  
developing strategic consensus**

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**ABSTRACT:**

Organizational performance depends on both effective formulation and implementation of strategies. The strategic management research has traditionally emphasized formulation, but implementation remains comparatively underexplored, and many organizations continue to struggle to translate strategic intent into coordinated actions. Strategic consensus, defined as shared understanding and commitment to strategic priorities across organizational levels, has been identified as a critical factor for implementation success. However, achieving such consensus is challenging, particularly in complex and ambiguous environments. Middle managers occupy an important position between top management and frontline employees and play a central role in interpreting, translating, communicating, and aligning strategic intent across organizational levels. Although prior research has separately examined strategic consensus, sensemaking, and middle managers' roles in strategy implementation, limited studies have integrated these streams to explain how middle managers actively construct shared understanding and commitment as a socially embedded process during strategy implementation. This thesis, therefore, aims to explore how middle managers develop strategic consensus through sensemaking to enhance strategy implementation effectiveness. Specifically, it seeks to uncover the processes through which middle managers interpret strategic intentions, translate and communicate strategic meanings, and align understanding and commitment across organizational levels during implementation. This study adopted a qualitative multiple-case study research design and conducted semi-structured interviews with five middle managers in the Vietnamese life insurance industry. Data were analysed using the Gioia methodology to systematically develop higher-level theoretical dimensions from the interviewees' descriptions of their experiences. The findings show that middle managers construct strategic consensus through six interrelated sensemaking practices: interpreting strategic intentions, translating and communicating meanings, aligning understanding and commitment, navigating structural and political dynamics, managing the emotional dynamics of change, and leveraging organizational culture. Strategic consensus emerges as a dynamic and continuously reconstructed outcome of ongoing interpretive, structural, emotional, and relational work. By integrating these dimensions into a coherent process model, the study extends theoretical insights into the underlying process of strategy implementation while offering practical guidance on how organizations can enable middle managers to sustain alignment, coordination, and commitment throughout strategic change.

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**KEYWORDS:** Strategic consensus, Middle managers, Sensemaking, Strategy Implementation

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## 1 Introduction

Organizational performance depends on both effective formulation and implementation of strategies (Hutzschenreuter and Kleindienst, 2006; Noble, 1999). Although strategic formulation has dominated the strategic management literature, strategy implementation has remained underexplored (Tawse and Tabesh, 2021). Evidence shows that many organizations are struggling to implement strategies effectively (Greer et al., 2017; Neilson et al., 2008).

Research indicates that strategic consensus is an important factor of implementation success (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992a; Kellermanns et al., 2011; Noble, 1999). Strategic consensus is defined as the shared understanding and commitment across all levels of an organization related to strategic priorities (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992a). When managers and employees share a common understanding of strategy and commit to the strategy, coordination is enhanced, resistance is reduced, and coherence is improved in organizational activities. (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992a; Kellermanns et al., 2011; Wooldridge and Floyd, 1990). However, strategic consensus is challenging to achieve, especially in volatile or complex environments and/or when strategy is ambiguous (Kellermanns et al., 2005; Tawse and Tabesh, 2021; Walter et al., 2013).

As strategic consensus is hard to achieve, middle managers play a pivotal role in bridging top management's intentions and operational realities. Middle managers are positioned between top management and front-line employees (Huy, 2001) and are responsible for interpreting, negotiating and translating strategic intent into context-specific actions (Balogun, 2003; Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992b; Huy, 2001). They use discursive and interactional competences through intertwined processes of sensemaking and sensegiving to shape how strategic meanings are interpreted and enacted across organizational levels (Rouleau and Balogun, 2011).

A growing body of literature has highlighted the importance of sensemaking and sensegiving processes through which middle managers construct and shape the strategic

meaning. Sensemaking theory explains how individuals continuously look back on past experiences to construct reasonable interpretations to make senses of their actions (Weick et al., 2005). In a strategic change context, sensemaking involves social interactions among organizational members, particularly middle managers, through which they interpret what the change or strategy means for their own work (Balogun and Johnson, 2004). These processes support the development of strategic consensus and stronger implementation outcomes (Kellermanns et al., 2005, 2011). Therefore, research on middle managers' sensemaking processes provides critical insights into how strategic consensus is developed and how strategies are effectively implemented.

However, although prior studies have recognized the critical roles of middle managers (Balogun, 2003; Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992b, 1997, 2000; Huy, 2001, 2002; Tawse et al., 2024; Wooldridge et al., 2008) and the importance of strategic consensus in strategy implementation (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992a; Kellermanns et al., 2005, 2011; Klein et al., 1999; Noble, 1999; Wooldridge and Floyd, 1989), empirical research has remained limited in integrating these streams to examine how middle managers use sensemaking processes to facilitate strategic consensus among diverse organizational members during implementation (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Tawse and Tabesh, 2021; Weiser et al., 2020). The purpose of this study is to explore ***how middle managers develop strategic consensus through sensemaking to enhance strategy implementation effectiveness***. Specifically, the study aims to uncover the processes through which middle managers interpret, communicate, and align strategic meaning across organizational levels.

The study responds to recent calls to focus on middle managers' micro-activities, roles, and behaviours in contemporary organizations (Tarakci et al., 2023). It extends strategic consensus research beyond top management by conceptualizing consensus as a socially constructed process unfolding during implementation (Kellermanns et al., 2005), and address Rouleau (2005)'s call to adopt a practice perspective by examine middle

managers as interpreters and promoters of strategic change through their everyday sensemaking and sensegiving activities.

To achieve this, the thesis employs a qualitative exploratory research design (Saunders et al.,2023). The insights are primarily obtained through semi-structured interviews with middle managers working in different organizational contexts, thus allowing for similarities and diverse understanding. A comprehensive literature review first establishes the theoretical foundations of strategy implementation effectiveness, strategic consensus, and sensemaking. Then, insights are explored empirically. This allows for an in-depth understanding of how middle managers' sensemaking practices contribute to the formation of shared understanding and commitment during strategy implementation.

The study contributes to the existing research on middle managers, their roles in strategic implementation, and sensemaking by exploring the activities through which middle managers develop strategic consensus for strategic implementation effectiveness. Theoretically, the study explains how middle managers connect strategic goals with everyday actions through sensemaking process. Practically, it offers recommendations for leaders on how to support middle managers in creating shared understanding and alignment to improve the success of strategy implementation.

The thesis investigates the sensemaking process of middle managers in building strategic consensus during strategy implementation. It does not analyse the strategy formulation stage, nor does it aim to quantitatively evaluate organizational performance outcomes. Additionally, this study does not analyse the differences across industries, national cultures, or organizational sizes. The purpose of this thesis is to provide qualitative insights into how middle managers make sense of strategy and share it within their organizations.

The thesis is divided into five chapters. **Chapter 1, *Introduction***, provides the background of the study, identifies gaps in literature, presents the objective, research question and expected contributions. **Chapter 2, *Literature Review***, establishes the theoretical

foundation for the study by defining the key concepts of strategy, strategy implementation, and implementation effectiveness, as well as discussing the roles of middle managers in strategy implementation. The chapter also explores strategic consensus and sense-making as process through which middle managers enhance strategy implementation effectiveness and concludes with a research gap and a proposed theoretical framework. **Chapter 3, *Methods***, describes the qualitative research design, including data collection and data analysis procedures. **Chapter 4, *Results***, presents empirical results, organized around key themes emerging from the data, and provides a summary of the main findings with a revised framework. **Chapter 5, *Discussion***, interprets the findings and their implications for theory and practice, outlines limitations, and provides actionable recommendations for future research.

## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 Strategy implementation effectiveness

#### 2.1.1 Understanding strategy

The concept of strategy has been widely debated in the strategic management literature, though its meaning and scope have changed over time. In the earliest literature, strategy was viewed as a rational process of determining long-term goals, developing formal action plans, and aligning organizational structure and resources to achieve these objectives (Andrews, 1971; Ansoff, 1965; Chandler, 1962). Later, Porter (1985, 1996) argued that strategy is about creating a unique value proposition through differentiation and trade-offs to establish sustainable competitive advantages against its rivals.

In contrast to this purely rational approach, other scholars defined strategy as a dynamic and on-going adaptation process (Mintzberg, 1978; Mintzberg and Waters, 1985). Mintzberg (1978) highlighted that realized strategy often develops through organizational learning and adaptation, and Mintzberg and Waters (1985) later introduced the concept of emergent strategy to explain how strategy unfolds through the patterns of action rather than formal planning. Later, Mintzberg and Lampel (1999) illustrated this by identifying ten schools of thought, which showed that strategy can emerge from deliberate design as well as emergent discovery influenced by organizational learning and context. This adaptive view aligns with the dynamic capabilities' framework (Teece et al., 1997), emphasizing that firms need to continuously reconfigure their resources to respond to changing environmental contexts. These perspectives expanded the understanding of strategy as both deliberate and adaptive, yet they are left unanswered the question of how strategy actually becomes collective, coherent action inside organizations.

In responses, the Strategy-as-Practice (SAP) perspective shifted attention from "*what strategy is*" to "*how strategy is done through everyday activities*" (Whittington, 1996). It

is often conceptualized through three interrelated elements: *practices* (the methods, norms, and artefacts shaping strategizing), *praxis* (the concrete episodes and activities of doing strategy), and *practitioners* (the individuals who perform and influence these activities) (Vaara and Whittington, 2012).

A significant stream of SAP research adopted a sensemaking perspective to explore how organizational actors, particularly middle managers, interpret, translate, and give meaning to strategic intent through their daily practices (Kohtamäki et al., 2022). Middle managers act as bridge between the top executive group and frontline employees by translating strategic objectives and aligning them with operational context (Balogun, 2003; Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992b). Rouleau (2005) further argues that middle managers enact strategy through micro-level sensemaking and sensegiving routines, they use day-to-day work practices to give meaning and sell strategic changes in their organizational contexts.

In summary, these observations point out that the concept of strategy has shifted from a rational, top-down planning orientation toward a processual and practice-based understanding. It is no longer defined simply as a product of deliberate design. Strategy is conceived as a dynamic process that unfolds through daily practices of organizational members. These theoretical insights provide the conceptual foundation for examining strategy implementation effectiveness in the next section.

### **2.1.2 Strategy implementation and its effectiveness**

Research on strategy implementation has shifted from structural and control-oriented views toward more adaptive, practice-based, and multilevel perspectives. From a structured view, early literature defined strategy implementation as a part of a predefined sequenced process following the strategy formulation and focused on how to organize structure and control activities to achieve intended performance outcomes (Hrebiniak and Joyce, 1984; Bonoma, 1984, as cited in Noble, 1999). However, over time, scholars challenged this traditional perspective, arguing that strategy implementation is better

understood as an ongoing process of the communication, interpretation, and enactment of strategic plans (Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Noble, 1999; Weiser et al., 2020).

Consequently, the notion of strategy implementation effectiveness has broadened from a static outcome, the degree to which an organization can realize its intended strategies and convert strategic intent into tangible outcomes (Lee and Puranam, 2016; Tawse and Tabesh, 2021), to a dynamic capability encompassing alignment, learning, and adaptation in action (Noble, 1999; Weiser et al., 2020). This shift in understanding provides a foundation for examining how strategy implementation has been conceptualized over time, which are discussed in more detail below.

Under traditional or structural view, strategy implementation is primarily concerned with achieving alignment between organizational structures and control mechanisms to successfully execute the intended strategic plans (Noble, 1999; Weiser et al., 2020). Implementation effectiveness is thus defined by the organization's ability to realize intended strategic outcomes through structural and procedural alignment, ensuring that designed plans are consistently translated into coordinated actions and controlled performance (Lee and Puranam, 2016; Tawse and Tabesh, 2021). As Weiser et al. (2020) note in their review of four decades of strategy implementation research, the central problem in the structural-control view was how to align the organization with a top-down mandated strategy, reflecting the assumption that strategy is formulated at the top and that implementation merely ensures its faithful execution across organizational levels.

As environments became more dynamic and uncertain, scholars began to challenge the assumption that strategy implementation could be managed solely through structural alignment and control mechanisms (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985). Empirical evidence suggested that many implementations' failures do not stem from flaws in strategic formulation but from deficiencies in communication, trust, and coordination across managerial levels (Beer and Eisenstat, 2000; Hrebiniak, 2006; Noble, 1999). Researchers have increasingly acknowledged a shift in the understanding of strategy implementation, from

a structural and control-oriented activity to a dynamic process of how strategies are enacted and continuously shaped in practice (Noble, 1999; Weiser et al., 2020), which paved the way for a more interpretive and dynamic understanding of implementation.

The review of early strategy implementation research by Noble (1999) marked a foundational turning point for this dynamic understanding. He reframed the implementation as an interactive process of communication, interpretation, adoption, and enactment of strategic plans rather than a purely structural or procedural exercise (Noble, 1999, p. 120). Furthermore, Weiser et al. (2020) identified the “adaptive turn” in strategy implementation as a shift in focus from designing and conceptualizing strategic plans to understanding how organizations enact and carry out strategies in practice. Scholars under this research stream view implementation as a dynamic and socially constructed process in which strategies are enacted, interpreted, and continuously reshaped in practice rather than merely executed according to predesigned plans (Weiser et al., 2020). Strategy is continuously enacted and adjusted through organizational sensemaking and sensegiving (Balogun and Johnson, 2004, 2005; Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014); the interaction of everyday practices, role relations, and organizing mechanisms (Floyd and Lane, 2000; Floyd and Wooldridge, 2000); emotional behaviours of organizational members (Huy, 2001, 2002), interactive process and communication across organizational levels (Jarzabkowski et al., 2019; Jarzabkowski and Balogun, 2009).

However, while structural control view provides systematic guidance on planning and control mechanisms, it tends to overlook the behaviours and social dynamics through which strategies are enacted in practice (Weiser et al., 2020). On the other hand, the adaptive turn has generated rich insights into sensemaking and enactment processes, but this stream has remained fragmented and insufficiently connected back to the strategy conceptualization and implementation planning (Weiser et al., 2020).

Drawing from insights of both the structural control view and the adaptive turn, Weiser et al. (2020) introduced an integrative view of strategy implementation that links these

previously fragmented research traditions. Strategy implementation, from the integrative perspective, is a continuous and socially embedded process that integrates structural mechanisms (structures, controls, and incentives) with social mechanisms (sense-making, discourses, and emotions) through feedback loops across organizational levels (Weiser et al., 2020). In other words, effective implementation depends on the dynamic interplay between formal systems that provide direction and coordination, and informal processes that enable learning, adaptation, and local interpretation. The integrative view thus views implementation as neither strictly top-down nor emergent but as a hybrid process where formal structures and social dynamics jointly influence strategic action. However, although the integrative view advances the strategy implementation research by recognizing the interplay between structural arrangements and the social, interpretive processes, Weiser et al. (2020) also acknowledge that research has yet to fully explain how diverse actors interact, negotiate meanings, balance discretion and control, and coordinate adaptations across levels to achieve coherent collective action.

While the integrative view (Weiser et al., 2020) conceptualized strategy implementation as a recursive interaction between structural and social mechanisms, recent scholars (e.g., Šilenskytė and Smale, 2021) have extended this logic through a multilevel lens. The multilevel view in strategy implementation research originates from the broader multilevel theory developed in organizational science (Klein and Kozlowski, 2000), which emphasizes that organizational phenomena unfold simultaneously across interdependent levels of analysis. Within the context of multinational corporations, Šilenskytė and Smale (2021) argue that strategy implementation should be understood as a set of actions and processes through which strategic plan is enacted across corporate, unit and individual levels. These processes are shaped not only by organizational structure and control systems but also by the organizational culture and local contexts, interactions, interpretations, and relationship that connect these levels (Šilenskytė and Smale, 2021).

As the understanding of strategy implementation has evolved in the literature, the notion of implementation effectiveness has also evolved from a static outcome, reflecting

the shift from how well an organization realizes its intended strategies (Noble, 1999; Lee and Puranam, 2016; Tawse and Tabesh, 2021) to a dynamic, multilevel, and interpretive capability that depends on continuous alignment, learning, and adaptation in action across organizational levels (Šilenskytė and Smale, 2021; Weiser et al., 2020).

As implementation effectiveness increasingly comes to be understood as a dynamic, socially embedded, and multilevel capability rather than a static outcome (Šilenskytė and Smale, 2021; Weiser et al., 2020), attention has shifted toward the organizational conditions that shape how strategic actions are interpreted and carried out in practice (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992a, 1997; Jarzabkowski et al., 2019; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). Because effective implementation relies on the alignment of interpretations and actions among multiple actors, *strategic consensus* has been highlighted as a key mechanism through which shared understanding and commitment about strategy can reduce uncertainty and enhance coordinated action (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992a; Kellermanns et al., 2005, 2011). At the same time, scholars further note that middle managers play a central role in developing such consensus, as they translate, interpret, and communicate strategic priorities across levels of the organization (Balogun, 2003; Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992b, 1997; Wooldridge and Floyd, 1990).

The reviewed literature collectively indicates a clear shift from viewing strategy implementation as a structural, plan-driven phase toward understanding it as a dynamic, socially embedded, and multilevel process. Implementation effectiveness has similarly expanded from a narrow focus on the realization of intended outcomes to a broader capability grounded in continuous alignment, learning, and adaptive action across organizational levels. Within this broader conceptualization, strategic consensus emerges as a promising mechanism that may enhance implementation effectiveness by fostering shared understanding and commitment to the strategy. Middle managers with a unique position in the organization play a critical role in this consensus-building process. How middle managers contribute to forming strategic consensus, and how this in turn shapes

implementation effectiveness, will therefore be explored in greater detail in the subsequent sections.

### 2.1.3 Middle managers' roles in strategy implementation process

Middle managers are commonly positioned between top executives and frontline employees, acting as a link that connects strategic and operational levels. Functionally, they coordinate the activities of related groups vertically and are responsible for sub-functional workflows (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992b). Hierarchically, they are typically located two levels below the CEO and one level above line managers or professionals (Huy, 2001). Research on the strategy process has repositioned them from passive implementers of top-down plans to proactive agents who shape the strategy implementation (Balogun, 2003; Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992b; Wooldridge et al., 2008). They played a critical role in interpreting, engaging, and aligning resources to translate strategic intent into collective understanding and coherent actions across the organization. When implementing strategic change, middle managers are not just implementers but interpreters and sellers of the change (Rouleau, 2005).

During the strategy implementation phase, middle managers serve as a ***strategic link between strategy formulation and operational execution***. A foundational framework identifies four roles of middle managers: implementing deliberate strategy, synthesizing information upward, championing alternatives, and facilitating adaptability across units (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992b). Through these roles, middle managers not only translate top management's intent into operational programs but also collect information from the front line and take them upward, suggest useful changes, and help teams adjust across functions.

Balogun (2003) further emphasized this "translation" capacity when describing middle managers as *change intermediaries* who operationalize strategic intention while keeping business activities aligned with the strategic direction. Huy (2001) points out that middle managers, due to their unique organizational position between the top and the

front line, are more effective at detecting problems and initiating innovation than top managers. Middle managers translate complex strategic language from senior executives into language that is understandable, practical, and relevant to employees (Huy, 2001). However, they are often overlooked and under-recognized, causing their creative potential to be wasted in the process of organizational change (Huy, 2001).

Effective strategy implementation requires middle managers to actively ***adapt and align strategic initiatives to local contexts***, ensuring that top-level intentions translate into actionable and relevant practices on the ground. They have deep knowledge about organizational contexts, such as customer and routine activities and are more diverse than senior executives' group, allowing them to have creative ideas about how to grow and change a business (Huy, 2001).

Another central aspect of middle managers' contribution is ***coordination and orchestration across functional and geographical boundaries***. Coordination has been viewed as critical element for effective strategy implementation, as it ensures the alignment of information sharing and task execution across organizational levels (Tawse and Tabesh, 2021). Within this process, middle managers serve as pivotal coordinators who coordinate multiple stakeholders and synchronize interdependent activities to ensure that strategic objectives are executed consistently across the organization (Tawse et al., 2024).

In addition, middle managers ***maintain a balance between change and continuity***, ensuring the organization adapts to environmental turbulence while maintaining core values and competencies (Huy, 2001). In Balogun (2003)'s model, a key task of middle managers is to "keep the business going" while implementing changes. By orchestrating communication across levels and departments, they balance multiple, often conflict, priorities to ensure that the implementation remains coherent and well-coordinated (Balogun, 2003).

Strategy changes often involve uncertainty, create worry and exhaustion, middle managers *act as emotional stabilizers and trust builders* (Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Huy, 2001, 2002). They balance pressures from top management and frontline employees, maintain morale, support people through difficult transitions.

Through their proximity and personal communication skills, middle managers act as “the therapists,” creating a safe psychological environment and keeping the organization running smoothly (Huy, 2001). Huy (2002) theorized the concept of *emotional balancing*, explaining how middle managers’ ability to manage both commitments to change and empathy toward employees enables organizations to maintain strategic consensus and performance during transformation. They become role models to “help others through change” and “make sense of things”, balancing the emotional impacts of changes with the need for maintaining the operations smoothly (Balogun, 2003). These emotional balancing roles are critical for sustaining collective agreement with the strategic direction.

## **2.2 Strategic consensus for effective strategy implementation**

Strategic consensus has been recognized as a critical condition for effective strategy implementation (Kellermanns et al., 2011). This section explores how the concept of strategic consensus evolves in the field over time, its role in strategy implementation effectiveness, and what roles that middle managers play to develop strategic consensus.

### **2.2.1 Evolution of strategic consensus**

The concept of “strategic consensus” has been long central to how the organization understand and transform strategic intentions into actions.

Research on strategic consensus during the period between 1980s and early 1990s was mainly focused on a top-management perspective (Kellermanns et al., 2005). Scholars examined how shared understanding within the top management team influenced

decision quality and organizational performance (Bourgeois, 1980; Dess, 1987). This early rational-planning view emphasized alignment at the top of the hierarchy but largely neglected how consensus evolves across organizational levels. Also, in the rational approach to strategic decision-making, research on content of consensus focused strategic goals and means (Bourgeois, 1980; Kellermanns et al., 2005). Moreover, studies during this period examined organizational performance as an outcome variable, focusing on the relationship between strategic consensus and organizational performance (e.g. Bourgeois, 1980; Dess, 1987). Dess (1987), however, highlighted that consensus also involves commitment to the strategy, as shared understanding without commitment may even have a negative effect on organizational performance (Wooldridge and Floyd, 1989).

A major shift occurred in the 1990s and 2000s, expanded the focus to include the roles of middle- and lower- managers in shaping and sustaining consensus (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992a; Wooldridge and Floyd, 1989, 1990). With the expansion of scope to include middle- and lower-level managers, the content of strategic consensus was viewed as strategic priorities, reflecting how strategic consensus is perceived across levels within the organization (Kellermanns et al., 2005). The concept was more precisely defined as *“the degree of shared understanding and commitment among managers at different levels regarding the strategic priorities of the organization”* (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992a, p. 155). While Dess and Priem (1995) further examined the relationship between consensus and organizational performance, they emphasized that this relationship is contingent upon environmental conditions and strategic context. In a comprehensive review of strategy implementation research, Noble (1999) also identified strategic consensus as a key behavioral and communication-related factor that facilitates coordination and commitment during the implementation process. These studies reflected a movement from viewing strategic consensus as a static outcome of the decision-making process to a dynamic and interactive process with middle managers’ involvement in coordinating actions and facilitating alignment across organizational levels (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992a; Wooldridge and Floyd, 1990).

From 2000s, research began to conceptualize strategic consensus as an ongoing, socially constructed, and practice-based process, emphasizing that consensus is enacted through the everyday activities of managers, such as conversations, sensemaking, and sensegiving (Balogun, 2003; Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Huy, 2001, 2002).

In this study, strategic consensus is defined as the shared understanding and commitment among organizational members at different levels regarding the meaning, direction, and priorities of strategy during implementation. It is viewed not as a fixed outcome but as a continuous, interactive process of sensemaking and alignment that unfolds through communication, interpretation, and collaboration. This definition integrates both cognitive and behavioural dimensions, recognizing that consensus emerges when managers not only understand strategic goals in similar ways but also coordinate and commit to realize them. In line with the strategy-as-practice perspective, this study adopts a dynamic and processual view of strategic consensus, emphasizing how it is constructed and sustained through the practices of middle managers as they bridge the gap between strategic intent and implementation.

### **2.2.2 Strategic consensus and strategy implementation effectiveness**

Strategy consensus, defined as shared understanding and commitment among organizational members at different levels regarding strategic priorities, has been extensively examined for its implications on strategy implementation, highlighting both the mechanisms through which it supports implementation and the conditions under which it may constrain it (Kellermanns et al., 2011; Noble, 1999). Prior research suggests that strategic consensus facilitates strategy implementation effectiveness because it enhances interpretive alignment for strategy enactment (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992a; Noble, 1999), strengthens coordination across organizational levels (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992a, 1997; Kellermanns et al., 2011), and fosters commitment to strategic priorities (Dess, 1987; Floyd and Lane, 2000; Noble, 1999). Yet, the literature also cautions that the consensus-building process may introduce constraints as it may generate rigidity or groupthink (Dess and Priem, 1995; Kellermanns et al., 2011), lead to inappropriate choices

when misaligned with the strategic context or achieved through the elimination of critical debates (Amason, 1996), and produce negative outcomes in highly complex or uncertain environments (Kellermanns et al., 2011; Noble, 1999). The following section therefore examines how strategic consensus can both enhance and hinder implementation effectiveness.

A substantial body of literature indicates that strategic consensus enhances implementation effectiveness by improving interpretive alignment, coordination, and commitment throughout the organization. The interpretive alignment emerges through ongoing sensemaking interactions in which organizational members construct shared meanings of strategic priorities (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992a; Maitlis, 2005; Noble, 1999), thereby reducing ambiguity surrounding strategic priorities (Noble, 1999). When managers at different hierarchical levels share similar understandings of strategic goals, they are better able to align decisions and integrate activities across units and prevent conflicting interpretations from disrupting implementation (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992a, 1997). Such cognitive alignment forms an important foundation for strategic alignment, as shared interpretations guide consistent action and coordinated responses throughout the organization (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992a; Noble, 1999).

Secondly, strategic consensus strengthens coordination by enhancing communication, sensemaking and sensegiving processes during implementation. Shared understandings of strategic priorities provide a common interpretive frame that facilitates clearer, more efficient, and more coherent communication among actors at different levels (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992a; Kellermanns et al., 2011). Such shared frames also support more effective sensemaking by helping organizational members interpret emerging issues in compatible ways and adjust their actions accordingly (Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). In addition, strategic consensus enhances the effectiveness of sensegiving efforts by senior and middle managers, allowing strategic messages to be conveyed in ways that are consistent, credible, and aligned with shared meanings of the strategy (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Rouleau and Balogun, 2011). Through these

mechanisms, consensus supports the coordinated execution of strategic initiatives across functions and hierarchical layers (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992a, 1997; Kellermanns et al., 2011).

Thirdly, consensus fosters commitment to strategic priorities by shaping how organizational members psychologically engage with the strategy. Research demonstrates that when organizational members share a common understanding of the strategic direction, they develop stronger psychological and motivational attachment to its implementation (Dess, 1987; Wooldridge and Floyd, 1989). Such shared interpretations increase individuals' willingness to contribute discretionary effort, persist through implementation challenges, and engage proactively in continuous problem-solving (Noble, 1999). Consensus also strengthens commitment by reducing interpretive conflict, enabling members to view strategy as meaningful guides for their own roles and responsibilities (Floyd and Lane, 2000). Through these cognitive and motivational processes, strategic consensus enables a more sustained and resilient engagement with implementation efforts, which supports the consistent enactment of strategic priorities across the organization (Dess, 1987; Floyd and Lane, 2000; Noble, 1999).

Although strategic consensus is widely theorised to enhance implementation by fostering alignment, coordination, and coherent action, a substantial body of research cautions that consensus may also hinder effective strategy implementation under certain conditions. Research shows that high strategic consensus might lead to groupthink, harness the creativeness or inability to adapt (Dess and Priem, 1995; Kellermanns et al., 2011). When consensus is achieved through forced harmony and avoidance of debate, it leads to groupthink, reduced information quality, and decreased strategic decision-making quality, all of which negatively impact organizational effectiveness (Kellermanns et al., 2011). These conditions can restrict organizational learning by preventing members from exploring alternative interpretations or adapting their understanding as circumstances change (Dess and Priem, 1995; Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992a; Wooldridge and Floyd, 1989).

Research further suggests that strategic consensus may produce harmful effects when it is achieved through the elimination of critical debates. Amason (1996) shows that consensus formed by avoiding cognitive conflicts may undermine the decision quality and restrict the exploration of viable alternatives. In the context of strategy implementation, where effectiveness relies on continuous interpretation, adaptation, and the ability to address and respond to emerging issues, consensus built on removed dissent may constrain managers' ability to detect misalignments and respond appropriately, ultimately resulting in ineffective implementation (Dess and Priem, 1995; Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992a).

A third concern identified in the literature is that strategic consensus may produce negative outcomes under conditions of high uncertainty or complexity. In such environments, attempts to stabilize shared meaning may restrict adaptive sensemaking by encouraging actors to rely on a single dominant interpretation rather than considering alternative possibilities (Kellermanns et al., 2011). As uncertainty increases, organizations benefit from flexible interpretive processes that allow for the rapid updating of shared meanings, but strong consensus can slow these processes and reduce responsiveness (Noble, 1999). This dynamic can hinder the implementation of strategic initiatives by limiting the organization's capacity to revise its assumptions, reinterpret new information, and adjust actions accordingly (Kellermanns et al., 2011).

These findings from the reviewed literatures indicate that strategic consensus enhances implementation effectiveness not through complete agreement, but through a shared interpretive ground that enables coordinated action while still allowing space for constructive disagreement, ongoing sensemaking, and adaptive adjustments during implementation (Kellermanns et al., 2005). This perspective highlights that consensus operates along multiple degrees of shared understanding and commitment, providing a basis for examining how different levels of consensus shape implementation dynamics.

Building on this recognition that consensus can vary in both form and effect, Floyd and Wooldridge (1992a) offer further insight through their framework of four levels of strategic consensus: “*strong consensus, blind devotion, informed scepticism, and weak consensus*”. These configurations illustrate how different combinations of cognitive understanding and emotional commitment shape behavioural responses during implementation (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992a). Strong consensus happens and supports strategic implementation by ensuring both clarity and willingness to act, while low understanding or low commitment can lead to misaligned behaviours, incomplete enactment of strategic priorities, or resistance, ultimately weakening implementation outcomes (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992a). Floyd and Wooldridge (1992a) emphasize that these four levels are situational and dynamic: strong consensus can enhance implementation in stable environments but may constrain adaptability in turbulent contexts, whereas informed scepticism may surface critical issues that prevent the execution of flawed strategies. Their framework thus clarifies why consensus matters and how different forms of consensus can differentially influence the effectiveness of strategy implementation.

		Understanding	
		High	Low
Commitment	High	<i>Strong Consensus</i>	<i>Blind Devotion</i>
	Low	<i>Informed Skepticism</i>	<i>Weak Consensus</i>

**Figure 1. Combining the cognitive and emotional dimensions of consensus results in four possibilities (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992a, p. 29)**

Within these ongoing processes, middle managers play a pivotal role. Positioned at the nexus of strategic intent and operational realities, they act as interpretive intermediaries who continuously translate, contextualize, and negotiate the meaning of strategic priorities (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1997; Wooldridge and Floyd, 1990). Through their

sensemaking and sensegiving efforts, they help organizational members construct localized interpretations that align with overarching strategic narratives (Balogun, 2003; Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Maitlis, 2005). Their interactions, both vertical and horizontal, shape how consensus forms and stabilizes over time, influencing both the cognitive and affective dimensions of alignment. As environments become increasingly dynamic, middle managers' active involvement in constructing and maintaining consensus becomes critical for sustaining coherent yet adaptable implementation processes.

Strategic consensus can be a powerful enabler of strategy implementation effectiveness when it produces clarity, coordination, and commitment across levels of the organization. However, its benefits are neither universal nor automatic; consensus can also constrain adaptation, delay action, or reinforce ineffective strategies. Therefore, building and sustaining strategic consensus should be understood as an ongoing, recursive process requiring continuous communication, interpretation, and adjustment. In this process, middle managers play a central role, through their sensemaking, sensegiving, and strategic influence roles which are critical in producing the type of consensus that supports successful implementation. The following sections therefore examines how they actively shape strategic consensus and ultimately influence the effectiveness of strategy implementation.

### **2.3 Sensemaking as the underlying mechanism of strategic consensus development during implementation**

The concept of sensemaking originates from organizational studies, most notably from the work of Karl E. Weick. Sensemaking refers to an ongoing social process through which individuals interpret and construct meaning from their experiences (Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995). Sensemaking process is triggered by issues or events that are somehow ambiguous or confusing (Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014).

In strategic context, the implementation of change initiatives is one of the source triggering sensemaking processes (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). Through sensemaking, organizational members engage in interactive interpretation and dialogue through which strategic issues are discussed, negotiated, and rendered meaningful (Maitlis, 2005). These sensemaking processes enable them to align their understanding and develop commitment toward strategic priorities (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Dess and Priem, 1995). Overtime, such interactive and socially constructed processes contribute to developing the strategic consensus within the organization (Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Kellermanns et al., 2011; Weick et al., 2005).

Maitlis (2005) introduces a framework of four types of organizational sensemaking depending on the level of leaders and stakeholders' engagement in sensegiving and interpretation process, including *“guided, restricted, fragmented, and minimal sensemaking”*. These forms explain why some sensemaking process produce coherent, shared understandings while others result in conflict and confusion (Maitlis, 2005). In guided sensemaking, both leaders and stakeholders actively participate in constructing and negotiating interpretations, creating a highly animated and strongly controlled process that produces rich, unified accounts of strategic priorities and consistent patterns of actions. In contrast, restricted sensemaking is characterised by strong leader control but limited stakeholder engagement, resulting in narrower interpretations and more constrained action. Fragmented sensemaking emerges when stakeholders actively generate competing interpretations in the absence of strong leadership guidance, leading to multiple, often inconsistent understandings and emergent patterns of action. Finally, minimal sensemaking occurs when neither leaders nor stakeholders actively engage in interpretation, producing only nominal accounts and limited, one-time actions (Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014).

		Stakeholder sensegiving	
		High sensegiving	Low sensegiving
Leader sensegiving	High sensegiving	<p><b><i>Guided organizational sense-making</i></b></p> <p>Process characteristics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- High animation</li> <li>- High control</li> </ul> <p>Outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Unitary, rich account</li> <li>- Emergent series of consistent actions</li> </ul>	<p><b><i>Restricted organizational sensemaking</i></b></p> <p>Process characteristics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Low animation</li> <li>- High control</li> </ul> <p>Outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Unitary, narrow account</li> <li>- One-time actions or planned set of consistent actions</li> </ul>
	Low sensegiving	<p><b><i>Fragmented organizational sensemaking</i></b></p> <p>Process characteristics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- High animation</li> <li>- Low control</li> </ul> <p>Outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Multiple, narrow account</li> <li>- Emergent series of inconsistent actions</li> </ul>	<p><b><i>Minimal organizational sensemaking</i></b></p> <p>Process characteristics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Low animation</li> <li>- Low control</li> </ul> <p>Outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Nominal account</li> <li>- One-time, compromise actions</li> </ul>

**Figure 2. Four forms of organizational sensemaking (Maitlis, 2005, p. 32)**

In this way, sensemaking serves as the underlying mechanism that transforms diverse individual understandings into a collectively shared meaning of the strategy. By demonstrating how different configurations of engagement shape the quality and coherence of collective meaning, Maitlis's (2005) framework helps clarify how shared understanding develops, or fails to develop, during strategy implementation. This perspective aligns closely with the notion of strategic consensus discussed in the previous section, as it highlights how consensus is not an automatic outcome of strategic decisions but an emergent product of ongoing sensemaking processes through which organizational members gradually converge around shared interpretations of strategic priorities.

At the same time, while Maitlis's (2005) framework provides a valuable typology for understanding how different configurations of leader and stakeholder engagement shape organizational sensemaking outcomes, it offers limited insight into **how these sense-making processes are enacted in practice across hierarchical levels**, particularly during strategy implementation. Subsequent research suggests that **middle managers occupy a distinctive and influential position** within organizational sensemaking processes, as they are simultaneously recipients of top management sensegiving and active sensegivers to frontline employees and peers (Balogun, 2003; Rouleau, 2005).

Middle managers occupy a unique structural and cognitive position between top and frontline levels, enabling them to act as interpretive bridges within the organization (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992b, 1997). They are deeply embedded in daily operations while also being responsible for understanding and enacting strategic directives. Therefore, they are not merely passive recipients of strategy but active sensemakers and sensegivers who help translate abstract intentions into actionable understanding (Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Rouleau, 2005). In their sensemaking role, they interpret and construct meaning for themselves from the information and cues surrounding strategic change, while in their sensegiving role, they seek to influence how others understand the change by translating and communicating their interpretations (Rouleau, 2005). Through these activities, middle managers facilitate alignment between intended strategy and enacted practices, ensuring that strategic intent is meaningfully connected to daily organizational actions.

Although prior studies have recognized the importance of strategic consensus in effective strategy implementation (Ateş et al., 2020; Bragaw and Misangyi, 2022; Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992a; Kellermanns et al., 2005, 2011; Noble, 1999), most studies conceptualise consensus as an outcome rather than a socially constructed process (Bragaw and Misangyi, 2022; Kellermanns et al., 2011). Existing research tends to focus on its effects, such as improving organizational performance, while offers limited insights into how

consensus understanding is developed (Kellermanns et al., 2005). At the same time, the sensemaking literature provides rich explanations on how organizational actors interpret and enact change (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Weiser et al., 2020), and well-acknowledged role of middle managers as both sensemakers and sensegivers in strategic change (Balogun, 2003; Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992b, 1997; Huy, 2001, 2002; Wooldridge et al., 2008). However, limited studies have connected these three streams, strategic consensus, sensemaking, and role of middle managers, into an integrated, process-oriented explanation of how shared understanding and commitment to strategy socially constructed over time during strategy implementation.

The present thesis bridges this gap by demonstrating how middle managers' sensemaking activities, interpreting, translating, and aligning, to actively shape how shared strategic understanding and commitment develop over time. In doing so, the study responds to the calls for more focus on the activities through which middle managers engage in to effectively implement strategy (Tarakci et al., 2023) and to Rouleau (2005)'s call to adopt a practice-based perspective that examines middle managers as interpreters and promoters of strategic change through their everyday sensemaking and sensegiving activities.

Furthermore, most strategic research focuses on Western organizational context (Vaara and Whittington, 2012). Much less is known about how middle managers in less developed markets, such as Vietnam, where organizations often face ambiguity, conflicting expectations, and rapidly changing strategic priorities. These settings make sensemaking and consensus-building even more challenging, yet research on such context remains limited (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). This also contributes to the calls to extend strategic consensus research beyond top managers and to examine the processes through which shared understanding develops in dynamic implementation contexts (Kellermanns et al., 2005).

## 2.4 Theoretical framework

The purpose of this section is to integrate the reviewed literature into a coherent theoretical framework that explains how strategic consensus is constructed during strategy implementation, with a specific focus on the role of middle managers' sensemaking. Building on the discussions in Chapter 2, this thesis adopts a process-oriented and mechanism-based perspective, in which strategic consensus is not treated as a static outcome, but as a socially constructed product that emerges through sensemaking under conditions of ambiguity and change.

The framework proposes that middle managers actively construct different forms of strategic consensus through three interrelated mechanisms, interpreting strategic intentions, translating and communicating meanings, and aligning understanding and commitment, which transform individual interpretations into collective agreement and coordinated action as implementation unfolds. The operation and effects of these mechanisms are contingent on the sensemaking context, shaped by varying levels of leaders' and stakeholders' engagement.

The proposed framework is grounded in the observation that existing studies address separate but interconnected aspects of strategic consensus formation. Floyd and Wooldridge (1992a)'s framework explains what strategic consensus looks like by identifying different forms of consensus depending on the level of shared understanding and commitment. Maitlis (2005)'s framework explains the social conditions under which sensemaking takes place, showing how levels of leaders' and stakeholders' engagement shape how meanings are constructed. However, these studies do not fully explain how consensus is actively developed in practice during strategy implementation, nor how individual interpretations develop into collective agreement across organisational levels. Understanding this process requires attention to organisational actors who operate between strategic intent and everyday enactment. This study examines that role through the sensemaking work of middle managers.

Building on these insights, the framework synthesises middle managers' sensemaking work into three analytically distinct but interrelated mechanisms: interpreting strategic intentions, translating and communicating meanings across the organization, and aligning understanding and commitment around the strategic priorities. These mechanisms are not treated as isolated activities, but as mutually reinforcing processes through which individual sensemaking develops into collective agreement. Importantly, they are not conceptualised as discrete or sequential stages. Rather, they represent ongoing and mutually reinforcing mechanisms that may overlap, recur, and operate in parallel as strategy implementation unfolds.

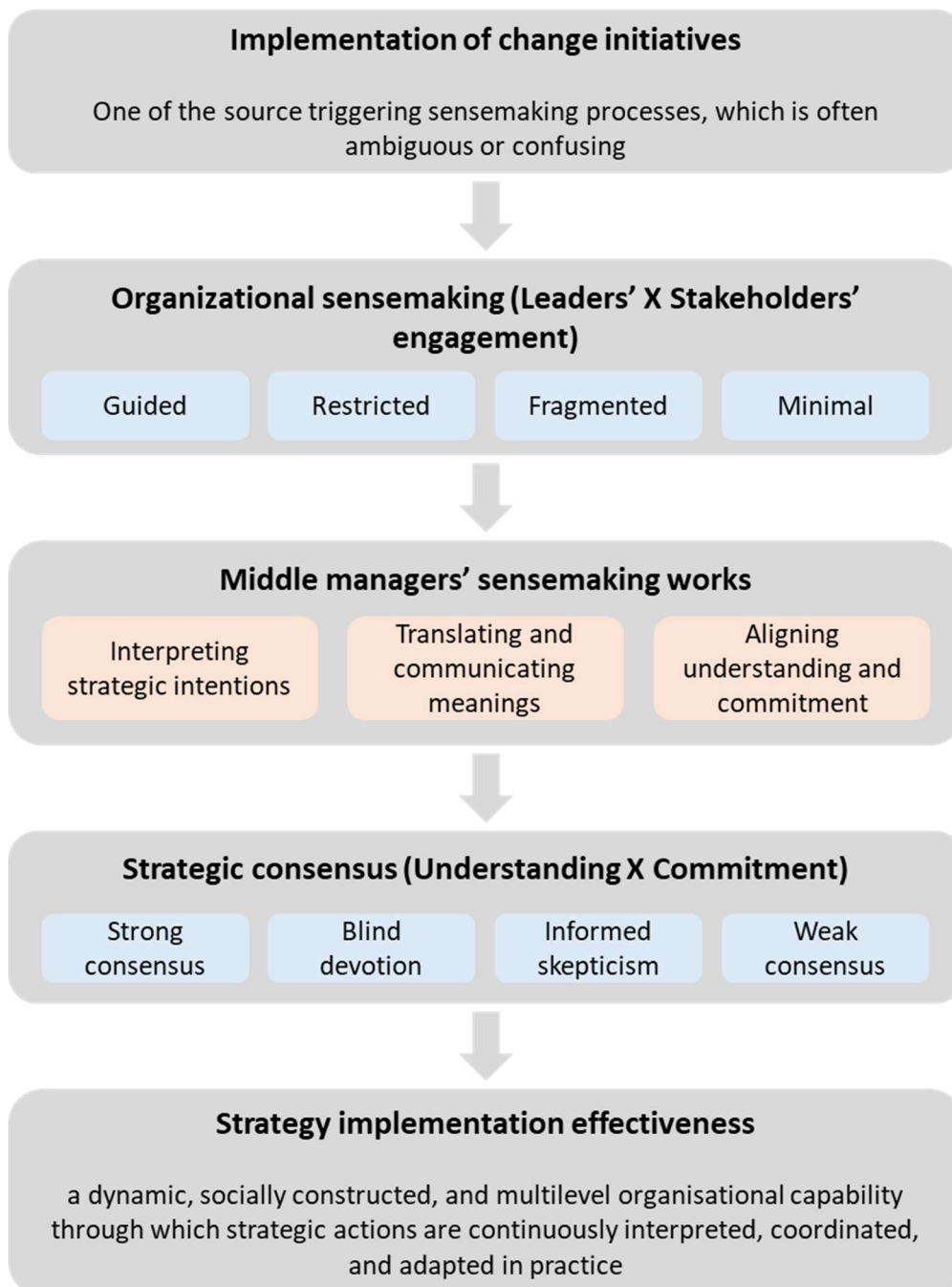
***Interpreting strategic intentions*** captures how middle managers make senses of top-management's strategic intents (Maitlis, 2005; Weick, 1995). When strategic directives are issued, middle managers first engage in *individual sensemaking* to make sense of the often-ambiguous goals and priorities within their situational contexts and to identify what the strategy "*means for us*" (Weick, 1995). Rouleau (2005) strengthens this micro-level view by showing that sensemaking is anchored in managers' tacit knowledge and is constituted through routines and everyday conversations, rather than being confined to formal plans or top-management discourse. This phase also involves upward sensemaking, providing feedback to senior leaders about feasibility or ambiguity in strategic plans (Balogun, 2003). Through this interpretive work, middle managers help narrow the gaps between top and middle levels and lay the cognitive foundation for shared understanding across the organization (Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Maitlis, 2005). In line with integrative view of strategy implementation, middle managers' sensemaking in this phase connects the conceptualization of strategy with its enactment, as they provide meaningful interpretations to strategy, which can guide decisions and actions at lower levels (Weiser et al., 2020).

***Translating and communicating meanings*** reflects middle managers' roles as *sensegivers* who reframe and convey these interpretations in ways that are understandable and compelling for their subordinates (Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Rouleau, 2005). As an

initial understanding of strategic intentions emerges, middle managers translate, communicate, and contextualize strategic meanings for their teams and peers. Translating can be understood as more than mere transmission; it involves practices such as selectively foregrounding particular elements of strategic change and connecting these elements to the others' interpretive context through appropriate discursive and symbolic resources (Rouleau, 2005). Rouleau (2005) further shows how middle managers "*over-code*" strategy by embedding strategic messages in professional and socio-cultural codes, such as language use and culturally embedded references, thereby reinforcing strategic meanings through contextually appropriate cues. In this process, middle managers use various discursive practices, such as framing, storytelling, and justification enacted through everyday routines and conversations (Rouleau, 2005; Rouleau and Balogun, 2011) to make the strategic issues understandable, relevance, and compelling for frontline employees and peers. As such, middle managers not only enable the strategic information travel across hierarchical levels and functional boundaries but also shape how organizational members perceive the organizations' strategic priorities.

***Aligning understanding and commitment*** emphasizes how middle managers foster convergence of views and generate buy-in that supports the emergence of strategic consensus (Kellermanns et al., 2011), a process that is facilitated by middle managers' emotion-management practices during change implementation (Huy, 2002). As strategy implementation unfolds, middle managers attend to others' reactions, address misunderstandings, and adjust meanings through ongoing interactions, working to reconcile both cognitive and emotional differences (Huy, 2002). Rouleau (2005) provides micro-level grounding for this alignment work by showing how middle managers "*discipline*" audiences through embodied, spatial, emotional, and symbolic tactics that subtly build support for a new strategic orientation, and how they "*justify*" change by offering legitimate reasons that invite adoption and commitment. Through such continuous interpretive interaction, middle managers transform dispersed and evolving understandings into coherent strategic consensus that guides coordinated implementation actions (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992a), as meanings are continuously constructed and negotiated through

social interaction during change (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). In this way, aligning understanding and commitment represents the mechanism through which their interpretive work ultimately supports coherent, coordinated action and enhances strategy implementation effectiveness.



**Figure 3. Theoretical framework (author's own elaboration based on (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992a; Maitlis, 2005))**

As illustrated in Figure 3, middle managers may simultaneously interpret evolving strategic cues, communicate and reframe meanings for different audiences, and align understandings and commitments across groups in response to feedback and changing conditions. These mechanisms unfold under specific sensemaking contexts (Maitlis, 2005) and give rise to different forms of strategic consensus (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992a). In turn, such consensus shapes strategy implementation effectiveness, which is in this study understood as a dynamic, socially constructed capability that enables coordinated and adaptive action across organizational levels.

The framework also recognises that these sensemaking mechanisms do not operate in the same way in all situations. Drawing on Maitlis (2005), the framework incorporates sensemaking context as a set of conditions that shape how sensemaking unfolds. Depending on the level of engagement from leaders and stakeholders, sensemaking may take the form of guided, restricted, fragmented, or minimal sensemaking. These contexts influence whether middle managers can openly discuss strategic issues, challenge interpretations, and stabilise shared meaning. As a result, similar sensemaking efforts by middle managers may lead to different outcomes across sensemaking contexts.

The outcomes of these context-dependent sensemaking mechanisms are conceptualised using Floyd and Wooldridge (1992a)'s strategic consensus forms. Consensus is therefore treated not as a single variable, but as a pattern of shared understanding and commitment that can take different forms, such as strong consensus, blind devotion, informed scepticism, or weak consensus. These forms reflect how sensemaking processes unfold in practice and how meanings and commitments are shaped during implementation.

Finally, the proposed framework links these consensus forms to strategy implementation effectiveness, which is understood in line with the process view adopted in Chapter 2. Implementation effectiveness is therefore conceptualised in this study not merely as the realization of intended strategic outcomes, but as a dynamic, socially constructed,

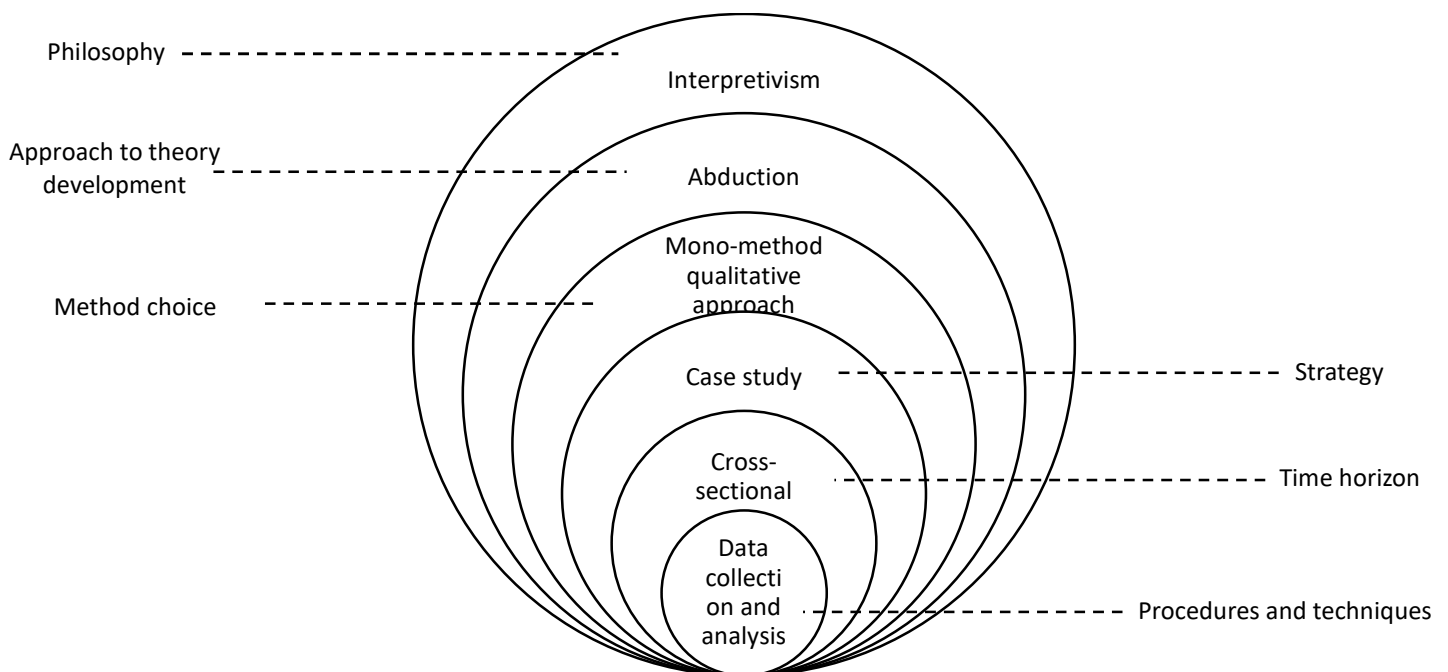
and multilevel organisational capability through which strategic actions are continuously interpreted, coordinated, and adapted in practice (Šilenskytė and Smale, 2021; Weiser et al., 2020). From this perspective, different forms of strategic consensus are expected to shape implementation trajectories in distinct ways (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992a; Kellermanns et al., 2011). Some forms may support shared orientation and coordinated adaptation over time, while others may limit learning, reinforce misalignment, or constrain the organisation's capacity to adjust actions as implementation unfolds (Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Huy, 2002). This process will be further explored empirically.

### 3 Methodology

This chapter presents the methodological approach selected to address the research question of how middle managers develop strategic consensus through sensemaking to enhance strategy implementation effectiveness.

#### 3.1 Research approach

The research approach of this study is structured according to the research onion proposed by Saunders et al. (2023). The research onion describes different stages or layers of designing a research methodology, moving from broad philosophical assumptions to specific data collection and analysis techniques (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 130). The following subsection explains the choices made for this study and justify how they align with its aims of exploring middle managers' sensemaking practices during strategy implementation.



**Figure 4. Methodological choices of this study presented through the research onion (adapted from Saunders et al., 2023)**

At the outer layer, the onion focuses on the **research philosophy**, which is the basic beliefs and assumptions about how knowledge is created (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 131). These assumptions guide the whole research process, shape the choice of methods, and influences what types of data are considered important and how those data are interpreted to develop new knowledge (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 131). Saunders et al. (2023) distinguish “*five major philosophies in business and management: positivism, critical realism, interpretivism, postmodernism and pragmatism*”, depending on assumptions about reality, knowledge, and the role of values and ethics in the research process (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 145). The purpose of this thesis is to understand how middle managers interpret strategic intentions, construct meanings within their local contexts, and communicate these meanings with other members to foster a shared understanding. This assumes that organisational reality is multiple and socially constructed rather than fixed and purely objective. In line with these assumptions, the study adopts **an interpretivist research philosophy**, which is particularly suited to capturing subjective experiences, socially embedded processes, and context-specific interpretations (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 150). Interpretivism is widely used in sensemaking research because it recognises the importance of meaning, intentionality, and human agency in organisational phenomena (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). Alternative research philosophy such as positivism or critical realism is deemed unsuitable because the study does not aim to measure variables or identify causal mechanisms but to interpret how managers construct meaning in practice.

The second layer of the onion concerns **the approach to theory development**, which reflects how the study positions itself in relation to existing theories, including deductive, inductive, and abductive approach (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 154). A deductive approach starts from existing theory and derives hypotheses to be tested, whereas an inductive approach develops theory from empirical observations (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 155). The abductive approach combines elements of both by iteratively moving between data and theory to refine existing explanations (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 155). This thesis adopts **an abductive research approach**, which is particularly appropriate for research

on sensemaking. The literature review in Chapter 2 and the proposed framework of three interrelated mechanisms, interpreting strategic intentions, translating and communicating meanings, and aligning understanding and commitment, provide an initial theoretical lens that guide the early stages of data collection and analysis for this study. In this thesis, the analytical process iterates between existing theory and empirical data: theoretical insights guide data collection and early coding, while emerging themes from the interviews are used to refine, extend, or nuance the initial framework.

Building on the interpretivist research philosophy and the abductive approach outlined above, the next layers of the research onion formulate the *method choice*, which are categorised as quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods, reflecting whether the study relies on numerical data, non-numerical data such as interview transcripts or observations, or a combination of both, each offering valuable insights depending on the nature of the research question (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 181). Given the interpretivist perspective and abductive approach adopted in this thesis, *a mono-method qualitative design* is the most appropriate choice. Qualitative methods are widely recognised as appropriate for examining how middle managers interpret and enact strategic initiatives, as demonstrated in numerous studies of managerial sensemaking and strategy implementation (Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis, 2005; Rouleau, 2005; Rouleau and Balogun, 2011). A mono-method approach ensures depth and coherence by focusing on one primary data source through semi-structured interviews.

The next step in the research onion relates to the choice of *research strategy*, which provides the methodological link between the study's philosophical assumptions, abductive logic, and the specific methods used to collect and analyse data (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 191). Saunders et al. (2023) emphasize that the key criterion is achieving coherence across the research question, objectives, philosophy, and available resources, and introduce a variety of research strategy. They outline several strategies, including experiment, survey, ethnography, grounded theory, narrative inquiry, archival, case study, and action research (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 191). Among these, case study research is

widely used approach in organization studies (Gioia, 2021, p. 21), enables an in-depth exploration of a phenomenon and produce rich, previously unavailable understandings of social processes (Lee and Saunders, 2017). Importantly, as Gioia (2021, p. 21) notes, case study does not always refer to a single firm. This study does not investigate a single organisation; each participating middle manager represents a bounded case that reflects a distinct sensemaking context. This design aligns with the notion of a *collective case study* introduced by Stake (1995), in which several individual cases are examined to explore variation and identify cross-case patterns. In line with this logic, the present research adopts **a multiple-case study strategy**.

With respect to time horizon, the study adopts **a cross-sectional design** (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 212). Data are collected at a single point in time from middle managers who reflect on their experiences on the strategic initiatives' implementation process. Although strategy implementation and sensemaking are inherently continuous processes, a cross-sectional design is appropriate for the scope of a master's thesis and still allows the reconstruction of processual dynamics through participants' retrospective accounts. Retrospective interview accounts allow participants to reconstruct sequences of events, interactions, and how they unfolded over time (Langley, 1999), enabling the study to capture temporal dynamics while remaining feasible in practical terms. During interviews, participants are encouraged to describe sequences of events, interactions, and turning points, which helps capture temporal aspects of their sensemaking and consensus-building work within the practical constraints of the project.

At the core of the research onion are the techniques and procedures to collect and analyse data (Saunders et al., 2023). This study relies on **semi-structured interviews** as its primary method of data collection because this approach balances structure with flexibility for exploring middle managers' sensemaking practices. Semi-structured interviews use a prepared guide to maintain consistency across interviews while allowing the interviewer to expose deeper, context-rich responses (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik, 2021; Qu and Dumay, 2011).

In summary, when viewed through the research onion, the study can be characterized as an interpretivist, abductive, mono-method qualitative inquiry using an interview-based, cross-sectional strategy and thematic analysis. These choices are closely aligned with the research purpose of exploring how middle managers' sensemaking contributes to the development of strategic consensus during strategy implementation.

### 3.2 The case selection

Sampling strategies can be categorised into probability (or representative) and non-probability (or non-random) approach (Saunders et al., 2023). Probability sampling is used when the purpose is to generate statistical explanations or make population-level inferences, while non-probability sampling is more appropriate for studies aiming to develop deeper understandings and theoretical generalisations through analytic reasoning (Saunders et al., 2023).

As this study adopts a qualitative case study design to explore middle managers' sense-making practices, the focus is not on producing statistically generalisable results but on selecting an appropriate case and informants who can provide depth and meaningful insights. Thus, the emphasis is placed on the case selection and the criteria guiding the identification of relevant participants.

A ***purposive selection procedure*** was therefore used to identify participants whose professional roles make them well positioned to contribute to the research aim. Potential participants were selected based on the following criteria:

- They occupy a middle management role, typically situated between senior executives and line managers or professionals.
- They have direct responsibility for implementing strategic initiatives, changes, or projects within their units.
- They are willing and able to discuss their experiences in detail.
- They come from same industry in the same country to ensure the consistency.

In terms of sample size, the adequacy lies less on the number of participants than on the relevance of the cases selected to the research purpose (Hammersley, 2015; Saunders et al., 2023). Saunders (2012) notes that sample size in qualitative studies depends largely on the degree of homogeneity within the participant group. The author suggests that studies involving relatively homogeneous groups typically require between four and twelve participants for relatively homogeneous samples and twelve to thirty for more heterogeneous ones (Saunders, 2012).

In this study, the participants are middle managers working in the life insurance industry in Vietnam, a group that shares comparable organisational structures, regulatory environments, strategic processes, and managerial responsibilities. Such shared professional and industry characteristics create a high degree of homogeneity, reducing the need for a large and diverse sample to capture variation. Moreover, the study's focus on sense-making during strategy implementation requires in-depth, experience-based accounts rather than broad representativeness. Therefore, a sample size within Saunders's (2012) suggested range of four and twelve middle managers is sufficient to generate detailed and contextually grounded insights, while remaining consistent with qualitative sampling principles and the scope of a master's thesis.

In total, five middle managers participated in the study. Key characteristics of the participating middle managers (e.g., years of managerial experience) are summarized in table below. This overview provides contextual background for interpreting their accounts and supports assessment of the transferability of the findings.

Interviewee	Years of experience as middle managers	Length of interview	Language used in the interview
1	≥ 2 years	47 minutes	English
2	≥ 2 years	38 minutes	English
3	≥ 10 years	51 minutes	Vietnamese

4	≥ 2 years	35 minutes	English
5	≥ 10 years	54 minutes	Vietnamese

### 3.3 Data collection

The primary data source for this study consists of semi-structured interviews with middle managers. This technique provides both a consistent structure across participants and the flexibility to pursue emerging themes through investigating and follow-up questions (Saunders et al., 2023). As discussed in Chapter 1 and 2, the thesis seeks to understand how middle managers interpret strategic initiatives, construct meanings and contribute to the development of strategic consensus during implementation. This research's focus requires a data collection method that allows for capturing participant's experiences, contextual reasoning, and retrospective accounts of sensemaking practices (Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Maitlis, 2005; Rouleau, 2005). Reflecting the interpretivist philosophical position of this study, the interview process recognises that meanings are co-constructed through interaction between the researcher and participants, with data emerging from their interpretations and situated experiences (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 441). Furthermore, qualitative strategy research commonly relies on conversational interview formats to explore how actors narrate events, interactions, and meaning construction processes (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Saunders et al., 2023). Given these objectives and the interpretive nature of the research, semi-structured interviews represent the most appropriate and methodologically aligned data collection method.

Cassell (2019) differentiates semi-structured interviews into two categories: those organised around predefined themes and those that employ distinctive formats. Thematic semi-structured interviews focus on exploring predefined topics or theoretical themes, whereas distinctive semi-structured interviews centre on specific formats, such as events, comparisons, narratives, biographies, or visual prompts, to generate deeper, experience-based insights (Cassell, 2019; Saunders et al., 2023, p. 443). For this study, a thematic semi-structured interviews design was adopted, enabling the use of pre-defined themes

while retaining the flexibility to pursue emerging issues relevant to participants' sense-making practices.

The interview protocol was developed based on the literature review presented in Chapter 2 and the initial framework documented in Figure 3 outlining three interrelated mechanisms of middle managers' sensemaking: interpreting strategic intentions, translating and communicating meanings, and aligning understanding and commitment. A list of pre-prepared questions is documented in Appendix 2. The first part of the interviews consists of demographic questions, such as job title, years of experiences, business industry, location. The remaining questions were organised around these theoretical dimensions. One set of questions explored participants' involvement in implementation of strategic initiatives, their information sources, initial interpretations, experiences of ambiguity if any, and reflection on the interpretive processes. The next set of questions examined how the participants communicated the initiatives to their teams and subordinates and captured the interviewees' sensegiving processes. Then, the interview guide focused on how shared understanding and commitment were fostered or disrupted across levels and departments, addressing the alignment processes. The final reflective questions invited participants to describe how these activities unfolded over time, identify what organizational conditions that enabled or constrained their roles, and reflected on lessons learned for future implementation.

To support consistency across interviews while allowing for flexibility, the guide served as a navigational tool rather than a strict sequence. Participants were encouraged to elaborate freely on experiences they considered significant, and the order of questions was adjusted when appropriate to maintain conversational flow. This approach aligns with interpretivist interviewing principles, in which meaning is co-constructed through interaction and reflexive engagement between interviewer and interviewee (Saunders et al., 2023).

Participants were contacted directly via email or LinkedIn and provided with an information document explaining the purpose of the study. A total of five interviews were conducted with middle managers working in multinational firms in life insurance industry in Vietnam. Interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis via Microsoft Teams due to geographical distance, enabling flexible scheduling. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and took place in January 2026. The interviews were conducted in English or Vietnamese depending on the preference of the interviewees. A translation of the interviewee's answers was prepared if Vietnamese language was used. A complete list of interviewees profile, duration of interview, and language used during the interview is documented in section 3.2.

With participant's consent, interviewees were either video recorded or documented through detailed note-taking, depending on interviewee's preference. For those who agreed to recording, the video files were used to ensure accuracy in capturing their responses. In cases where participants did not consent to being recorded, detailed notes were taken during the interview and subsequently shared with the respective interviewees for confirmation to ensure accuracy and faithful representation of their views. Participation was voluntary, respondents could withdraw at any time, and anonymity was assured by removing identifiable details from reporting findings.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

The choice of data analysis techniques in qualitative research depends on the underlying research philosophy and the adopted approach to theory development (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 655). The present study followed the principles of interpretivism and an abductive approach, both of which emphasise the importance of understanding socially constructed meanings and iteratively moving between empirical evidence and theoretical concepts, allowing researchers to refine, adjust, and extend theory as the study unfolds (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007). In addition, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, an approach that enables participants to articulate their experiences in their own terms while allowing researchers to explore emerging directions (Cassell,

2019; Saunders et al., 2023, p. 445). Therefore, the analytical method must preserve the participants' subjectivity, facilitate interactive theorising, and capture the dynamic nature of sensemaking process of middle managers central to this thesis.

For these reasons, the study employed the ***Gioia methodology*** (Gioia et al., 2013; Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991) as the primary analytical approach. The method offered a structured and transparent system for generating conceptual insights from qualitative data while remaining closely grounded in participants' experiences (Gioia et al., 2013), which is the also nature of interpretive research (Gioia, 2021). A central assumption of Gioia approach is that organizational members are "*knowledgeable agents*", meaning they can explain in their own words how they understand and interpret what happens around them (Gioia et al., 2013). This assumption aligned directly with sensemaking scholarships, which view managers as active interpreters who continuously reconstruct understanding in response to strategic directives (Balogun and Johnson, 2004, 2005; Maitlis, 2005; Rouleau and Balogun, 2008).

The analysis began with ***first-order concepts*** that remain faithfully to participants' own language and interpretations (Gioia et al., 2013), reflecting the interpretivist assumption that meanings reside in participants' accounts (Gioia, 2021). This stage provided a rich empirical basis for understanding how middle managers interpret strategic intentions, translate and communicate the meanings, and foster alignment and commitment across organizations. Through iterative engagement with sensitising concepts in the literature, including sensemaking theory (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis, 2005; Weick, 1995), strategic consensus development (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992a; Kellermanns et al., 2005; Weiser et al., 2020; Wooldridge and Floyd, 1989), the role of middle managers during strategy implementation (Balogun, 2003; Floyd and Wooldridge, 1997; Huy, 2001, 2002; Tawse et al., 2024; Wooldridge and Floyd, 1990), these first-order concepts are transformed into ***second-order themes*** that captured the researcher's theoretical understanding of the phenomenon (Gioia et al., 2013). Gioia (2021) emphasises that this phase represents a shift from inductive pattern recognition to abductive theorising,

where empirical insights and existing theory iteratively inform one another. This is critical for the present study, which seeks not to generate a wholly novel theory but to extend and refine existing frameworks that explain how middle managers foster a shared understanding and commitment of strategic meanings across organisational levels. These second-order themes were subsequently clustered into **aggregate dimensions**, representing higher-level conceptual categories that articulate the underlying mechanisms emerging from the data (Gioia et al., 2013).

A central feature of the Gioia methodology is the construction of **a data structure**, which is a visual representation that traces the analytic progression from raw empirical material to more abstract conceptual categories (Gioia et al., 2013). The data structure provided an explicit audit trail of the analytic process, demonstrating how interview excerpts informed theme development and theoretical refinement, allowing readers to assess the coherence and rigorous of the analysis (Gehman et al., 2018). The date structure for this study was visible in below:

First-order concept	Second-order theme	Aggregate dimensions
Regulatory change; market crisis; cost pressure; national administrative restructuring.	Constructing strategic necessity through contextual cues	Interpreting strategic intentions
Town halls and official communications; Group's vision; company's strategy; senior executives' meetings and alignment; clear roles and responsibilities; kick-off.	Executive strategic direction-setting	
Senior executives' directions; clarity of strategic purpose; clearly defined initial target group and strategic positioning; clear strategic objectives; clear understanding of strategic rationale, expectations, and inter-workstream linkage.	Clarity of strategic intent and rationale	

First-order concept	Second-order theme	Aggregate dimensions
Proactively seeking clarification from senior executives; clarifying roles and expectations; middle managers' willingness to seek clarification.	Upward inquiry for role and expectations	
Doubt about feasibility; only idea initially approved; everything not clear; sudden requests; needed to work out details; first time applying... unclear how to implement; company needed to adjust to reality; feeling that project reverting to old model.	Ambiguity in strategic execution	
Understand the purpose of the change; shared full economic context; repeated the "why"; link to ultimate strategic goal; asking how each idea serves core goal; <i>"No reason to believe"</i> ; evaluate strategic relevance.	Purpose-centered sensegiving	
Divide communication into sub-teams; one-to-one sessions; discuss only what affects them; cascade in relevant language; subordinates have different levels, different mindsets; provide advice and direction; provide template.	Contextualizing strategy for diverse stakeholders	
<i>"Strategy is easy in words, but implementation is complex."</i> ; significant impact on system; new recognition mechanism; follow-up meetings; participation of various managers; applied quantitative–qualitative model; based on strategic relevance.	Translating strategy into operational processes	Translating and communicating meanings
Gradually feel buy-in; began to contribute; get used to the idea; time consuming; Use all possible events to promote; updates increase engagement; Promote the project continuously.	Iterative sensegiving and gradual buy-in	
Bottom-up divisional strategy formulation aligned with corporate strategic direction; senior leaders forum to <i>"know our plans together"</i> ; cross-functional involvement; <i>"on the same page"</i> .	Multi-level alignment process	Aligning understanding and commitment

First-order concept	Second-order theme	Aggregate dimensions
Arrange kick-off meeting; documented in meeting minutes and circulated for consensus; arrange Steering Committees; weekly/daily catch-up; keep information updated constantly; inter-departmental meetings; frequent status updates.	Structural communication and coordination routines	
Strategic plan reflected in annual objectives; linked to annual incentive bonus; delivering objectives means delivering company goals; clearly defining portfolio and scope; team reviews quarterly; fair and motivating reward; recognition creates pride.	Performance-based structural alignment	
<i>"When I had concerns, I felt very comfortable sharing them with my line manager"</i> ; transparency about constraints and problems; keep good spirit, safe environment, feel free to talk; empower them sooner; the key is how to help people understand it and trust the results that the project can deliver.	Trust and empowerment	
Strong oversight from head quarter; skip-manager culture; political conflicts; hidden agenda; <i>"resistance by asking a lot of questions"</i> ; offline conversations to <i>"test the water"</i> but view very negative; a lot of conflict about point of view, role and responsibility; cross-departmental delays created implementation conflicts.	Organizational power dynamics	Navigating structural and political dynamics
Many different perspectives from different stakeholders to understand about a common goal; new people ... old people; larger implementation group size increased complexity and made consensus more difficult.	Strategic meaning divergence	
Senior executives transition chaotic; decisions needed to be revisited and re-explained from scratch; external consultant; project coordinator.	Authority realignment	

First-order concept	Second-order theme	Aggregate dimensions
<i>"Majority of them was still unclear what we need to do, how it would be done," "softly demotivated them"; personnel resignation; "avoiding sharing negative impacts"; "resistant because they need to work more".</i>	Emotional disruption triggered by strategic change	Managing emotional dynamics of change
<i>"Give them time to absorb"; "free and safe to share"</i>	Emotional containment and support practices	
Balancing personal and professional life; developing emotional self-awareness capability.	Leadership emotional self-regulation and capability development	
<i>"that's not my job,"; "very committed and dedicated"; "win-win spirit"; strong team support grounded in established company culture; extra-work social activities; openness to generational diversity; engaging cross-generational perspectives.</i>	Collaboration norms	Leveraging organizational culture
Open and supportive organizational culture facilitating upward and downward communication; informal relational networks, including external activities, fostering strong cross-level relationships	Open communication	
Consistent executive reinforcement of teamwork; learning-oriented culture that <i>"acceptance of mistakes and early failures in order to learn and gain experience"</i> ;	Supportive leadership	
Made it to have some fun; excited the team; First country to implement group's strategic initiatives.	Sense of pride	

**Figure 5. Data structure**

To conclude, the Gioia methodology the most appropriate analytical technique for this study. Its structured coding architecture, transparency, and abductive orientation provide a robust foundation for developing theoretically meaningful and empirically

grounded insights into the mechanisms through which middle managers engage in sensemaking to develop strategic consensus during the strategy implementation.

### 3.5 The assessment of the quality of the data

The rigor of field research, including case studies, was evaluated using several criteria, typically including internal validity, construct validity, external validity, and reliability (Gibbert et al., 2008).

The **construct validity** referred to the quality of conceptualization or the operationalization of relevant concept (Gibbert et al., 2008). This was ensured by designing the data collection process so that empirical material accurately captures the theoretical construct central to this study, including middle managers' sensemaking mechanisms to develop strategy consensus for effectively implementing strategic intents. The interview protocol was developed directly from the theoretical framework in Chapter 2, ensuring that questions explicitly target the three sensemaking mechanisms, interpreting strategic intentions, translating and communicating meanings, and aligning understanding and commitment. Semi-structured interviews were used to allow participants to express their experiences in their own terms, producing rich first-order accounts that reflect their lived interpretations of strategy work. Furthermore, construct validity was strengthened through adherence to the Gioia methodology, which required a clear chain of evidence linking raw data to first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions (Gehman et al., 2018; Gioia et al., 2013). This ensured that future interpretations remain grounded in participants' descriptions rather than the researcher's assumptions.

The **internal validity** referred to the logical coherence and plausibility of the analytic claims drawn from the empirical materials (Gibbert et al., 2008). This criterion was assured by formulating a clear research framework, using patterns matching to compare empirical evidence with established findings from previous studies, and drawing on multiple theoretical lenses to ensure that the explanations offered are not the result of a single interpretation (Gibbert et al., 2008). In this study, internal validity was ensured

through abductive iteration, which involves moving between emerging insights and sensitising theoretical concepts drawn from literatures on sensemaking and sensegiving (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995), strategic consensus (Dess, 1987; Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992a; Kellermanns et al., 2005, 2011; Wooldridge and Floyd, 1989), role of middle managers (Balogun, 2003; Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992b, 1997; Huy, 2001, 2002; Rouleau and Balogun, 2008). This ensured that the theoretical framework proposed in Chapter 2 is not imposed a priori but is justified through repeated confrontation between data and theory.

The **external validity** referred to the extent to which findings from a case study can be analytically generalised to a broader theory beyond the specific research setting (Gibbert et al., 2008). The present study focused on middle managers from several companies within the Vietnamese life insurance industry, a context characterised by rapid growth, intense competition, and frequent strategic change in response to regulatory and market changes. In such conditions, sensemaking and the alignment of strategic intentions are especially prominent (Maitlis, 2005; Weick, 1995). Selecting participants from several companies within this sector introduced variation in organisational structures and managerial practices while retaining a coherent and theoretically relevant industry boundary.

The **reliability** concerned the extent to which the research procedures are transparent and replicable, enabling other investigators to follow the same steps and arrive at comparable insights if the study were repeated (Gibbert et al., 2008). The systematic development of a Gioia-style data structure served as an explicit audit trail illustrating how raw interview excerpts progress into first-order terms, second-order themes, and aggregate theoretical dimensions (Gioia et al., 2013). This clear chain of evidence enhanced the dependability and transparency of the study and provides assurance that the findings emerge from a rigorous and traceable analytic process rather than from subjective interpretation.

These above procedures ensured that data collected in this study will be credible, theoretical relevant, and analytically robust. By following these criteria, the study established a solid foundation for generating meaningful insights into how middle managers make sense of strategic intentions and contribute to the development of shared understanding and commitment during strategy implementation.

## 4 Findings

This thesis investigates how middle managers develop strategic consensus through sensemaking for effective strategy implementation. Through Gioia methodology, six aggregate dimensions emerged from cross-case analysis of five middle managers in the Vietnamese life insurance industry.

### 4.1 Interpreting strategic intentions

The findings indicate that interpreting strategic intentions was not a passive reception of top-down directives, but an active and iterative sensemaking process. Middle managers constructed meaning of strategic intentions by constructing strategic necessity through contextual cues, orienting themselves within executive strategic direction-setting, navigating ambiguity in strategic direction and execution, seeking clarity of strategic intent and rationale, and engaging in upward inquiry for role and expectations to align their roles and expectations. Rather than a linear cascade of information, interpreting strategic intentions emerged as a dynamic, relational accomplishment shaped by both external pressures and vertical interactions.

A primary mechanism through which middle managers interpreted strategic intentions involved ***constructing strategic necessity from contextual cues***. Regulatory changes, economic downturns, declining market trust, cost pressures, and national administrative restructuring were repeatedly referenced as background conditions that rendered strategic change inevitable. Interviewee 1 described the life insurance market as *“experiencing a shock come from both consumers’ trust and also from the new insurance law”*. Similarly, Interviewee 4 emphasized the introduction of *“a new compensation cap... the first time Vietnam introduced that regulatory cap,”* which aimed to ensure *“sustainable growth for the insurance industry.”* These factors created urgency and reinforced the perception that strategic change was inevitable. Interviewee 1 framed changes as something that *“we have to do sooner or later.”* Contextualizing the initiative within external

pressures strengthened its justification and made the change appear necessary rather than optional.

***Executive strategic direction-setting*** was the formal and structured approach in which strategic intentions were introduced and communicated across hierarchical levels. Direction typically originated from the Group, cascaded to the company, was aligned at the senior executive level, and subsequently cascaded further to departments to ensure shared strategic objectives. As Interviewee 3 noted, the project *“originated from the Group’s sharing of its overall vision,”* while Interviewee 4 emphasized that *“all the direction needs to be aligned at the executive level first,”* with regular senior executive meetings ensuring consensus before implementation was cascaded. Clear roles and responsibilities were defined at the senior executive level, providing governance structure to ensure that all departments were working toward the same goals. This structured cascade, from Group to company to departments, established a unified strategic orientation prior to execution. Strategic priorities were then communicated through formal mechanisms such as townhall meetings, senior executive briefings, and kick-off meetings. Interviewee 1 described how it *“was made clear to all employees in townhalls”* that *“we’re going through a tough time,”* and Interviewee 2 explained that the senior executive arranged meetings to share *“company strategy and expectations.”* Through these formal channels, middle managers received directional cues that helped them interpret strategic focus and performance expectations.

While the dominant pattern reflected deliberate top-down alignment, there were occasional instances of rapid updates or sudden executive requests, suggesting elements of emergent adjustment within an otherwise structured direction-setting process. For example, Interviewee 1 recalled being *“called into the room”* and given only *“a very quick update,”* followed by limited time to prepare slides for senior leaders. This example shows that strategic direction was not always communicated through long discussions or carefully planned sessions. Sometimes it was delivered quickly, under time pressure, or signalled indirectly through actions. Even in these situations, middle managers still

relied on executive cues, whether formal or informal, to understand organizational priorities and what was expected from them.

**Clarity of strategic intent and rationale** emerged as an important condition shaping how middle managers interpreted strategic direction. Several interviewees described the overall direction as clear when it was cascaded from the Group to the company and then to functional business units. Interviewee 2 stated that *“it’s completely clear about the direction... direction from the group cascade to the company ... clear strategy not only one year, but three to five years.”* Similarly, Interviewee 3 noted that *“the initial objective was very clear,”* and that objectives were clearly defined in terms of target groups and positioning, such as focusing on large cities and specific age segments.

Clarity was also associated with understanding purpose, expectations, and concrete contribution. Interviewee 4 emphasized that *“the key success factor is clarity... clarity about the purpose, about the expectation,”* and explained that when receiving direction from the senior executive, she understood *“what value my team can contribute to the common goal,”* including clear milestones such as regulatory compliance deadlines. Interviewee 5 similarly described how kick-off meetings helped clarify the background, rationale, expectations, and linkages across workstreams, and reported not feeling ambiguity after executive briefings. In this sense, clarity referred to having explicit direction, defined objectives, and a clear rationale that enabled middle managers to understand both the strategic purpose and their unit’s expected contribution.

Clarity of strategic intent and rationale reflects the extent to which middle managers perceived strategic objectives, purpose, and expectations as clearly expressed. In contrast, **upward inquiry for role and expectations** captures the active behaviours through which middle managers seek to clarify and define their own roles and responsibilities within that strategic direction. Middle managers actively engaged in upward inquiry to negotiate role identity and expectations. Interviewee 2 described requesting *“a meeting with my line manager”* to clarify uncertainties. Interviewee 4 repeatedly asked, *“what your expectation from me... what is the expected value,”* and sought to determine

whether she was expected to act as “*key leader*,” “*project coordinator*,” or “*subject matter expert*”.

Ambiguity was sometimes attributed not to senior executive’s communication, but to the absence of upward questioning. While Interviewee 5 did not experience ambiguity after the kick-off meeting, she suggested that it may arise when middle managers lack the courage to raise questions and seek clarification. This indicates that clarity may depend partly on middle managers’ willingness and confidence to ask questions and seek clarification from their leaders. However, the data does not provide any further insight into what may influence such willingness, such as potential organizational or cultural factors.

Although the overall strategic direction was often introduced clearly, ***ambiguity tended to arise during execution***. Several interviewees described uncertainty not about the intent itself, but about how the strategy would be operationalized. Interviewee 3 noted that “*the initial objective was very clear*,” reflecting shared understanding of overall direction. However, uncertainty arose when managers had to translate that objective into concrete actions. Interviewee 1 explained that “*nothing was formed... only idea initially approved... needed to work out details*,” indicating that high-level approval without detailed planning generated ambiguity at the early stage of execution. Similarly, Interviewee 1 described dealing with “*uncertainties and sudden requests*” as “*kind of a norm*,” suggesting that execution often involved responding to unexpected demands.

As implementation progressed, middle managers began to question the feasibility of the initiative. Interviewee 3 explicitly expressed “*doubt about the feasibility of that objective*,” especially when operational challenges became visible. Moreover, adjustments made during implementation to better fit practical realities sometimes generated further confusion. Interviewee 3 described how changes were introduced “*to better fit the actual situation*,” yet these modifications later “*became unclear... the input no longer matched the initial goals*,” leading to concerns that the project was “*reverting back to the old model*.” These accounts show that ambiguity in strategic execution did not stem

from unclear objectives, but from the complexity of operationalization and the unintended consequences of adaptive adjustments during implementation.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that interpreting strategic intentions was a structured, yet dynamic process shaped by both senior executive's direction and middle managers' active engagement. While strategic necessity was constructed through contextual cues and formal executive's strategic direction-setting provided an initial frame, clarity of strategic intent and rationale enabled middle managers to understand purpose, expectations, and contribution. At the same time, upward inquiry for role and expectations showed that clarity of strategic intent was actively negotiated through the organizations. Therefore, although strategic objectives were often clear at a high level, ambiguity in strategic execution emerged during implementation, particularly when translating intent into concrete actions and adjusting to operational realities. These processes show that interpreting strategic intentions was not a linear downward flow of information, but an evolving sensemaking process shaped by contextual pressures, executive alignment, and ongoing vertical interaction.

## 4.2 Translating and communicating meanings

The findings indicated that translating and communicating meanings was not simply about cascading information downward. Instead, middle managers actively reshaped strategic intent so that it became understandable, relevant, and workable for stakeholders. They did not just forward directives. They clarified purpose, adapted messages to different audiences, embedded strategy into daily work processes, and reinforced meaning over time. Translation and communication therefore unfolded as a process that connected high-level intent with everyday practice.

First, under the second-order theme of *purpose-centered sensegiving*, middle managers translated the strategic intent by drawing on the shared purpose that they had previously made sense of. Having gained clarity about strategic direction and its underlying rationale, they engaged in sensegiving by rearticulating that shared purpose to their

teams, enabling others to see how their works contributed to the broader strategic agenda.

Across the interviews conducted, participants emphasized the importance of communicating the purpose or rationale behind each strategy. They consistently highlighted that actions without explanation would not generate genuine commitment. For example, Interviewee 2 explicitly warned that when managers assign tasks without explaining the background, employees act with *“no reason to believe”*. To prevent this, they repeatedly shared the economic context and strategic expectations received from higher levels, using weekly one-to-one meetings to reinforce the rationale behind planning requirements. Similarly, Interviewee 5 underlined that clearly understanding the purpose and being able to communicate and inspire the team around it was critical. They described repeatedly linking discussions and ideas back to the *“ultimate strategic goal”* to prevent drift and maintain alignment. These accounts show that shared purpose served as a clear reference point. It helped connect senior executive’s directions with local understanding and allowed strategy to be seen not just as tasks, but as part of a broader direction.

Despite consistently communicating around a shared purpose, middle managers recognized that emphasizing the purpose alone was insufficient unless it was carefully adapted to diverse audiences. Under the second-order theme of ***contextualizing strategy for diverse stakeholders***, middle managers adjusted how strategic intent was expressed so that it aligned with the specific concerns and operational realities of different groups. Interviewee 1, for instance, divided communication into sub-groups and conducted one-to-one sessions with each functional units, discussing only aspects directly affecting them. Interviewee 4 similarly emphasized the need to *“cascade in relevant language,”* recognizing differences in mindset and comprehensive levels among subordinates. These examples demonstrate that translating strategic intent required not only restating the shared purpose but also tailoring language, focus, and approaches so that the strategy made sense within the audience’s specific contexts.

Beyond explaining and adapting meaning, middle managers further translated strategic intent by embedding it into operational processes. Under the second-order theme of ***translating strategy into operational processes***, middle managers converted abstract direction into operating systems, structures, and routines that guided execution. Several interviewees described how strategic change required redesigning workflows, templates, reporting mechanisms, and governance arrangements. Interviewee 4 explained that regulatory change had significant implications for their systems and tracking processes, effectively replacing legacy practices. They formed a working group of internal experts who understood procedural constraints and stakeholder impacts to ensure that new requirements were operationally workable. Similarly, Interviewee 3 described redesigning the operational processes, including recruitment inputs, compensation schemes, and reporting systems, so that the new model could function in practice. In these cases, translation extended beyond communication into structural embedding. Strategy became embedded in how work was organized and monitored. New templates, metrics, and routines helped ensure that daily activities reflected strategic intent.

Finally, the findings also indicated that translation was not accomplished in a single communication event but unfolded through ***iterative sensegiving and gradual buy-in***. Throughout the interviews, translation was rarely immediate. Even when shared purpose had been clearly articulated and carefully adapted to different audiences, middle managers found that understanding and commitment developed over time. Meaning therefore had to be reinforced repeatedly through follow-up discussions, visual reminders, and continuous updates. Interviewee 1 described multiple sessions that were “*time consuming*,” yet over time stakeholders “*got used to the idea and began to contribute*”. Interviewee 3 similarly noted that repeated sharing, illustrative images, and progress updates gradually strengthened understanding and confidence. Especially, Interviewee 3 further noted that informal reminders during external activities sustained engagement and kept the project visible. Rather than emerging from a single persuasive moment, buy-in developed incrementally as communication was sustained over time. These

iterative interactions helped maintain attention to the initiative, clarify evolving concerns, and gradually strengthen stakeholders' willingness to engage with the change.

### 4.3 Aligning understanding and commitment

While earlier findings showed how middle managers interpreted strategic intent and translated meanings across the organization, the data further reveal how they engaged in sustained efforts to ensure that strategic direction was coherently understood and enacted across levels and functions. These efforts extended beyond information sharing and involved structured cross-level integration, recurring coordination mechanisms, performance embedding, and relational trust.

The findings show that a ***multi-level alignment process*** unfolded across hierarchical and functional boundaries. Rather than operating solely as recipients of strategic direction, middle managers were actively involved in upward, downward, and lateral alignment activities. Interviewee 2 explained that divisional strategies were prepared bottom-up before being evaluated and presented to top management team, allowing operational considerations to be incorporated into corporate-level decision making. They also described a senior leadership forum where all senior executives and middle managers have frequently meetings, enabling participants to "*know our plans together*" without the need for repeated explanations across departments. Interviewee 4 described large-scale initiatives involving strategy, sales, operations, finance, and distribution teams to ensure that departments were "*on the same page.*" Interviewee 3 similarly noted that inter-departmental meetings allowed participants to understand dependencies, monitor progress, and coordinate timelines. Across the interviews, alignment appeared to involve creating shared visibility of strategic direction across multiple organizational layers rather than relying on sequential cascade alone.

The findings further reveal the role of ***structural communication and coordination routines*** in reinforcing alignment over time. Participants described a range of formalized and recurring mechanisms that embedded coordination into organization's operating

structure to sustain clarity and coherence over time. Interviewee 1 referred to formal documentation of executive approvals, meeting minutes circulated for consensus, kick-off meetings with key stakeholders, and the establishment of Steering Committees to formalize oversight. Interviewee 4 described weekly catch-ups with the senior executives, daily morning alignment meetings followed by day-end reviews. Interviewee 3 described inter-departmental meetings as “*the best and only effective way*” to manage cross-functional dependencies. These accounts suggest that alignment was embedded within ongoing governance and coordination structures rather than confined to isolated communication events.

In addition to coordination mechanisms, the findings also highlight the role of ***performance-based structural alignment***, as participants described how strategic priorities were incorporated into formal performance systems. Strategic plans were translated into annual objectives, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), and evaluation criteria. Interviewee 2 explained that strategic plans were reflected in annual objectives and linked directly to incentive bonuses, meaning that delivering on objectives was directly connected to delivering company goals. She also described quarterly reviews within their team to monitor progress and adjust objectives when strategic direction changed. Interviewee 4 referred to setting clear KPIs for the salesforce to align business targets with regulatory requirements, as well as milestone-based rewards that encouraged motivation and recognition among project teams. Interviewee 5 emphasized defining clear ownership and portfolio scope to support performance expectations. Strategic direction was described as being reflected in individual objectives, evaluation processes, and incentive structures, linking day-to-day performance with broader strategic priorities.

Finally, the data indicated that ***trust and empowerment*** played a significant role in how alignment was experienced and sustained. Participants repeatedly referred to transparency, psychological safety, and empowerment. Interviewee 2 emphasized the importance of sharing full information about constraints and challenges, warning that withholding information could affect the entire team. Interviewee 3 described feeling

comfortable raising concerns with their line manager, who invested time to explain future outcomes and provide reassurance. Interviewee 4 highlighted giving opportunities to subordinates to contribute ideas and moving away from over-protection toward earlier engagement and trust-based empowerment. They also described how senior executive's respect and recognition increased motivation and pride. Alignment was associated not only with formal structures but also with relational conditions that encouraged openness, engagement, and ownership.

#### **4.4 Navigating structural and political dynamics**

While interpreting, translating, and communicating strategic intents, middle managers *navigating structural and political dynamics* to create and communicate meaning, reconciling the various viewpoints associated with multiple levels of the organisation's hierarchy, adjusting their approaches based upon competing agendas or resistance to change; and addressing the effects of changes in executive support. This included mediating conflicting stakeholder perspectives, clarifying responsibilities when stakeholders were uncertain regarding their responsibilities or when boundaries between stakeholders were blurred; and at times, escalating issues or supporting executive authority realignment to maintain momentum on implementation processes.

The findings indicated that strategic work unfolded within structurally complex arrangements shaped by *organizational power dynamics*. One of the interviewees described a strong global oversight, engaging directly and frequently in local business. Such involvement reinforced the importance of the initiative but also introduced overlapping authority. Skip-level interactions, where global leaders bypassed formal reporting lines, leading to middle managers communicate across dual channels and balance expectations between global and local executives. In addition, two interviewees noted that individuals from different backgrounds, long tenured versus newly appointed staff, held varying assumptions about the initiative, shaping early reactions and influencing how messages were received. These structural and cultural conditions formed the backdrop against which strategic sensemaking and sensegiving took place.

As strategy moved into implementation, **strategic meaning divergence** became more visible. Participants explained that newly introduced strategic concepts generated differing viewpoints across departments, making consensus more difficult as the number of stakeholders involved expanded. What initially appeared aligned at the executive level became more contested at the implementation level, particularly when interdependencies increased and delays in one unit affected others. Similarly, another interviewee highlighted that disagreement emerged over how to frame the implications of regulatory changes, with different functions emphasizing distinct aspects of the issue based on their responsibilities and concerns. Reaching a shared position required multiple rounds of discussion across formal meetings and written exchanges before a more integrated understanding developed. Participants also noted the presence of competing functional priorities among senior leaders, which shaped how the initiative was evaluated and advanced. At times, tension surfaced through extensive questioning, cautious silence, or prolonged deliberation, contributing to slower decision-making at key milestones.

Beyond horizontal tensions, vertical changes in leadership and governance arrangements further shaped the implementation process through **authority realignment**. An interviewee described periods in which senior leadership turnover required previously discussed decisions to be revisited and re-explained. Changes in senior executive roles sometimes weakened continuity, particularly when incoming leaders did not have the same level of attachment to earlier strategic commitments. In some cases, key decision makers were temporarily less involved in early phases of the initiative, creating misalignment in the approval processes. Such shifts did not necessarily reflect direct opposition to the strategy. Rather, they introduced uncertainty regarding ownership, accountability, and decision rights. As a result, middle managers had to recalibrate communication channels, clarify decision pathways, and ensure that newly positioned leaders were brought up to speed. These adjustments illustrate how governance instability formed part of the structural conditions within which strategic work unfolded.

To reconcile these misalignments, external and internal coordinating efforts played a supporting function in strengthening shared understanding. In one case, an external consultant was engaged to provide structure analysis and facilitate cross-departmental dialogue, helping participants articulate differing assumptions and converge on a clearer interpretation of the strategic model. In another instance, an independent project coordinator worked across departments to clarify constraints, surface concerns in advance of larger meetings, and reduce the personalization of disagreements. These roles did not replace managerial authority but complemented it, enabling middle managers to foster more coherent discussion and align interpretations across stakeholders.

Middle managers responded to structured and political dynamics by engaging in multiple practices to promote coordination and forward movement. They spoke informally and visited site locations to understand local sentiments and uncover concerns. When tensions existed among stakeholders between two or more hierarchies, middle managers acted as intermediaries to facilitate communication and resolve expectations between stakeholders. They sometimes used higher-level authority to reinforce alignment with an initiative, as well as clarify direction and legitimize decisions.

#### **4.5 Managing emotional dynamics of change**

The findings reveal that managing emotional dynamics formed an integral part of middle managers' strategic work. Across interviews, participants consistently described strategy implementation as an emotionally charged process rather than a purely analytical or procedural task. Emotional disruption emerged as an immediate response to strategic change, which middle managers then engaged in recognizing, containing, and responding to emotional reactions associated with change to implement strategic initiatives effectively.

***Strategic change initially generated significant emotional disruption*** across organizational levels. Interviewee 1 described the kick-off meeting was “*really tense*”, “*there was*

*still a lot of resistance in the room,” “majority of them was still unclear what we need to do, how it would be done,”* reflecting incomplete emotional commitment. Leadership changes and early ambiguity weakened initial motivation, particularly when direction was unclear, as Interviewee 1 noted that changes in leadership and early unknowns *“softly demotivated them”*. At the individual level, Interviewee 2 admitted the feeling *“quite concerned”* when approaching a new strategic direction for the first time. Emotional strain also translated into behavioural consequences; Interviewee 2 reported that *“half of my team resisted... some decided to resign”*, while Interviewee 4 explained that employees resisted because *they “need to work more, work hard”*. Additionally, Interviewee 3 observed that prolonged implementation without full-time dedication caused attention to fade. Together, these findings show that emotional disruption, manifested as anxiety, resistance, and demotivation, formed an inherent part of strategy implementation.

In response to these emotional disruption, ***middle managers actively engaged in containment practices and motivational support*** aimed at stabilizing team reactions. Interviewee 1 emphasized giving affected stakeholders *“time to absorb the information and the direction”*, recognizing that emotional adjustment requires space. Interviewee 2 similarly highlighted the importance of maintaining a positive and safe environment where team members feel *“free and safe to share”*. Furthermore, Interviewee 5 explicitly stated that commitment was strengthened by *“addressing emotional responses to change”*, suggesting that acknowledging emotions rather than suppressing them helped sustain engagement. These practices illustrate how middle managers acted as emotional stabilizers, absorbing and moderating turbulence to prevent escalation.

Finally, managing emotional dynamics also required ***self-regulation at the leadership level***. Middle managers reported experiencing significant stress, particularly at the middle level of the organization, and highlighted the need to balance work and personal life to prevent stress from spilling over into home life. Interviewee 1 described coping by balancing personal and professional life, while Interviewee 4 admitted taking on

additional burdens to protect the team. Interviewee 5 emphasized that leaders “*must recognize and manage their own emotions first*” and that developing emotional self-awareness requires “*time and practice*”. These accounts indicate that emotional competence was not incidental but constituted a learned leadership capability. Managing emotional dynamics therefore involved not only influencing others’ emotions but also sustaining one’s own emotional resilience throughout the change process.

#### **4.6 Leveraging organizational culture**

The findings indicate that middle managers leveraged existing cultural resources to facilitate alignment and strengthen commitment during strategy implementation. Rather than relying solely on formal authority, they drew upon collaboration norms, open communication practices, supportive leadership behaviours, and a sense of pride to encourage engagement across levels.

***Collaboration norms*** functioned as a foundational cultural mechanism shaping how employees engaged with the initiatives. In some cases, silo-oriented thinking was described as a constraint, reflected in expressions such as “*that’s not my job,*” suggesting limited collective ownership in certain contexts. However, other participants described a strong team orientation, where members were “*very committed and dedicated*” and “*very willing to participate.*”

The interviewees also reveal that middle managers reinforced a “*win-win spirit*” framing change as protecting the value and benefits of key stakeholders. This framing supported continued cooperation rather than defensive reactions. Team composition was also emphasized. Interviewee 3 highlighted the importance of balancing experienced employees with younger members who could contribute creative or unconventional ideas. Openness to generational diversity was viewed as helping the organization absorb new trends, remain modern, and build future capability. Diversity of perspectives, fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion considerations, was described by Interviewee 5 as contributing to more comprehensive solutions that addressed a broader audience. Interviewee 3 also

mentioned that external social and sports activities strengthen cross-level relationships. These activities created informal relational networks that supported coordination beyond formal meetings.

**Open communication** emerged as a consistent cultural feature facilitating alignment. Interviewee 4 highlighted that discussions provided *“a fair chance for all people to involve and clarify”* reflecting inclusive dialogue practices. Similarly, Interviewee 3 noted that exchange of information with their line manager was easy, demonstrating upward communication openness. Friendly hierarchical relations further reduced status barriers, enabling employees to *“share ideas from lower to higher levels.”* Informal bonding mechanisms, including external activities fostering strong cross-level relationships, also contributed to relational accessibility. These communication practices enabled broader participation and facilitated the identification of suitable project members, reinforcing alignment through relational transparency rather than directive control.

**Supportive leadership** functioned as a key cultural enabler that strengthened commitment during strategy implementation. Interviewee 1 described how the top leaders consistently reinforced the need for teamwork across forums, emphasizing that success required working *“as a team,”* thereby shaping collaboration norms. Interviewee 4 highlighted visible executive involvement, with senior leaders working *“side by side”* with teams and emphasized the importance of executive empathy from the senior executives, which enhanced trust and reduced hierarchical distance. Interviewee 3 further noted that alignment stemmed from a broader culture of support, including acceptance of mistakes and early failures, with *“not too much emphasis on being wrong.”* In addition, Interviewee 4 highlighted the senior executives’ role in sustaining morale through appreciation practices, such as celebrating small wins, sending thank-you letters, and recognizing contributions, which helped maintain high energy even during periods of intensive work, including overnight efforts. Together, these accounts suggest that leadership role modelling, empathy, and openness to experimentation cultivated psychological safety and increased employees’ willingness to commit in implementation.

*Sense of pride* functioned as an additional source of motivation. Interviewee 3 highlighted that Vietnam office being chosen as the first country to implement the project generated a sense of honour and pride. Recognition by headquarters further reinforced symbolic legitimacy, as employees felt entrusted to pioneer implementation aligned with the Group's five-year objectives. In another example, modernization of office facilities was framed as a positive and exciting milestone, generating enthusiasm among team members.

#### **4.7 Summary of the key findings and the revised framework**

This thesis explores how middle managers develop strategic consensus through sense-making practices during strategy implementation. Based on the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, the study proposed an initial theoretical framework consisting of three inter-related mechanisms, interpreting strategic intentions, translating and communicating meanings, and aligning understanding and commitment. The empirical findings largely support this structure but also reveal how these mechanisms operate in more dynamic ways.

Strategic consensus formation began at the stage when middle managers received strategic direction from higher levels. Middle managers, however, did not accept these directives passively. They interpreted the strategic intent based on contextual cues such as regulatory changes, market pressures, and both formal and informal information flows. They constructed strategic necessity of the initiatives, clarified the intent and underlying assumptions, and engaged in upward inquiry to negotiate roles and expectations. This process of interpretive works established the cognitive foundation for subsequent consensus development.

Building on this foundation, middle managers translated and communicated meanings to make abstract strategic intent more understandable and actionable for different stakeholders. They anchored communication in shared purpose, adapted messages to

different stakeholder groups, embedded strategic priorities into operational processes and routines, and reinforced meaning through repeated interactions. Buy-in developed gradually over time rather than through a single communication event.

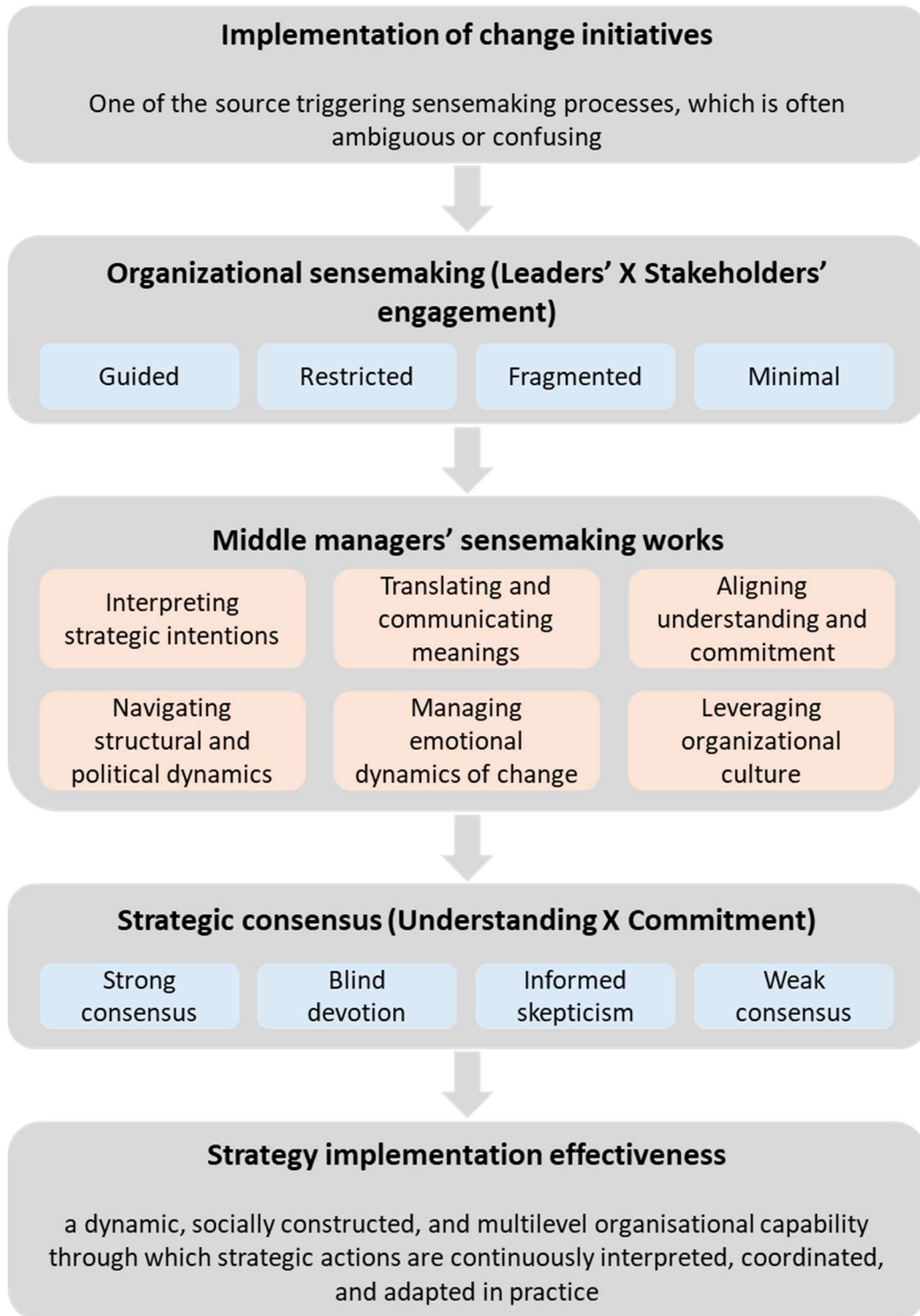
Middle managers went beyond communication to align of understanding and commitment, ensuring that the strategic direction was coherently understood and enacted across different levels and functions of the organization. They worked upward and downward to create shared visibility of strategic direction among various departments and at multiple levels. This included facilitating cross-departmental meetings, participating in senior leadership forums, and integrating higher-level decisions into operational systems and procedures. In addition, middle managers created recurring coordination routines, documented decisions, built mechanisms for new decisions, embedded strategic priorities into annual objectives, KPIs, and incentive systems, to build a formal structure of alignment within the organizations. At the same time, they fostered an environment where trust and psychological safety existed by encouraging open dialogue, transparency, and empowerment. Through these combined structural and relational practices, middle managers continuously stabilized shared understanding and sustained commitment throughout the implementation processes.

The empirical findings also identified three additional dimensions that guided how these mechanisms operated in practice: navigating structural and political contexts, managing emotional dynamics, and leveraging organizational culture. As strategy moved from initial direction-setting to implementation, middle managers involved in the strategic execution under the changing governance structures characterized by changes in leadership, overlapping authority, and conflicting functional priorities; therefore, they had to mediate interpretations, navigate authority tensions, and stabilize coordination across levels. Strategic changes often generated anxiety, resistance, and demotivation, which required middle managers to engage in emotional containment, reframing, motivational reinforcement, and self-regulation. In addition, organizational culture functioned as an enabling resource facilitating throughout the process. Specifically, collaboration norms,

open communication practices, supportive leadership, and a sense of pride strengthened ownership and participation, reinforced commitments to strategic initiatives.

The revised framework in Figure 6 extended the initial framework to reflect the structural, emotional, and cultural dynamics in practices. Though the three core mechanisms of interpreting, translating and communicating, and aligning remain central, the findings further demonstrated that these mechanisms are enacted through, and intertwined with, the active navigation of structural and political dynamics, the management of emotional responses to change, and the leveraging of organizational culture. These dimensions were therefore incorporated into the core of middle managers' sensemaking work rather than treated as background conditions. In addition, the revised framework also emphasized movement over time, highlighting that consensus is re-negotiated as implementation unfolds. As new ambiguities emerged and organizational conditions changed, middle managers revisited interpretations, renegotiated expectations, and recalibrated coordination mechanisms.

In conclusion, the study shows that strategic consensus is better understood as negotiated and continuously reconstructed. Initial clarity did not eliminate later ambiguity. As implementation moved into operationalization, disagreements and doubts re-emerged. However, such debates did not automatically weaken consensus. Instead, repeated discussions, coordination routines, and emotional support often contributed to deeper shared understanding and sustained commitment. Middle managers play a central role in developing strategic consensus by continuously interpreting strategic intent, translating it into actionable meaning, and aligning shared understanding and commitment, while navigating structural tensions, managing emotional dynamics, and leveraging organizational culture as implementation unfolds.



**Figure 6. Revised framework of the thesis (author's own elaboration informed by (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992a; Maitlis, 2005))**

## **5 Discussion**

This thesis explores how middle managers develop strategic consensus through sense-making during strategy implementation. Drawing on semi-structure interviews with middle managers in the Vietnamese life insurance industry, the findings show that middle managers contribute to the development of strategic consensus through ongoing interpretation, communication, and alignment. At the same time, they navigate through structural and political conditions, manage emotional dynamics, and leverage organizational culture to support the consensus development. This chapter discusses theoretical contributions of the study, outline managerial implications, and presents limitations and directions for future research.

### **5.1 Theoretical contribution**

This study contributes to the research on strategic consensus, sensemaking, and middle management by offering a process-oriented understanding of how middle managers construct strategic consensus through ongoing sensemaking during strategy implementation.

The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 suggests that strategic consensus enhances strategy implementation by fostering shared understanding, coordination, and commitment across organizational levels (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992a; Kellermanns et al., 2005, 2011). However, research acknowledges that in uncertain environments, consensus can both support and hinder implementation (Amason, 1996; Dess and Priem, 1995). Chapter 2, therefore, concluded that strategic consensus should be viewed as a continuous recursive process developed through ongoing communication and interpretation, and adjusted over time.

The findings in Chapter 4 support this process view and enhance it by showing more clearly how this recursive process unfold during implementation. The data reveal that consensus becomes fragile during implementation as new interpretations emerge,

leadership changes occur, structures shift, and emotional reactions surface. Shared understanding and commitment are repeatedly disrupted and must be rebuilt. Importantly, this rebuilding does not happen through communication alone. In response, middle managers actively use coordination routines, performance systems, and emotional support to stabilize shared understanding and commitment. At the same time, middle managers also address emotional concerns. In this way, the study extends the literature by showing that middle managers actively sustain the dynamic nature of consensus through multiple organizational mechanisms, not solely through continuous dialogue.

Second, the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 shows that sensemaking is an ongoing, socially constructed process through which organizational members interpret ambiguity and gradually build shared meaning (Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995). In the context of strategy implementation, change initiatives trigger sensemaking as managers and employees seek to understand what the strategy means for their work (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). Organizational members align their understanding and strengthen their commitment to strategic priorities through communication, interpretation, and sensegiving (Balogun and Johnson, 2004).

The findings in Chapter 4 demonstrated that ambiguity is often a trigger for sensemaking, especially when strategic intent moves from high-level direction to operational execution. Middle managers clarified purpose and expectation through upward inquiry, dialogue, and repeated communication, confirming prior research that sensemaking is socially constructed and interactive. However, this thesis extends existing research by showing that sensemaking is not just limited to interpretation and discourse. It was closely intertwined with structural embedding (e.g., KPIs, governance routines), political navigation (e.g., leadership transitions, overlapping authority), emotional management, and cultural leveraging. This offers a more grounded and practice-based view of how sensemaking operates during strategy implementation.

Third, the study contributes to the literature on middle managers by integrating their interpretive, coordinative, political, and emotional roles into a coherent process model. Research on middle managers have highlighted their roles as sensemakers and sensegivers, important actors in strategy implementation to translate strategic intent into meaningful actions (Balogun, 2003; Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992b; Wooldridge et al., 2008). Research also highlights their roles in coordination, adaptation, and emotional balancing during change (Huy, 2001, 2002; Tawse and Tabesh, 2021). The findings of this thesis confirm that middle managers translate and communicate strategic intent, yet they extend this understanding by demonstrating how these roles unfolded as an integrated set of practices rather than separate functions. Middle managers simultaneously interpret, translate, coordinate, mediate political tensions, embed strategy into performance systems, manage emotional turbulence, and leverage cultural norms. Their work shows how sensemaking, coordination, and alignment are deeply interconnected. This thesis therefore contributes to sensemaking research by a clearer explanation of how middle managers actively construct shared understanding and commitment over time through everyday strategic practices.

Fourth, much of strategic consensus and sensemaking research has been developed in Western organizational contexts (Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Kellermanns et al., 2005, 2011; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Rouleau, 2005). This study of middle managers in the Vietnamese life insurance industry not only support that consensus formation relies on shared understanding and commitment across levels, but it also extends theory by showing how regulatory pressures, global oversight, and leadership transitions intensify ambiguity during implementation. In such contexts, structural clarity, emotional containment, and cultural cohesion become particularly important. While not limited to emerging markets, these findings demonstrate how environmental and governance conditions shape the form and intensity of sensemaking and consensus-building processes.

Overall, this thesis has demonstrated how middle managers develop strategic consensus through ongoing sensemaking process that combines interpretation, translation,

communication, structural embedding, emotional management, and cultural leveraging. Strategic consensus does not emerge automatically from formal strategy decisions; it is gradually constructed and repeatedly stabilized through middle managers' everyday practices. By integrating insights from strategic consensus, sensemaking, and middle management research, this study provides a more process-oriented and practice-based explanation of how shared understanding and commitment are developed to support strategy implementation effectiveness.

## **5.2 Managerial implications**

This study shows that middle managers play an important role in developing strategic consensus by continuously interpreting strategic intent, translating it into actionable meaning, and aligning shared understanding and commitment, while navigating structural tensions, managing emotional dynamics, and leveraging organizational culture as implementation unfolds. The findings of this study offer multiple practical implications to senior executives, middle managers, and organizations to create the conditions that support middle managers in this role.

The thesis offers practical implications for senior executives by clarifying how they can enable middle managers to effectively develop strategic consensus during strategy implementation. The findings suggest that strategic consensus rarely stabilizes at the time it was announced. Although early communication of strategic direction may provide clarity, alignment may deteriorate during implementation as ambiguity emerges in operationalization, leadership changes occur, and structural adjustments are introduced. Without continued guidance, shared understanding and commitment may gradually weaken. Senior executives can support middle managers' alignment efforts by regularly reinforcing strategic priorities, providing ongoing clarification, and creating opportunities for feedback and dialogue throughout the implementation process.

Interviewees repeatedly emphasized the importance of clarity during implementation. Clarity extends beyond understanding the strategic direction and purpose to include

roles and responsibilities, expectations, and authority arrangements. Middle managers generally perceived the strategic intent as clear; however, ambiguity frequently emerged during execution when responsibilities were not fully defined, authority overlapped, or decision-making pathways were unclear. There were also uncertainty surrounding the ownership and accountability, particularly during leadership transitions and skip-level interactions. Maintaining alignment with the strategic directions, therefore, requires both strategic clarity and structural clarity. With clearly defined responsibilities, stable decision-making structures, and consistent reporting arrangements, middle managers are able to perform their sensemaking and coordination roles with greater confidence and coherence.

The findings further highlight the importance of viewing middle managers as strategic partners rather than merely implementers. Throughout implementation processes, middle managers actively engaged in interpretation, translation, coordination, and emotional stability. Their ability to develop strategic consensus depends on their access to information, trust, and recognition. Early involvement in strategic discussions, opportunities for upward inquiry, and acknowledgment of middle managers' alignment-building contributions strengthen their capacity to bridge the gap between strategic intention and operational reality.

While enabling conditions from senior leadership are essential, middle managers themselves must actively cultivate the capabilities required to develop strategic consensus. The findings highlight that strategy implementation requires active and continuous sensemaking rather than passive transmission of strategic directives. Strategic clarity at the executive level does not automatically cascade downward. Middle managers need to engage in upward inquiry to clarify expectations, role boundaries, constraints, and decision rights before translating strategy to their teams. Proactively seeking clarification and confirming shared understanding reduce the risk of misalignment during later stages of implementation. This suggests that middle managers should view questioning and

negotiation not as signs of uncertainty, but as essential practices for strengthening alignment.

Importantly, such clarity enables middle managers to develop a more coherent understanding of strategic intent, their own roles and responsibilities, and the expectations for them. With this foundation, they are better positioned to translate and communicate the strategy in ways that are consistent, credible, and contextually meaningful for their teams.

Effective translation and communication alone, however, are insufficient to sustain consensus. Although explaining purpose and rationale is necessary, alignment becomes more stable when the strategy is embedded into everyday routines and systems. Middle managers play a critical role in translating strategic priorities into operational processes, KPIs, performance reviews, and governance mechanisms. By integrating strategic objectives into measurable targets and recurring coordination routines, they anchor shared direction in daily practice. Regular cross-functional meetings, structured follow-ups, and progress reviews help maintain focus and prevent drift over time.

Emotional management emerges as a critical capability. Strategy implementation often triggers anxiety, stress, and resistance. Middle managers contribute to consensus not only through interpretation and coordination but also through emotional stabilization. Importantly, they must first recognize and regulate their own emotional responses before supporting others. Self-awareness, composure, and emotional balance directly influence how teams interpret uncertainty and respond to pressure. Developing emotional regulation and resilience should therefore be considered as a core leadership capability for middle managers.

Middle managers can actively leverage organizational culture to strengthen alignment. Collaboration norms, open communication practices, and a sense of pride were found to facilitate engagement. Encouraging diversity, including generational diversity, further

enhances implementation capacity. Combining experienced employees with younger members introduces fresh perspectives while preserving institutional knowledge, allowing teams to balance stability with innovation. By fostering inclusive participation and valuing diverse viewpoints, middle managers can reduce silo thinking and improve the quality of solution. Rather than relying solely on formal authority, they can draw on shared purpose, team identity, diverse perspectives, and informal networks to encourage voluntary participation and sustained commitment.

At the organizational level, systems and structures should support ongoing alignment carried out by middle managers. Aligning performance metrics and incentive systems with strategic priorities helps drive the whole organisation toward a common goal and shared direction, thereby fostering consistent alignment across different levels and units. Regular reviews, milestone-based recognition, and transparent progress tracking help middle managers maintain the team's focus on strategic objectives. In addition, organizations should establish cross-functional coordination forums, such as steering committees and regular cross-department meetings, to manage interdependencies, prevent fragmentation across departments, and provide structural stability that supports alignment across the organization.

These implications demonstrate that effective strategic implementation depends on more than formal plans; it also requires a continuous process of alignment across organizational levels. Clear direction, stable structures, emotional awareness, and supportive cultural conditions work together to define how the strategy is understood and enacted in practice. Middle managers play an important role in constructing and sustaining a collective understanding and commitment, and supporting the success of implementation, thereby reducing the risk of fragmentation during change.

### 5.3 Limitations and suggestions for future research

While this thesis provides a process-oriented understanding of how middle managers develop strategic consensus through sensemaking for strategy implementation effectiveness, the study has some limitations.

First, the study is based on a qualitative design with a relatively small number of semi-structured interviews conducted with middle managers in one industry and one country. This approach allowed for in-depth exploration of how middle managers interpret and align strategy in practice. Moreover, the findings are specific to Vietnam's life insurance industry context and therefore cannot be generalized to wider population. The degree of ambiguity may be intensified due to the nature of life insurance industry in Vietnam, which is characterized by regulatory pressures, global oversight, and market volatility. Therefore, conducting more studies with similar processes in different industries or countries could assess whether the patterns identified in this study are transferable. Future comparative studies across emerging and developed markets may further clarify how institutional conditions shape the development of strategic consensus.

Second, although the study identifies structural, emotional, and cultural mechanisms through which middle managers develop strategic consensus, it does not examine how strongly or weakly these practices influence the implementation outcomes. In other words, while the findings explain how alignment is constructed in practice, they do not test whether and to what extent these mechanisms support or hinder implementation effectiveness. Future research could use the findings from this study as foundation to develop clear metrics to examine the relationship between specific sensemaking practices and implementation outcomes.

Finally, one of the findings highlights the role of generational diversity in supporting strategy implementation. The combination of experienced employees and younger members helped teams maintain stability while also encouraging innovation. Experienced staffs contributed practical knowledge and organizational understanding, while

younger members brought fresh perspectives. However, this aspect was not a focus of the study. Future research could explore how generational diversity influences sense-making dynamics, communication patterns, and consensus development during strategy implementation. For example, researchers may investigate whether differences in values, ways of working, and risk perceptions across generations affect how strategic priorities are interpreted and enacted. Such research would deepen understanding of how diversity shapes alignment processes in contemporary organizations.

Despite these limitations, the study offers a detailed, practice-based explanation of how middle managers contribute to the development of strategic consensus through sense-making. By identifying the interpreting, translating, communicating, aligning, structural, emotional, and cultural practices that sustain alignment, it provides a foundation for future research to further refine and test these processes across different contexts and methodological approaches.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Introduction letter

Dear [recipient's name]

I am currently conducting my Master's thesis at the University of Vaasa, Finland. My thesis studies how middle managers through sensemaking contribute to developing strategic consensus for effective strategy implementation.

I am looking for middle managers who would be willing to share their experiences through an interview. The interview will take approximately 60 to 90 minutes and will be conducted online via Zoom or MS Teams. Your insights would be valuable perspectives on how middle managers interpret, translate, communicate, and align strategic initiatives across organizational levels.

Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time without giving a reason. All information you provide will be handled confidentially, and your identity will not be revealed in the thesis or any related publications. Any potentially identifiable information will be anonymized during analysis.

If you are willing to participate or would like more information, please feel free to contact me at: [tram.nguyen@student.uvasa.fi](mailto:tram.nguyen@student.uvasa.fi).

I would be grateful for your contribution to this research, and I hope you will consider sharing your valuable experience.

Best regards,

Tram Nguyen

Master's student in Strategy Business Development program

University of Vaasa, Finland.

## **Appendix 2. Semi-structured interview guide**

### **Background information**

1. Could you please describe your current roles and responsibilities? (e.g. title, functions)
2. How long have you worked in this company and in middle management positions?

### **Understanding strategy implementation experiences**

3. What strategic initiatives have you been involved in the implementation stage? What was your role?
4. When this initiative was launched, how did you first understand its goals?
5. What information were you given, and through which channels?
6. What felt clear or unclear at the beginning?

### **Sensemaking practices**

7. How did you make sense of the initiative when it was introduced?
8. Did your understanding change over the time or not? If yes, what triggered those changes?
9. Which interactions (e.g., meetings, discussion, informal talks) affected your understanding? In what way? What interactions helped clarifying your understanding?
10. Could you please describe situations or moments in which you experienced ambiguity, conflicting information, or uncertainty during the initiative? Where did this occur, and how did you make sense of and deal with it?

### **Sensegiving practices**

11. How did you communicate or explain the initiative to your team or subordinates?
12. What did you do to help your team or subordinates understand the goals or meaning of the initiative? Were there specific messages, frames, or examples you used to guide their understanding?
13. How did you handle differing interpretations, questions, or resistance from your team or subordinates?

**Alignment**

14. How did you work to ensure that shared understanding across your team, peers, or senior managers?
15. Did you encounter or not conflicting interpretations across levels or departments? How did you address them?
16. How did you encourage commitment toward the strategic initiative?
17. Can you share an example where alignment or misalignment affected implementation?

**Reflections**

18. Can you describe how these activities unfolded over time and what was the result? Did they tend to happen step by step, or did they overlap? Please walk me through what happened and share an example.
19. What conditions, resources, or organizational factors do you believe would help middle managers perform these roles more effectively?
20. Looking back, what would you do differently next time when interpreting, communicating, or aligning strategy?
21. Do you have any other advice for other middle managers?
22. Is there anything else that you would like to share with me?