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Implementing strategy through middle management and sensemaking

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ABSTRACT:

In today's competitive business environment, the importance of formulating a strategy and being able to implement it is crucial in order to stay competitive and improve the business performance. How strategies are formulated and implemented has existed and developed as a re-research area for several decades, and previous studies have already established the important role of the middle management in organizations and strategy implementation. However, there is a very limited amount of research around how middle management can use sensemaking to influence strategy implementation through their daily practices. The main topic of interest of this thesis is to further extend into this research area and to enhance the understanding of how sensemaking can be utilized by daily actions to implement strategies to achieve strategic objectives. Studying middle managers and their practices is important because of their position within organizations and the hierarchy which can sometimes be overlooked. However, because of their unique position acting in the middle and by having influence on both directions within the hierarchy they play an important role in ensuring the day-to-day operations and strategy implementation process. This thesis uses a real-life case company which is an estate agency firm, and the data was collected by conducting interviews with a group of middle managers in same roles. The data was analysed by using a Gioia method. The main findings in this research revealed some important aspects of how sensemaking by middle management can enact strategy implementation in companies. Middle management is in the key role in building and developing their employees to ensure that everyone within the firm can work towards achieving the common goals. In addition, middle managers have a crucial role in communicating and translating the strategy to employees, and to ensure that it is understood by all and that everyone shares a similar view of the strategy. Constant communication and review and keeping the information and delivery of the message consistent, are important part of the sensemaking.

KEYWORDS: strategy implementation, middle management, sensemaking

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Tiivistelmä:

Nykypäivän kilpailevassa liiketoimintaympäristössä strategian laatiminen ja sen toteuttaminen on ratkaisevan tärkeää kilpailukyvyä säilyttämiseksi ja liiketoiminnan suorituskyvyn parantamiseksi. Strategioiden muotoilu ja toteutus on ollut olemassa ja kehittynyt tutkimusalueena useiden vuosikymmenien ajan, ja aiemmat tutkimukset ovat jo osoittaneet keskijohdon tärkeän roolin organisaatioissa ja strategian toimeenpanossa. On kuitenkin hyvin rajallinen määrä tutkimusta siitä, kuinka keskijohto voi käyttää yhteisen ymmärryksen merkityksellistämistä vaikuttaakseen strategian toteuttamiseen päivittäisten käytäntöjensä kautta. Tämän opinnäytetyön pääaiheena on laajentaa tätä tutkimusaluetta ja lisätä ymmärrystä siitä, miten yhteisen ymmärryksen merkityksellistämistä voidaan hyödyntää päivittäisillä toimilla strategioiden toteuttamiseksi strategisten tavoitteiden saavuttamiseksi. Keski-johtajien ja heidän toimintatapojensa opiskelu on tärkeää heidän asemansa vuoksi organisaatioiden hierarkiassa, joka voi joskus jäädä huomiotta. Keskellä toimivan ainutlaatuisen asemansa ja hierarkian molempiin suuntiin vaikuttamisen vuoksi keskijohdolla on kuitenkin tärkeä rooli jokapäiväisen toiminnan ja strategian toteutusprosessin varmistamisessa. Tässä opinnäytetyössä käytetään tosielämän tapausyritystä, joka on kiinteistövälitystoimisto, ja dataa on kerätty haastatteleamalla ryhmää samassa roolissa olevia keskijohtajia. Aineisto analysoitiin Gioia-menetelmällä. Tämän tutkimuksen tärkeimmät havainnot paljastivat tärkeitä näkökohtia siitä, kuinka keskijohdon edesauttama yhteisen ymmärryksen luominen voi vaikuttaa strategian toteuttamiseen yrityksissä. Keskijohdolla on keskeinen rooli henkilöstön rakentamisessa ja kehittämisessä, jotta jokainen yrityksessä voi työskennellä yhteisten tavoitteiden saavuttamiseksi. Lisäksi keskijohtajilla on keskeinen rooli strategian viestimisessä ja kääntämisessä työntekijöille sekä sen varmistamisessa, että kaikki ymmärtävät sen ja että kaikilla on samanlainen näkemys ja ymmärrys strategiasta. Jatkuva viestintä ja tarkastelu sekä tiedon ja viestin välityksen pitäminen johdonmukaisina ovat tärkeä osa yhteisen ymmärryksen luomista.

Avainsanat: strategian toteuttaminen, keskijohto, yhteisen ymmärryksen luominen

Contents

1	Introduction	5
1.2	Research problem and objectives	6
1.2	Research scope	7
1.3	Thesis structure	7
2	Literature review	9
2.1	Strategy implementation	9
2.2	Organizational hierarchy and strategy implementation	12
2.3	Middle management	16
2.3.1	Middle management practices	19
2.4	Sensemaking in organizations	21
2.4.1	Sensemaking and middle management	23
3	Methodology	28
3.1	The case company	30
3.2	Data collection	31
3.3	Data analysis	33
3.4	The credibility of research	36
4	Findings	37
4.1	Middle management	37
4.2	Strategy implementation	38
4.3	Sensemaking	41
5	Discussion	44
6	Conclusion	51
6.1	Limitations	52
6.2	Suggestions for future research	53
	References	55
	Appendices	59
	Appendix 1.	59

1 Introduction

Strategies are important for organizations as they provide an action plan for achieving organizational goals and objectives. A well-defined strategy also helps organizations to establish their vision, mission, and core values. According to Mintzberg and Waters (1985), strategy is a plan of what an organization intends or plans to do in the future. Strategies are an important foundation for organizations and for what they want to achieve and essential for their success. However, just a strategy alone is not enough to guarantee success for an organization; it also needs a careful implementation of the chosen strategy.

Strategy implementation is the process of taking action and turning the strategy into reality with the objective of achieving the desired outcome of the strategy. Effective strategy implementation is crucial for organizations to achieve its goals and objectives. It is important that every member of the organization understands the strategic goal and their role in implementing this strategy. This is why middle managers have a crucial role within organizations, although the role and the importance of middle management within the organizational hierarchy are often overlooked and misunderstood. Middle management plays an important part in the strategy implementation process for translating the organization's strategy and ensuring the successful execution of strategic actions by other organizational members (Schuler et al., 2023).

Organizational research have also studied sensemaking which is a process of learning and creating an understanding or knowledge of the reality which has been an interest in organizational management studies since the early 2000s and essentially means how organizational members make sense of the strategy and if the strategies are implemented as intended (Weiser et al., 2020) Organizational sensemaking plays an important part in how strategies are perceived and middle management has an important role in ensuring and influencing others to share a same reality of the organization in order to impact the strategy implementation process.

This research aims to develop a better understanding of strategy implementation and the role of middle management in influencing this through sensemaking. Middle managers have a valuable role within organizations in their strategy implementation process. However, the ways they can positively influence strategy implementation through sensemaking have yet to be explored. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to this academic field by extending the theory behind successful strategy implementation through sensemaking and middle management.

Therefore, this research's primary goal is to learn more about the importance of middle management and sensemaking during strategy implementation in organisations. Because strategies are often communicated from top to bottom through the organisational hierarchy, middle managers play an important role in communicating and translating the company's strategic objectives to other employees to ensure successful strategy implementation to achieve the organisational vision (Van Riel et al., 2009).

1.1 Research Problem and Objectives

The main purpose of this study is to offer more extensive research on the importance of the middle management's role in implementing strategies in organizations and how can sensemaking practices to be used to facilitate this within organizations to achieve strategic goals.

The research will aim to answer the following research question:

How is sensemaking used by middle managers in the strategy implementation process in organizations?

This research has two research objectives:

1. To understand the role of middle manager's role in strategy implementation.
2. To understand how sensemaking is used by middle managers in strategy implementation.

1.2 Research scope

This research delves deeply into the application of sensemaking by middle managers and its contribution to the strategy implementation process in a case organisation. While sensemaking could have been studied across the entire organisational hierarchy, the focus is specifically on middle management. This choice not only keeps the research scope manageable with the available resources but also allows for a more thorough analysis of sensemaking and middle management, thereby making a more comprehensive contribution to this research field. However, not studying all organisational members could be considered a delimitation for this study.

1.3 Thesis Structure

This study is divided into six main sections and begins with a brief introduction to the research topic. The introductory chapter also identifies the research problem, presents the main research question, and outlines the focal research objectives, research scope and the structure.

The next part of this thesis comprises the literature review, which explores the existing research on this topic and builds the theoretical framework for this research. The literature review includes four main topics: strategy implementation, organizational hierarchy, middle management, and sensemaking. In order to answer the research question, it is important to understand the existing knowledge around these research areas, which are all at the core of this research. Building these foundations for this study allows the reader to have a better understanding of the final analysis and discussion.

The third chapter establishes the chosen research methodology and introduces the case company used in this thesis. It also explains the data collection and analysis methods in detail and the validity and reliability of this research.

The fourth chapter, followed by the methodology section, presents the main findings of this study. This chapter summarizes and discusses the main findings by combining findings from the literature review and data collection.

Next is the discussion chapter, which consists of an evaluation and description of the main findings from the data collection. The findings are also linked to the literature review part, and any new insights will also be discussed in this chapter.

The last section of this thesis is the conclusion, which summarises the main findings and contribution of this study, considers the main limitations of this research, and makes suggestions for future research areas.

2 Literature Review

This section of this study compiles the existing literature that is relevant for this study. The literature review is divided into sections that summarise the previous research around the focal areas of this research, which are strategy implementation, organizational hierarchy, middle management, and middle management practices, sensemaking in organizations and sensemaking and middle management. Following this structure allows the reader to build and develop their knowledge around this the topic and delve deeper into the central focus of this study to build better understanding of the research analysis and discussion at the end of this paper.

2.1 Strategy implementation

Strategy implementation became a research topic during the 1960s, and it has received attention from several scholars and researchers over the past decades. Over time, strategy implementation has also developed many different definitions. Weiser et al. (2020) define *strategy implementation* as “the continuous interplay of three interrelated activities – conceptualizing, enacting, and coordinating – that enable an organization to realize strategies through collective actions by organizational stakeholders.” Tawse and Tabesh (2021) define *strategy implementation* as a process that combines activities by managers and employees that aim to achieve strategic objectives and turn a plan into a reality. However, in summary, all the definitions of strategy implementation have in common that strategy implementation is about executing plans into action to achieve a desired outcome and organizational objectives.

The importance of formulating a strategy has been well established in previous literature; however, the execution or implementation of the strategy has received less attention and remains a less undiscovered concept in academic literature. It has been understood, though, that strategy implementation is paramount for the success of organizations. However, strategy implementation is often seen as a complex process

that can be easily misunderstood, and the reason why companies fail is because of poor execution of strategies (De Oliveira et al., 2019). Therefore, effective implementation of strategies is an essential part of an organization's practices and is critical to its success. De Oliveira et al. (2019) identified five dimensions that play a part in the strategy execution process. These five dimensions are unfolding: coordination, communication, control and feedback, and development of human resources and policies and employee competencies. Unfolding means breaking down the strategy into different actions and understanding what must be done and by whom. Coordination is about organizing the employees and appointing the leaders to conduct the implementation. The third dimension communication relates to spreading information about the strategy and the implementation to enhance understanding. Control and feedback mean monitoring results, reviewing results achieved versus the actual goals and making necessary adjustments. The last dimension is about promoting policies and developing employee competencies.

According to Tawse and Tabesh (2021), strategy implementation has a significant impact on the organization's performance, and successful strategy implementation requires a well-formulated and implemented strategy to improve organizational performance and gain competitive advantage. In addition, for successful strategy implementation, organizations must improve competence, commitment, and coordination during the strategy implementation process in order to achieve competitive advantage. Competence refers to the skills and knowledge of the individuals within the organization and how well they can perform tasks and operations. Commitment refers to the level of commitment by organizational members to achieve strategic goals. Coordination is the interactive process of integrating everything together. Therefore, successful strategy implementation depends on the organizational members implementing it. Previous research has also highlighted the importance of managers at different organizational levels and how they can contribute to the successful implementation of the organizational strategy through different managerial actions and improve competence, commitment, and coordination in order to achieve strategic goals.

According to Friesl et al. (2021), in the early strategy implementation literature (1970-1990), the implementation process followed a contingency theory. The success of the strategy was considered to depend on organizational factors such as structures, processes, systems, and resources, which must be configured to contribute to the fit with the organization's environment. While processes, systems, and resources remained important in later strategy implementation literature, the focus shifted to how the organizational members at all levels interpret and make sense of the strategy and understand the firm's strategic intent. Similar findings were made by Weiser et al. (2020), who conducted research that consisted of a review of the past 40 years of strategy implementation research to find out how it has changed and developed over time and how the more recent research has taken a different view from the earlier and more traditional studies. The main difference between the traditional and more recent theories is that the traditional strategy implementation studies focus on organizational structures and control, emphasizing the contingency theory, whereas the more recent concept of adaptive strategy implementation takes a more adaptive and accommodating view, with increased attention on the organizational members.

In their paper, Silenskyte and Smale (2020) compared six different theoretical approaches and demonstrated that strategy implementation should be studied by a multilevel investigation approach as the majority of strategy implementation research has mainly been dominated by theorizing that focuses on organizational systems and the power of institutions. Organizations consist of different units and are complex structures of heterogeneous individuals within these units. Therefore, there is a need for multilevel theorization and thinking to understand how these organizations work and how strategies are implemented by taking into consideration the complexity of the organizational structures, including the hierarchies and heterogeneity of the organizational members. Therefore, there has to be an emphasized understanding of the heterogeneity of these individuals and how their identities, perceptions, thinking,

and actions can impact strategy implementation and, therefore, organizational performance.

The next chapter will cover strategy implementation and organizational hierarchy before delving into a detailed chapter on middle management. Since this research focuses on middle management within the organizational hierarchy, it's important to comprehend the strategy implementation process across different hierarchical levels.

2.2 Organizational Hierarchy and Strategy Implementation

In organizations, top management typically sets the strategic objectives and formulates a strategy to follow. However, the strategy implementation process involves all organizational members at each level. It has also been argued that communication is the most basic unit that positions the everyday routines that make up organizational life (Westley, 1990). How strategies are communicated, perceived, and therefore implemented by the members of the organizational hierarchy also depends on which level of hierarchy they exist within the organization. All organizational members are heterogeneous individuals with their perceptions of reality; therefore, different views of the strategy can exist at different levels. Therefore, it is important to understand how these perceptions can differ at each organizational level, how does this affect the strategy implementation process, and how to create a more universal meaning and understanding of strategy within the organisation and its employees.

To investigate the internal heterogeneity across organizational hierarchy and to explore different perceptions of organizational members, Gibson et al. (2019) developed a concept of hierarchical erosion effect. Their research analysed the perceptual differences in organizational hierarchy and found inconsistent perceptions across all organizational levels. This effect means that the difference between organizational levels can be observed in a way that those on higher levels view practices more favourably than those at successive levels. Therefore, the perceptions erode as they move from top to

bottom. Although there are also differences in the views across employees at the same level, there is a higher level of inconsistency as we move up and down the hierarchy and notice how the favourability of practices and strategies diminishes at lower levels. This kind of difference in perceptions can negatively affect organizational performance and growth.

In addition, Gibson et al. (2019) found that one of the reasons for this erosion effect is linked to organizational members' identification and sense of belongingness. It was found that those at the top of the hierarchy identify more with the organization as a whole, whereas those at the bottom identify more with their work team. Therefore, it can be said that an individual's position level within the organizational hierarchy determines how favourably they are to view and respond to organizational practices. They also found out that to reduce the erosion effect; organizations should seek to develop new practices by using front-line employees in the implementation process from the bottom up instead of using only top-to-bottom strategy implementation. In addition, organizations should also share information across all levels more openly by more frequent interactions and communication between employees. According to Westley (1990), conversations are part of organizational routines that form coalitions, as all individuals interact with a finite number of people in finite places and activities. Conversations form a part of the organizational dynamics, and the inclusivity or exclusion from these conversations can impact organizational change, depending on whether the individual has been left demoralized or energized after the conversation. Therefore, when new strategic initiatives are discussed, the conversations determine how these are perceived and the strategic outcomes.

Therefore, communication and conversations amongst employees and management can contribute to the employees overall understanding of the strategy and their perception of it. A concept referred to as 'Line of sight,' which was discussed by Boswell (2006), is the employee's understanding of strategic objectives and how they can contribute. When employees have a line of sight into the organization's strategic objectives, it

enhances the feeling of 'fit' and a sense of significance as employees have a better awareness of the organization's goals and objectives and the 'bigger picture.' This kind of knowledge and understanding of the strategic goals differs between employees across organizational levels, as managers are more likely to have a greater line of sight than employees at the lower levels. However, it will evolve as employees stay longer within the same organization.

In addition, according to Boswell (2006), since the employees at the lower level of the organization hierarchy have less developed line of sight than their superiors, it highlights the importance of having clear and transparent communication through all the hierarchical levels to promote the line of sight and understanding of the strategic intent and the lowest levels. Involving all members of the organization and ensuring that the employees at the lowest levels also understand their significance in the strategy implementation process will enhance their feeling of 'fit' within the organization. In their article, Engberg et al. (2015) discuss the importance of how a well-implemented strategy should encompass all hierarchical levels. Their findings also suggest that the employees in the lower levels are not as aware of the strategic intent of the company as the managers on the top who develop the strategy. However, they are more involved in the implementation of the strategy. Therefore, it is essential to study the different roles of organizational members in the strategy implementation process, and there has been a significant interest in the role of middle management. Middle manager's influence and participation in the implementation of the organizational strategy are important for the firm's performance, as their involvement and commitment to the strategy can either hinder or facilitate the strategy. A study also found that the organizational structure and the number of hierarchical levels influence how middle managers perceive their strategic roles (Wooldridge et al., 2008).

Organizational hierarchies can consist of multiple levels depending on the size of the organization. According to an article by Van Riel et al. (2009), strategy implementation within organizations is a complex process involving employees and managers of all levels

of the organization. Their study and previous studies suggest that middle managers play an essential role in improving the strategically aligned behavior (SAB) in strategy implementation and that the successful implementation of the strategy is influenced by 'hard' and 'soft' factors controlled by managers. The hard factors refer to organizational systems and structure, and the soft factors refer to interactions between managers and employees, which influence how the employees understand, accept, and implement the strategy. Similar findings were made by Tawse and Tabesh (2021), who also found that managers at different levels of organizations are responsible for successfully implementing the strategy through structural and interpersonal managerial actions. Structural actions include policies, controls, and procedures, and interpersonal actions are more informal interactions such as coaching, influencing, and supporting. In addition, dynamic managerial capabilities such as managerial cognition, social capital, and human capital affect these kinds of managerial activities and their effectiveness.

Implementing strategies through organizational hierarchies becomes even more challenging and complex when the organization is large and operating on multinational level. In their research, Värlander et al. (2016) found out that when organizational practices are transferred at a global level, they are adapted and recontextualized based on the individual's constellation of logic, a form of sensemaking. When a practice is transferred from one location to another, individuals within that location create constellations of local logic to make sense of the new practice, and when the practices that are transferred from the origin are closely related to the new location, the individuals in that location require less recontextualization. However, when radical differences exist between the practices, the individuals must recontextualize the practice to fit their context. The recontextualization of practices can also occur by only altering the meaning or the action alone; however, in extreme cases, individuals recontextualize both. In addition, although the recontextualization of practices is more likely to happen in global transfers, it can also apply in local contexts if the organizations or their different units working together have different practices. For managers, it is important to identify

these recontextualizations, particularly when enacting a strategy across multiple locations.

In addition, Värlander et al. (2016) found that a global transfer of practices requires a degree of adaptation that considers social, cultural, and geographical context. Evidence suggests that for practices to thrive in new, diverse environments, some adaptations to practices are necessary. Individuals within different locations recontextualize the enactment of practices based on their context, and this recontextualization is based on individuals' interpretation of what makes sense to them. They also suggest that individuals at different locations base their meaning of the practice on logic.

2.3 Middle management

There is a broad understanding of how middle management is perceived within the organizational hierarchy. However, it can be understood to extend from managers below top management and to managers above supervision level and frontline employees within the organization (Wooldridge et al., 2008). There has been significant interest in middle managers' role in the strategy implementation process and their importance in influencing the process, and the outcomes have already been established in previous strategy implementation research. Due to the nature of hierarchies and how information is communicated between different levels, middle managers have a unique position within companies as they can influence every direction, meaning upwards, downwards, and laterally, which is important from a strategy implementation perspective.

Floyd and Wooldridge (1992) identified four different types of middle management's involvement in a strategy, of which two are upward influences and two are downward influences. The two upward influences are referred to as championing alternatives and synthesizing information. Championing alternatives is the function of middle management persuading and communicating new strategic ideas to higher management. When communicating with the top management, the middle managers also combine

different evaluations and interpretations of internal and external events, which in turn can affect the top management's perceptions and lead to a strategic change. This process is called synthesizing information. One of the downward influences middle managers have is identified as facilitating adaptability by encouraging positive change, adapting appropriately, and promoting flexibility. The last strategic function, middle managers implement is a deliberate strategy, which is aligning employees and organizational operations to follow the organizational strategy and the intention set by top management. These activities carried out by middle managers can vary depending on the firm type and their strategic goals.

Previous research has already established the importance of middle managers' strategic roles in influencing strategies. As companies have become more complex and geographically distributed, middle managers' strategic importance will continue to increase (Balogun & Johnston, 2005). According to Weiser et al. (2020), early strategy implementation research focused mainly on top and middle management's involvement in strategy implementation, and their research discovered that the middle management's resistance or acceptance of the strategic plans seriously impacts how the strategies are implemented. Schuler et al. (2023) also made a similar finding in their research about the key role of middle management, their inclination to either support or resist strategies and the influence their perspective can have on their subordinates. Some of the middle managers within organizations are in boundary-spanning positions, which means that they mediate between the organization's internal and external environments and, therefore, have more significant strategic influence than others and are essential for strategic renewal (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1997).

Westley (1990) made an important finding in his research about middle management inclusivity and dominance in strategic conversations with the top management. When middle managers are left feeling excluded and dominated in conversations, they are left feeling demoralized. On the other hand, when middle managers are included and allowed to dominate or at least partly dominate, the conversation leaves them feeling

energized. Therefore, how they participated in these conversations and how they were left feeling impacted their strategic initiatives and how they were implemented. Therefore, the top management must recognize the strategic importance of middle management and their involvement in strategic conversations, allowing them to express their ideas and initiatives.

Multiple studies have made similar findings about the importance of middle managers and their central role in strategy implementation, and their position within the organization is well understood. According to Ahearne et al. (2014), the middle manager's role within organizations is to give and receive direction, as they sit between the frontline workers and the senior management. In addition, middle managers are embedded within organizations through formal structures and informal networks, which are important in strategy implementation processes. In addition to communicating and influencing the strategy implementation downward in the organizational hierarchy, middle managers can have an upward influence in promoting strategic alternatives to senior managers from the bottom up, which can also be beneficial for strategic planning. In addition, because of middle managers' unique position acting in the middle and being involved with different hierarchical levels and operations within the organization, they have greater insight into what is going on, which enables them to see new possibilities and, therefore, envision new innovative ideas which they can communicate to top management (Huy, 2001). Friesl et al. (2021) made a similar finding in their research, as they also found that middle managers have an important role in acting in the middle as they facilitate the strategy downwards and influence the strategy upwards.

In addition, because of their unique position in the middle, middle managers usually have the broadest social networks within the company, which makes them well-suited for communicating any proposed changes within the organization (Huy, 2001). Therefore, they are in the best position to get everyone on board during the strategic change. Research by Floyd and Wooldridge (1997) found a positive relationship between organizational performance and middle managers' downward and upward influence.

They also found that higher levels of performance are associated with the upward influence when it is more varied based on the middle manager's knowledge and expertise and when the downward influence is more uniform across all units of the organization. Furthermore, during a radical change, middle managers are the ones who create a supportive work environment, ensuring the well-being of employees and ensuring the continuity of business operations without disruptions or disturbance to the overall performance (Huy, 2001).

One of the ways middle managers can influence strategy implementation through improved performance levels is by increasing employee motivation. According to Van Riel et al. (2009), one of the key performance indicators is how well the employees are motivated to perform their tasks. Middle managers can increase motivation by setting goals and giving employees a clear rationale. This can lead to more successful strategy implementation when employees understand that achieving their goals is worthwhile and attainable. In addition, improving the organization's communication climate, employees feel valued, and allowing them to participate in important decision-making and having their opinions heard leads to greater commitment, improved performance, and better implementation. To further stimulate SAB, managers must inform the employees about the company's strategy and ensure that the employees understand their role in it and develop the employee capabilities, for example, through training and mentoring, which also, as a result, leads to more successful strategy implementation. Therefore, motivation, capability development, and understanding the organization's strategy lead to a better implementation within the organization. Moreover, it is the middle managers who have an important role in ensuring that these are achieved.

Middle management's importance and role within organizations have been well established in organizational studies; however, further research is required to understand how middle managers and their practices can enact strategy implementation, their influence over other employees, and their contributions to the strategy. The next

chapter will discuss some middle management practices used in the strategy implementation process.

2.3.1 Middle management practices

A lot of previous strategy implementation research has mainly focused on the factors that either contribute to the strategy implementation or inhibit it from happening. Research by Merkus et al. (2019) found that in order to enact the strategy implementation process depends a lot on the routine practices of the organizational members. Routine practices are the daily tasks and flexible building blocks of an organization that are performed daily, and middle managers have an important role within organizations in influencing the routine practices of employees and, therefore, their behaviour to ensure successful strategy implementation. The challenge for middle managers lies in employees' willingness or resistance to change their routine practices.

Practices and behaviour can also change within international organizations based on the employee's geographical location and their colleague's perceptions of them. Research carried out by Silenskyte et al. (2022) found that employees' practices and behaviours changed based on the ascribed identity of their foreign colleagues, which can have negative implications on the strategy implementation across the multinational organization. Their research focus was on strategy implementation in a trans-national multinational corporation, and it studied a multinational corporation where Finnish and Russian employees had different views of their Indian colleagues, some being socially constructed uniform negative representations of Indians, which hinders the transnational collaboration between these colleagues.

Research by Huy (2011) found that during a top-down strategy implementation process, middle managers' group focus emotions based on their social identities caused them to either support or dismiss a strategic initiative, and by understating middle managers' group focus emotions, top managers can adjust strategy implementation actions

accordingly. Middle managers' emotions are important in empirical studies as individual's emotions can influence their thinking and behaviour, which can affect organizational performance. In addition, because of middle managers' position within the organizations, their emotions can also influence other employees thinking and behaviour, which in turn can impact the strategy implementation. Therefore, it is vital for top managers to pay attention to and understand middle managers' emotions because of their influence over other organizational members and their strategy implementation behaviour.

Research by Engle et al. (2017) found that four common middle manager practices facilitate their commitment to implementing new innovations, strategies, or practices. One of the components is information diffusion, which is middle managers spreading information to employees through different methods of communication such as meetings, huddles, electronic communication such as emails, and coaching. Another component is information synthesis, which is synthesizing general information into more specific and relevant facts, which middle managers pass on to employees. Strategy and day-to-day activity mediation are the framework for identifying tasks to improve employees' capabilities. Middle managers can do this by training, coaching, and providing resources and support. Selling innovation implementation is the last component, which is middle managers' methods of encouraging employees' engagement in innovation and creating an atmosphere that facilitates innovation and improvement. All these activities were found to be somewhat interrelated, and the middle manager's influence is greater when they build on each other.

As proven by previous studies, middle managers are key players in organizations, and they are also important in the strategy implementation process as they can influence others through different practices. The following section will discuss sensemaking as a practice in organizations and how middle managers use sensemaking.

2.4 Sensemaking in organizations

Sensemaking is a cognitive process where individuals within an organisation construct meaning of the reality and understanding of what it means (Schuler et al., 2023). The information received by the individual as the "sense maker" can come through many different channels, which can be spoken and written, or formal and informal (Balogun & Johnson, 2005). Sensemaking has been found to have an important role in the strategy implementation process, as the way organisational members view the strategy and essentially make sense of it impacts the effectiveness and the outcome of the strategy (Weiser et al., 2020). Therefore, it can be understood that the reality of organisational members' construct of the strategy may or may not align with the intended strategy and, therefore, affects their alignment with the strategy and its enactment. In addition, individuals within the organisation can have different interpretations of reality, and these different constructions of reality can also create organisational reality, which consists of all kinds of different meanings and interpretations.

According to Weiser et al. (2020), organisational sensemaking in the strategy implementation process became more popular during the adaptive turn of strategy implementation research during the turn of the millennium. There was an increased interest and emphasis on how people within organisations make sense of the strategy during the implementation process and how it is enacted in practice. It was found that strategies are often not implemented as intended due to the complex interplay between sense-giving and sensemaking between organisational members. Sensegiving is a process used by organisational members and stakeholders such as leaders, middle managers, and employees in attempts to influence each other through persuasion and language (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). Sensemaking is likely to occur in organisations during strategic change or when surprising or confusing events happen; as a result, the organisational members try to make sense of what occurs (Maitlis, 2005).

When there is a change in the strategic direction within the organisation, sense-giving and sensemaking play an important role in ensuring that all organisational members are aligned with a similar understanding and perception of where the company is headed. Those within leadership roles, such as middle managers, have an important role in sense giving to influence the perception of other organisational members to achieve the desired strategic goal and have a shared definition of organisational reality (Maitlis, 2005). In addition, according to Sonenshein and Dolakia (2012), strategic change requires adaptation, which can often create stress and lead to resistance. Social psychology research has shown that individuals respond and adapt to change more positively when they can connect it to the value system, understand it, and see more benefits of the change rather than focus on the downsides. In psychological studies, meaning-making means constructing an understanding of an event or change that has occurred. Likewise, in organisational studies, sensemaking can be applied in a similar way to help understand organisational strategy implementation.

2.4.1 Sensemaking and middle management

There has been an increasing interest in the academic literature on middle managers' role in sensemaking and sense-giving, however this area of research is still somewhat limited. The early research in sensemaking established the importance of sensemaking for organisational learning, however this was thought to be only the responsibility of the top management (Westley, 1990). However, the increased interest in middle management and the realisation of their importance in initiating strategies have led to more research in this area. Further research has found out how through sensemaking, higher management, middle management, and the employees at lower levels can influence the strategy implementation process and the outcomes (Friesl et al., 2021), and a lot of the previous sensemaking research has focused on sensemaking in a specific context which is mostly around organisational change. Therefore, the extent to which middle managers apply sensemaking through daily practices to influence strategy implementation is still a less developed area in organisational research.

Sonenshein & Dolakia (2012) highlighted the importance of communication from managers during the change and the implementation process as it helps employees sensemaking through sense giving, resulting in better adaptation when, for example, implementing a new strategy. This also helps the individuals within the organisation understand how and why the organisation is changing and the new strategic direction. The manager's way of communication also affects the way the employees view the change. Maitlis and Lawrence (2007) found that managers do not always engage in sense giving, although it is considered a critical activity in organisations and central leadership functions. They identified two sense-giving triggers and enablers for managers. They identified that managers' sense-giving is triggered by the uncertain perception of the issue and by the complex stakeholder environment. They found out that managers' level of expertise on the issue and organisational performance in the issue domain both act as enablers for sense giving. When all these were present, the leaders were more likely to engage in sense-giving; however, when none of these were present, managers were unlikely to engage in sense-giving actively. Therefore, there is a need to explore further how sense-giving by middle managers can enhance the strategy implementation process and how to actively engage managers in sense-giving through daily practices.

Rouleau and Balogun (2011) made four important findings in their research about how middle managers influence others through sensemaking. They found out that in order to accomplish their strategic roles, middle managers enact sensemaking by discursive competencies, including performing the conversation and setting the scene. In other words, their strategic sensemaking can be more influential through the language they use and their ability to identify and connect relevant people together and enable them to connect with the interests of others. In addition, they also found out that middle managers' sensemaking is also more influential when they have deep knowledge and understanding of the organisation and others. By symbolically positioning themselves in a way that is cognizant of different power or status, they can also have more influence

over others by sensemaking. Therefore, it can be stated that influential sensemaking is about saying the right things in the right way to the right people in the right place.

Studies have found that managers can influence employees' sensemaking through sense-giving; however, they can never fully control the implementation process (Friesl et al., 2021). Sonenshein & Dolakia (2012) also made an interesting finding about employee behaviour during strategic change, suggests that how employees interpret the organisation's strategic change determines how committed they are to implementing the change. Their study also found that employees also influence one another in addition to managers, which often contradicts how managers influence others. When employees are viewed as assets and by facilitating meaning-making, their view of the strategic change improves, enabling them to implement the change. Therefore, it is crucial for managers to be aware of how employees can influence each other and to be able to practice sensemaking in a way that is effective in influencing employees in a way that aligns with strategic goals and, therefore, reinforces strategically aligned behaviour.

Schuler et al. (2023) found that middle managers can create separate or shared realities of a strategy and that their strategy implementation can also be affected by their sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes towards new strategies. When there is ambiguity about the strategy, middle managers tend to discern their peer's stance on the strategy and their strategy implementation behaviour, and therefore, their views and opinions of the strategy are influenced by them. Middle managers regularly engage in conversations and interactions with each other, which influences their sensemaking of the strategy, which could affect how they view the strategy, which in turn impacts their implementation behaviour. Therefore, the horizontal interactions, actions, behaviour, language, and shared experiences contribute to the sensemaking development of middle managers (Balogun & Johnston, 2005).

Research by Rouleau (2005) demonstrated how strategic sensegiving and sensemaking are initiated by middle managers through daily routines, practices, and conversations.

Therefore, strategic sense-giving and sensemaking happen through micro-practices that are repeated daily and put into action by middle managers and their communication and interactions with people. The four micro practices practised by middle managers that were identified in this research were translating the new orientation, overcoming the strategy, disciplining the client, and justifying the change. It is these actions that may not be considered to be strategic as such. However, it can be understood that these actions do have significant strategic importance. This research took the perspective of strategy implementation by middle managers during a strategic change and how middle managers use sensegiving and sensemaking to influence stakeholders, such as clients in particular. This paper aims to expand on these findings, how micro-practices and daily routines constitute sense-giving and sensemaking, and how middle management can influence strategically aligned behaviour to implement strategies in employees.

Therefore, studying middle managers in strategy implementation is important because of their unique position within the organisation and their ability to enhance the strategy implementation process by facilitating strategic change to improve organisational performance. In addition, because most of the research around sensemaking and middle management has focused on organisational change, it will enhance the existing knowledge when this subject is studied in a more general context and by studying an organisation that is not going through a radical change in its strategic direction. However, to engage with the implementation of the current organisational strategy and enhance performance, it is important that all managers actively engage in sensemaking daily because sensemaking is embedded in daily routines, conversations, and interactions.

Extensive research on middle management and sensemaking has already established their importance in organizations. However, we have yet to learn how sensemaking can be used by middle managers in their daily practices in strategy implementation within companies. Therefore, further research is needed to learn more about how middle managers use sensemaking through their routines and interactions and how it helps in strategy implementation. Therefore, this research aims to fill this gap in research and

add to the existing literature by further enabling the understanding of middle management utilization of sensemaking in strategy implementation as illustrated below in figure 1. The following section will introduce the methodology used in this research and outline the steps followed to collect, analyse and interpret data.

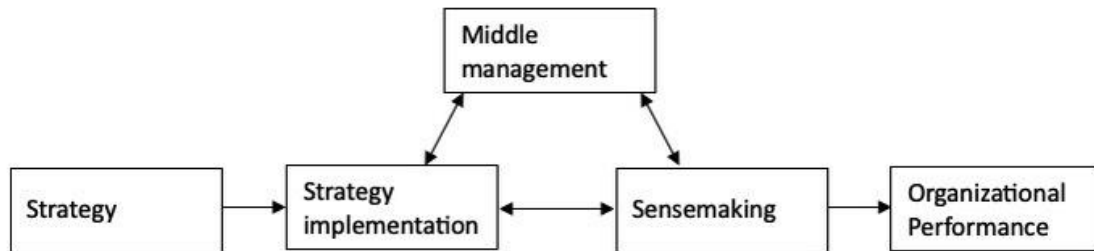


Figure 1. Framework illustrating how strategy implementation, middle management and sensemaking drive organizational performance.

The next chapter discusses the methodological approach chosen for this research.

3 Methodology

This section outlines the methods of how this research was conducted and why certain methodological approach was chosen for this research. Therefore, this section includes the research methods and research philosophy, introduction to the case company, data collection and analysis methods.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how middle managers use sensemaking in implementing a strategy and how they can be used as a management practice to affect employees and therefore improve the strategy implementation. Therefore, this research follows an abductive approach, which combines induction and deduction, and makes interpretations and comparison between the theory and data (Saunders et al., 2023) The abductive approach allows for flexibility in the research to move between the data and the theory and therefore enables for the identification of patterns (Saunders et al, 2023).

This research adopts an interpretative research philosophy commonly used in qualitative organizational research. Interpretative research philosophy assumption is that all individuals have their own socially constructed subjective meaning of the reality based on their personal experiences and that individuals are continuously making sense of the social world around them, constructing their realities, and the researcher has to try to understand the research subjects' point of view (Saunders et al., 2007).

A qualitative research approach was used in this study as qualitative research helps to understand the complexity of social phenomena and human behaviour by exploring subjective meanings and interpretations in natural settings (Saunders et al., 2023) Qualitative research is holistic by nature which means that it aims to capture the context the phenomenon that is investigated, which allows for an in-depth exploration of individuals' perspectives, motivations, emotions, and social interactions. (Saunders et al., 2023) Qualitative research was chosen for this research due to its many advantages to

explore a phenomenon. Qualitative research provides detailed and rich data and therefore allows for a better understanding of the studied phenomena and enables deeper exploration of a topic where there is little existing knowledge.

According to Dubois & Gadde (2002), in order to expand the understanding and the knowledge of the already existing theory and the studied phenomena in a case study, following an abductive approach is the most useful method because it allows the researcher to move between the theory, the case, the empirical data, and the framework. This process is also known as systematic combining, as all the research components evolve simultaneously. The two main foundations for systematic combining are matching and direction and redirection. The process of going back and forth between the different research components is called matching, which is one of the foundations for systematic combining. Another foundation is direction and redirection, which means that multiple sources of data and knowledge may lead to a discovery of new dimension which may cause a redirection of the study. Therefore, the key to a systematic combining or abductive method, is the evolving framework. Therefore, following this kind of framework was chosen for this research as it allows for investigation of this phenomena by simultaneously moving between the data collected in this case study research as well as the already existing theory which in the end leads to evolved knowledge of the chosen topic as well as allows for exploration of new findings.

According to Saunders et al (2023) a case study research studies a phenomenon in a real life setting where the case could be either a person, organization, or an event. Therefore, to answer the research question of how sensemaking is used by middle management in strategy implementation process, a case study was chosen for this research. The use of a single case study sets the research boundaries and allows the researcher to study the phenomenon by using a real life context which can generate more in depth insights leading to theory development (Saunders et al., 2023). This research considered the case company as the context for this single case study, and the middle managers were studied as individual embedded units within the case company. Therefore, the units of

observation were the middle managers, which allowed the research to analyse how sensemaking is or is not used by middle managers and how this impacts the organisational outcomes (Saunders et al., 2023).

3.1 The case company

The company used in this real-life case study is a national estate agency firm, that offers residential sales and lettings services, helping people in buying, selling, renting and letting out properties. This estate agency is one of the biggest names in the country offering comprehensive estate agency services and has 13 branches in different locations across the country, including big cities and small towns. The geographical location and where they operate is the only thing that differentiates each branch as otherwise, they are identical in terms of the services they offer and the structure of the team within each branch. Every branch has a branch manager who oversees each specific branch, and in addition every branch has a lettings manager, sales negotiators, and lettings negotiators. All 13 branches have the same managing director who the branch managers report to.

This estate agency offers its clients all-inclusive estate agency service and one of their selling points is their professional marketing package which includes different marketing tools to really make the properties stand out and to reach the largest number of potential buyers. Providing first-class customer service is one of the priorities for this firm and the professional and dedicated teams are always there to support and help clients throughout the whole process. In addition, they offer their clients different online tools which they can log into and use whenever they want. Their pricing is not the cheapest however it is still competitive and within the mid-range in comparison to other estate agents.

This company was chosen for this research because the estate agency industry is very competitive which means that different estate agents must be able to create a strategy

to secure more new business in order to generate income. The company generates its main income by residential property sales and rental property management. The company's goal is to increase its income and profits annually by generating more business by obtaining more clients. Each branch is given a target every year based on previous years' performance and taking into consideration internal and external changes that may occur.

Each branch manager acts as a middle manager who is responsible for running the branch and ensuring that the targets are met. Branch managers have regular meetings with the managing director to have an overview of how the firm overall and every specific branch is doing. The performance is reviewed quarterly however there are also weekly meetings. Branch managers are therefore in charge of communicating the goals and the strategy to their own teams within each branch.

The interviewees in this research are branch managers which consisted of both male and female managers between 1 - 15 years in the role. By interviewing different individuals rather than ones that are equally alike allows for more variety in the samples and therefore gain more insightful data and have the possibility to compare the answers and identify similarities and differences in the answers and to compare them with the theory.

3.2 Data collection

Qualitative research uses non numerical data which can be collected by various methods such as interviews, observation, or focus groups for example. (Saunders et al., 2023) The primary data in this research was collected by conducting semi structured interviews with open ended questions. The benefit of using semi structured interviews as a data collection method is that it allows for a better and understanding for how the interviewees interpretation and meaning of what is happening. The interviews were held with 6 branch managers over a video call which were recorded, and the interviews were

conducted during January and February 2024, and lasted from 22 minutes to 36 minutes, as summarised in the table below.

Table 1. Interviewee information table

Interviewee	Time in the role	Interview date	Length of the interview
Branch Manager 1	1 year 2 months	19.1.2024	25 minutes
Branch Manager 2	2 years 6 months	26.1.2024	33 minutes
Branch Manager 3	9 years	31.1.2024	22 minutes
Branch Manager 4	10 years 3 months	7.2.2024	29 minutes
Branch Manager 5	12 years 8 months	27.2.2024	36 minutes
Branch Manager 6	15 years	29.2.2024	31 minutes

Each interviewee was asked the same questions in the same order, however following a semi-structured interview allowed the interviewer to ask possible additional questions in case further elaboration was required. The interview questions were given to the interviewees prior to the interviews to allow them some time to prepare for the interview and to ensure that they understood the questions. The interview questions were built around three central themes of this research in order to fill in the research gap and support in developing an answer to the research question. Therefore, the interview questions focused on finding out more about middle management, strategy implementation, and sensemaking. The interview questions can be found in the appendix at the end of this research paper. The interview language was English. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and coded afterwards.

In order to support the findings from the interviews and to reduce potential bias, this research also used data triangulation to enhance the validity and credibility of the data (Saunders et al., 2023). Therefore, to gain greater insight into each branch manager's role and use of sensemaking in the strategy implementation process, each branch's

performance was also compared in line with the interviews with each manager. The secondary data used in this research includes each branch's performance against their targets over the year of 2023. However this secondary data could not be shown in this research as it is confidential information that must be kept internal within the organization, and any financial information of the company could not be revealed in this research. However, to understand whether the branches are performing, it is measured by looking at whether each branch has hit its targets over the past 12 months.

3.3 Data Analysis

The organisational world is socially constructed, and the people within the organisations constructing the organisational realities are "knowledgeable agents" who are given voice in organisational studies data collection and analysis, which enables the development of existing concepts as well as the discovery of new concepts (Gioia et al., 2012). The data was analysed using the Gioia method, which is compatible with qualitative research and helps build on a theory and understand why or how a particular organisational phenomenon occurs (Magnani & Gioia, 2023). Gioia method is a rigorous data analysis method that follows a systematic approach by assembling data into structures. These structures or categories are known as first-order codes, which are informant-based, and second-order themes, which are researcher-based (Magnani & Gioia, 2023). This kind of interpretative research that includes informants- and researcher-based perspectives gives the research a multifaceted view and is grounded on the informants' interpretations (Gioia, 2020). In addition, considering both the informants and the researcher's perspectives enables high-quality qualitative research, which systematically demonstrates the links between the data, theory, and new concepts (Gioia et al., 2012).

The informants were the interviewees, who are the employees of the case company, all working as middle managers. These middle managers are organisational members who have all constructed their version of the organisational reality. Therefore, by interviewing them, allowed me to give them a voice and express their realities and experiences,

leading to our findings. According to Magnani and Gioia (2023), the Gioia method combines data and theory to develop explanations of the phenomena that are being explored. Ultimately, a successful application of this model should result in findings that affirm existing concepts, extend knowledge, and generate new concepts.

According to Gioia et al. (2012), the first-order codes or categories are informant-based, which emerge from the interviews, and the first-order analysis involves narrowing the informants' terms and phrases into categories. These first-order categories are then organised into 2nd order themes and move into more theoretical analysis. These second-order themes are further narrowed down into aggregate dimensions. Once the first-order categories, second-order themes and aggregate dimensions have been identified, we can develop a data structure, a visual representation to demonstrate how the raw data was analysed and how it progressed from multiple concepts into a few groups of different themes. The representation of the data structure is illustrated below in Figure 2.

According to Magnani and Gioia (2023), this kind of data structure allows one to draw findings from multiple perspectives and show evidence to support the conclusions from the findings. To gather the first-order categories, the data collected from the interviews was coded and narrowed down to categories. The second-order themes were gathered by sorting and reducing first-order categories, which were then aggregated into the aggregate dimensions by also combining theory and evidence using systematic combining following the abductive approach.

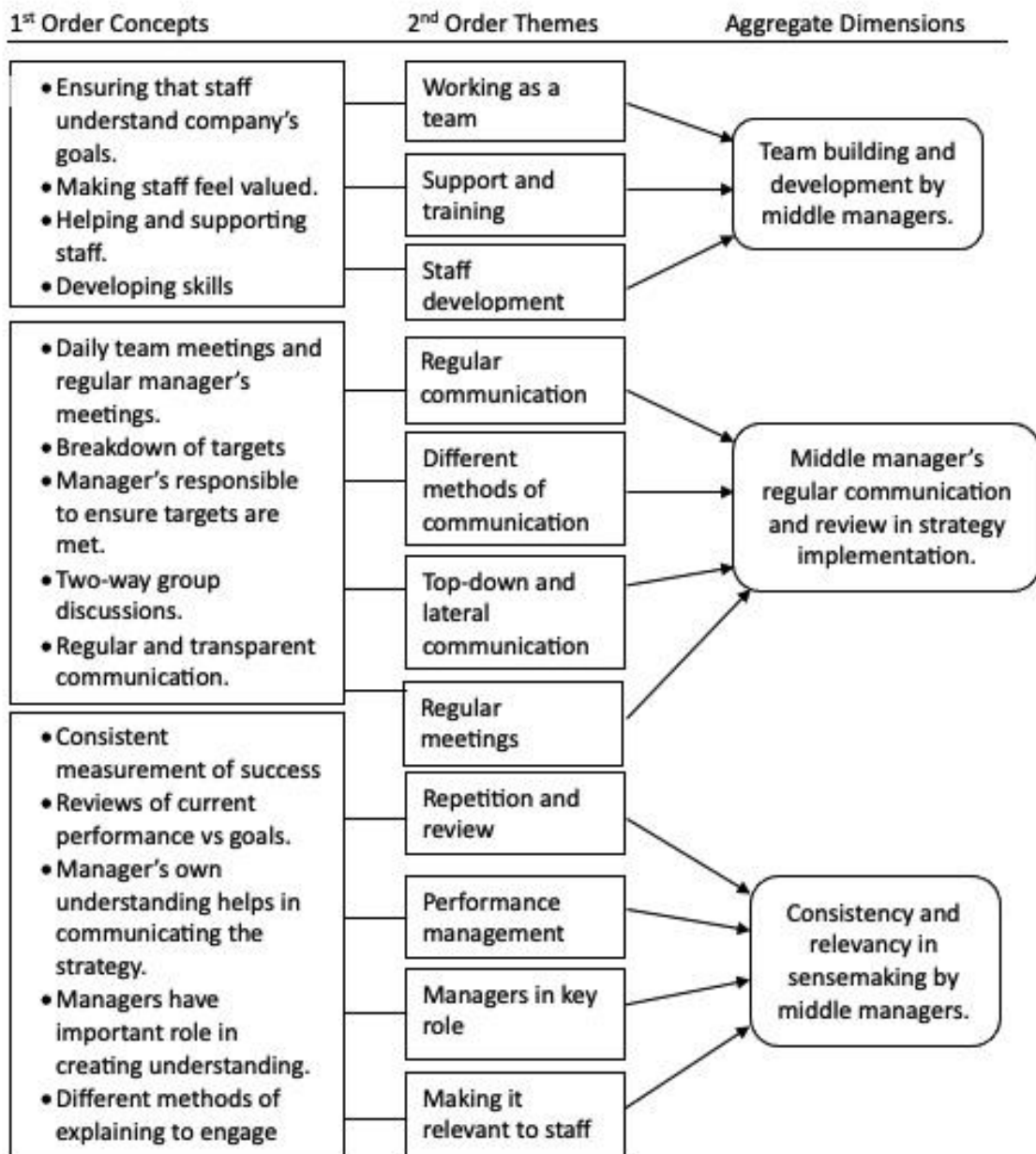


Figure 2. The data structure

Following the Gioia method (2012), enabled the movement between the data and the theory from the literature and explore any new emergent concepts. As this research followed an abductive method, the data and the literature were considered alongside each other. The following section will discuss the findings and will explain each emergent theme in more detail, discuss the links between the data and the theory and any existing

concepts from the literature review, and highlight any new emergent concepts that may have created new insights.

3.4 The credibility of the research

According to Saunders et al. (2007), to evaluate the credibility of the research design, it is essential to consider the research's reliability and validity. The reliability of the study refers to how consistently the same data collection method can produce the same results if the research is repeated under the same conditions. The validity of the study is concerned with the accuracy of the measurement and the intended results.

To ensure the validity of this research, interviews were chosen as the data collection method because it is the most appropriate method for this kind of research type. The interviewees were selected randomly because each possible interviewee that could have been chosen is working in an identical role. To ensure the reliability of the research, each interview was conducted under the same conditions and followed the same method, which was a Zoom video call, and followed the same interview question structure. All interviewees were also given the questions a day before the interview to give them time to think about their answers.

4. Findings

This section summarises the main findings from this research and discusses the results of from the data collection. The findings are divided into different sections including findings around middle management, strategy implementation and sensemaking, therefore following the same structure as the interviews and staying consistent with the structure.

4.1 Middle management

When the interviewees were asked about their roles as middle managers their answers were consistent throughout all the interviews. Every interviewee understood the importance of their role and shared the same understanding that it is important in their roles to motivate the staff and make them feel valued and supported and assisting them with personal development and growth within the business, which will in turn result in improved performance and business growth.

Branch Manager 1: *“I think one of the most important parts of my role is to support my team and ensure that they fully understand their roles and that they are capable of doing what is expected of them and understand what the strategy is. I think it is important to develop the team and help everyone to reach their full potential. I also find it important to keep communicating with them throughout the day.”*

For branch managers it is important to ensure that their teams are capable of doing their jobs and that they understand their place in the team and the importance of their roles in generating more business for the branch as a whole. When individual team members understand their roles and what they are working towards, it enables the business growth for the branch and also allows individual team members to develop themselves to reach their full potential and also earn more commission which does motivate them to do even better. In addition, because the branch managers are responsible for the

individual branch performance, it is very important for them to have a fully functioning team where everyone is working towards the same goal and understands their role in it and the importance they have.

However, another interesting finding was that couple of the managers also said that being a middle manager can also be a lonely or solitary role, which can be very challenging at times with having a lot of responsibility on one person. However, the challenge seems to arise when there are team members who are not as motivated or committed to do well, and therefore it can become a very challenging role at times if the manager is not getting support or engagement from the team, it becomes difficult to manage a busy branch when all the responsibility falls into one person.

Branch Manager 3 *“A constant battle of priorities in what can feel at times to be quite a solitary role.”*

Because each branch manager is responsible for making sure that the branch is hitting targets it is important for them to ensure that their teams understand what the targets are and how to achieve them. The key is constant communication with the teams and ensuring that everyone is hitting their individual targets and making sure that they are getting the support they need.

Branch Manager 5 *“We usually start off our day with a team meeting. Some days we can get very busy and with some of the team also spending time outside the office it is important to check on with them and keep communicating throughout the day.”*

4.2 Strategy implementation

When asked about the company's strategy the answers were consistent throughout the interviews and all managers understood what the company's strategy and goals are, and all of them also thought that everyone within the firm has a good understanding of the

strategic objectives. Primarily some of the main goals are to increase profitability, improve market share, and continuously grow the business year on year.

Branch Manager 5: *"I believe everyone in the firm has a good sense of strategic goals through consistency of measurement and communication."*

Some of the branch managers mentioned transparency and explained that by having great flow of communication to both direction from top to bottom and bottom up helps with ensuring that there is a good consistent understanding of the strategy, and it also helps to keep everyone involved in the development of strategy. The strategy is broken down to monthly, weekly, and daily targets which helps each branch to keep track of their progress. There is a high level of transparency of how the branches are performing individually and every branch can also see how other branches are performing against their targets.

In addition, all managers described one of the most important aspects of their roles to help staff to understand their roles and what their team and individual targets are, and what is the overall company's strategy and what is the role they play in that. All managers start of their day with a team meeting, going over the previous day and discussing the goals and objectives for the day ahead. Most managers also have an afternoon catch up with their teams. Overall, all branches follow a daily structure which again emphasizes that the daily performed routine practices are the building blocks of the business that enact the strategy implementation.

Branch Manager 2: *"We have targets that are set out for the month which we can then break down to daily targets which are kept up to date at each daily meeting. We also make sure everyone in branch has an understanding of the targets and what is needed to achieve this."*

There are various methods of communication mainly because of the company is operating nationally in different locations. All individual branches have their own in person face to face team meetings daily with all employees at the same location. Branch managers have biweekly meetings with other managers and the managing director to go over any key information and changes, these meetings are done over a Zoom video call. Branch managers also meet up occasionally in person for a full one-day meeting to go over the year-to-date performance and discuss other important changes in the business. There are also regular email updates from the senior management to all branches via email to keep them up to date on performance against targets and any new important business updates.

Branch Manager 4 *“Mixed methods of communication mainly in person or through email, regular bi-weekly video calls and occasional managers meetings every quarter or 6 months.”*

The managers also shared a similar understanding of what the current strategy implementation process is and what their roles in the strategy implementation are. They all agreed that communication is important to pass messages from senior management to their teams, and to ensure that everyone understands the strategy and the targets. They also think it is important to support and drive their teams as it is also their responsibility to ensure the branch targets are met.

Branch Manager 3: *“Each branch manager is responsible to ensure their team and branch deliver a satisfactory performance to contribute to the overall strategic targets. “*

Only one of the interviewed managers said that that the current strategy implementation process could be improved by more direct communication from senior management to the lower-level staff and more training for staff. No other ways to improve current strategy implementation was mentioned by other branch managers which means that they are all mostly satisfied with the current implementation process.

4.3 Sensemaking

When the interviewees were asked questions about their own understanding of the strategy and what helps them to best understand it, it became clear from the answers that by having consistency in the message, having group discussions, and reviewing performance versus goals helps managers understand the strategy and how it is working. All the managers agreed that they have an important role in translating the strategy to others and most importantly to their direct reports. Most of them also explained that what helps them the most to explain and translate the strategy to others is by having a good understanding of the strategy themselves and by having a positive view of it. They also agreed that by keeping the communication and the message consistent and by having regular reviews of the current performance against targets helps everyone else in the company as well to understand the current strategy and how it is working.

Branch Manager 6: *"I think what helps everyone to understand the strategy is the consistency of message, how it is delivered and different communication channels."*

When asked about what helps them in creating a shared understanding of strategy, an interesting point was made by one of the branch managers who said that one of the most important ways he thinks helps in the understanding of the strategy is by making it relevant to the staff at the bottom. For example, instead of giving them number and figures shared and distributed by the senior management, it is important to keep the staff motivated and engaged by for example explaining to them how much commission they will make by achieving the targets. This means a lot more to them than looking at graphs and figures they may not fully understand.

Branch Manager 6: *"Changing the approach on how it is explained, instead of being all numbers, make it relevant to the staff, for example, how much commission will you*

achieve if the target is met. I think this helps keep them motivated as there is a physical figure for them.”

When the interviewees were asked about how they would explain strategy to others, the main points that were raised were having regular meetings and reviewing the current performance against targets. In addition, the delivery of the message has to stay consistent and be relevant to the staff to help them understand it. Most managers had the view that the strategy has been understood if the targets are being met everyone within the teams are working together to achieve them. In addition, another measure of successful strategy implementation which was mentioned by couple managers is having satisfied clients, positive reviews and feedback.

Branch Manager 1: *“The strategy is working when we are consistently hitting our targets and growing the business year on year. Also when we get positive feedback and our clients are happy with the service also means we are doing well.”*

It became evident from the interviews there is a lot of horizontal communication between the middle managers which means that they can have some influence over each other’s sensemaking. However, the teams within each branch are receiving most of the communication of the strategy directly by their branch manager. Therefore, the branch managers are primarily in charge how their own teams view and perceive the organizational strategy, because the direct communication between the senior management and lower-level staff is limited. This is why the regular team meetings, reviews and updates are crucial to keep the staff engaged and motivated.

Branch managers also highlighted the importance of having a team of similar values and who work well together as a team. If one of the team members is disengaged and does not view the company and its strategy positively can have a negative influence over the whole team which can impact the strategy implementation process. Also, when comparing the performance of each branch over the past 12 months, it became clear

that those teams who work well together as a team and have been in the business for longer are performing better as a branch. When there are new starts with less experience, or disengaged staff, can have an adverse effect on the performance and the implementation of the strategy. The managers experience and length of time in the role can also have an impact on the performance and strategy implementation.

To summarise the findings, branch managers have an important role within company as part of the strategy implementation process as they are responsible in ensuring the performance and profitability of their own branches. To ensure successful implementation of strategies in the case company, consists of three key areas that are the responsibility of middle managers. Firstly, they are responsible of building and developing their teams, so that everyone within the team understands their roles and are all working towards the same goal while improving their competencies. Secondly, as a part of the strategy implementation, regular and transparent communication is important, as middle managers are responsible communicating strategy to their teams, and their ability to translate it and make it relevant to them contributes to the shared understanding of the strategy. Constant review of performance against targets is also important, in order to understand where the focus must be in order to ensure that the targets are met. And lastly, consistency and relevancy are important in the sensemaking to create a shared understanding of the strategy and engaging all staff in the process. Therefore, sensemaking by middle managers is the key in the strategy implementation process which happens through the daily actions and processes.

5 Discussion

This research aimed to answer the research question of how middle managers use sensemaking in strategy implementation and mainly how middle managers use sensemaking in their daily practices and interactions. As discussed in the findings section, by interviewing middle managers of this national estate agency company and finding out more about their roles, the importance and challenges, and daily life at work, this research revealed some significant findings that contribute to the overall research field of middle management and sensemaking in organizations.

As found out from the interviews, some of the critical aspects of being a middle manager are motivating and developing the employees so that the business can reach its strategic objectives and business goals. These findings are consistent with Van Riel et al. (2009) research, as discussed in the literature review, which confirms that there is a link between performance and the middle manager's ability to motivate their employees and help them understand the objectives. Employee motivation was found to be one of the key performance indicators, and motivating employees was emphasized as a part of strategy implementation to improve performance. Middle managers can increase motivation by setting attainable goals and a clear rationale, which was also found in the interviews in this research. In the case company, middle managers do this by breaking down the strategic objectives into smaller more manageable tasks which are performed daily. By having more attainable goals helps employees understand that what they are doing is important and worthwhile.

The interviews also revealed the importance of developing and training staff and ensuring they feel they are a valuable part of a team. Middle managers must ensure that their employees are continuously given enough support and opportunities to develop their skills. Moreover, it was found out that additional training and employee development offers a promising opportunity to bolster strategically aligned behaviour in the case company. By ensuring that employees grasp the company's strategic goals and understand how their contributions impact these, it is possible foster a more cohesive

and effective work environment, which will result in the improvement in strategy implementation and therefore better organizational outcomes. Similar findings were discussed by Van Riel et al. (2009), that in addition to motivation, capability development and understanding of the strategy will also lead to strategically aligned behaviour (SAB) and better strategy implementation. The middle managers of the case company highlighted the importance of developing employee skills and ensuring that everyone is capable of doing their tasks as an important aspect of strategy implementation.

In addition, creating an atmosphere and building a team where everyone works as a part of the team was discovered to be an essential factor in the strategy implementation process in the case company, and middle managers have an important role in building this. Therefore, middle managers need 'hard' or structural and 'soft' or interpersonal skills to interact with their employees to support their development and strategically aligned behaviour, as discussed by Van Riel et al. (2009) and Tawse and Tabesh (2021). It is important for middle managers to follow formal procedures and practices; however, having more informal interpersonal skills is also essential for team development and making everyone feel valued as part of the team. In the case company, middle managers highlighted the importance of team building and development for successful strategy implementation.

When everyone in the company understands the strategy and works together towards the same goal, it is a crucial part of the strategy implementation process to achieve strategic objectives. As found out from the interviews, middle managers play a pivotal role in this, emphasizing the importance of maintaining transparency and having regular communication and meetings. It was also highlighted in the interviews that following a daily structure is essential, which supports the findings by Merkus et al. (2019), as discussed in the literature review, that the daily routine practices are the building blocks of the business that enact the strategy implementation. Middle managers can also influence the routine practices of other employees and their subordinates, which is

important for successful strategy implementation, as these practices build daily organizational life.

In the case company, the middle managers are also responsible for ensuring the employees understand the company's strategy and role in the implementation process. Therefore, managers need to be able to translate and communicate the company's strategy to their teams in a transparent, relevant, and achievable way by breaking it down. A key to achieving this is having regular meetings, changing how things are explained, keeping it relevant to the staff and ensuring constant communication and review. Consistency, regular communication, and review were found to be essential parts of the sensemaking process by middle managers in the case company. Regular communication within the organization across different channels and consistency in the message of the strategy and how it is achieved are essential sensemaking practices as part of the strategy implementation. In addition, when middle managers can explain the strategy and the steps that must be taken to achieve its goals, they must make it relevant to the employees at the lowest level to help them understand it better. How managers communicate and interact with their teams can also impact how they feel about the company and its strategy and influence their feeling of fit and belongingness within the company. This was also essential to strategy implementation, as Gibson (2020) and Westley (1990) found. According to their findings, when organizational members feel a sense of belongingness and inclusivity in conversations, it improves their perception of the strategy and reduces the erosion effect.

As Gibson et al. (2020) discussed, there usually are inconsistencies in the perceptions of the strategy within the organizational hierarchy. Therefore, more transparent, and frequent communication helps reduce this erosion effect when the employees at the lowest level are also involved and kept informed. This also enhances the employees' feeling of fit within the company and helps them feel part of it, as Boswell (2006) has revealed. In the case company, the middle managers have the responsibility to ensure that their team members are kept informed of the strategic goals and objectives and

that they understand these. In addition, it is important to maintain regular communication and reviews to understand where the current performance level is against targets.

As De Oliviera et al. (2019) discussed, strategy implementation consists of five steps: unfolding, coordination, communication, control and feedback, and development of human resources and policies and employee competencies. The interviews in this research also revealed similar characteristics in the strategy implementation process. In the case company, unfolding happens when the strategy is broken down into different steps, and the case company does this by breaking the strategy down into monthly, weekly and daily targets. Coordination is about organizing the employees and appointing the leaders to conduct the implementation, and in the case company, middle managers act as leaders and assign tasks to their employees. Communication happens continuously throughout the day, such as meetings, catch-ups, and constant reviews. Control and feedback are also a daily building block in the case company as the performance versus targets is constantly reviewed, and the focus then shifts to an area where the performance is not where it should be. Developing employee competencies is also important in the case company, as it was found that team building and development are important parts of the strategy implementation process.

As discussed in the literature review, middle managers' understanding of the strategy is influenced by the senior management, how it is communicated to them, and other middle managers' views. As Balogun & Johnston (2005) found, horizontal interactions, actions, behaviour, language, and shared experiences between middle managers contribute to the middle manager's sensemaking development. It became evident from the interviews that there is much horizontal communication between the middle managers, which means they have some influence over each other's sensemaking. Schuler et al. (2023) also found that shared or separate realities of the strategy can also exist amongst the middle managers, and their views and attitudes towards the strategy can influence other middle managers' sensemaking. Therefore, when middle managers

in the case company interact with each other, they can have a significant influence over their sensemaking of the strategy. This can then influence how they communicate or translate the strategy to their teams, impacting their performance. It is pivotal for companies when appointing middle managers as their sensemaking, and how favourably they view the company's strategy can significantly influence other employees in the company, which can either enact or hinder the strategy implementation.

Rouleau (2005) also identified in her research that middle managers initiate sensemaking through micro-practices that they repeat daily in their interactions and communications with people. This research demonstrates the profound impact of these practices and routines on strategy implementation. In the case company, middle managers regularly interact with their teams, other middle managers, and senior management. Because the employees within the individual branches have more limited communication and interaction with other employees than their managers, it becomes vital for the middle managers to ensure that their daily practices and interactions with their teams reinforce the company's strategic objectives. This is why they have built their daily routine practices, which consist of reviews, meetings, catch-ups, and performance management, inspiring and motivating their teams to align with the company's vision.

This research, in alignment with the findings by Engle et al. (2017), underscores the pivotal role of middle managers in common practices. For instance, information diffusion occurs when middle managers share and communicate information with employees through various methods, such as daily meetings. They also synthesize this information, making it relevant to the employees in a way that aids their understanding. Moreover, middle managers play a crucial part in the training and coaching of employees, a key finding in this research for team building and development. In addition, their ability to engage employees and foster an environment that encourages innovation and improvement was also identified as a significant aspect of successful strategy implementation. This happens by middle managers activities to keep the morale high and celebrating successes as a team.

Furthermore, it was found in this research that manager's experience and tenure with the company significantly influence their understanding of the strategy and their ability to translate it to their teams. This understanding is crucial in managing their team's performance to ensure consistent target achievement and improvement of the overall performance. Therefore, according to the findings in this research, middle managers' sensemaking can develop over time during their employment in the company, and those with the most experience have developed a better ability to use sensemaking as a part of their daily management tool to enhance the strategy implementation process. Consequently, these middle managers are valuable parts of the company and crucial for the sensemaking development of newer colleagues.

Although this case company has 12 branches scattered across the country in different geographical locations, it was positive to find out that they all share a similar understanding of the strategy, and the way the managers apply sensemaking is consistent across the company. The interviewees chosen for this research represent 50% of the middle managers in this company with varying lengths of experience in their roles. We can assume that the results would have remained consistent if the other 50% had been interviewed. However, some of the managers could have raised other interesting new points, which could have led to new findings.

To summarise the main findings from this research, based on the comprehensive findings, it is evident that middle managers are key players in executing successful strategy implantation. Strategy implementation consists of micro-practices that fall into three main dimensions: team building and development, communication and review, and consistency and relevancy, which are the foundation of strategy implementation. Importantly, sensemaking by middle managers was found to be a crucial aspect in each dimension. Their daily tasks and interactions with other employees, which shape the organization's daily life, involve creating their understanding of the strategy and their comprehension of how they can impact it. These findings were derived from a thorough

literature review and insightful interviews with the middle managers of the case company, further validating the central role of middle managers in this process. The next and final chapter concludes this research highlighting the main findings and summarizing the answer to the research question. The limitations of this research and suggestions for future research are also presented in this chapter.

6 Conclusion

The primary objective of this research was to delve into the question of how middle managers employ sensemaking in strategy implementation. Drawing from a comprehensive review of existing literature, our focus was on comprehending middle managers' daily practices, communication, and interactions in the context of strategy implementation. Through interviews with middle managers at the case company, we unearthed intriguing findings that corroborate some of the existing literature and introduce some new insights into the realm of middle management and sensemaking. These findings, we believe, will significantly contribute to the understanding and practice of strategy implementation in the field of middle management, strategy implementation, and organisational behaviour.

There was remarkable consistency between the branch managers and their opinions and views of their roles and the company's strategy, allowing the analysis to make clear and consistent findings. To summarise the findings, the middle managers understood the importance of their role in implementing the company's strategy and driving the business to improve its performance. The managers highlighted that one of the essential components for performance is having a team where individual members all understand the business goals and are capable of fulfilling their roles. Keeping the teams engaged and motivated, giving them the training and support they need, and making them feel valued help build a team that can perform successfully and reach targets. This underscores the crucial and valued role of middle managers in strategy implementation, making them the linchpin of organisational success.

Middle managers play an important role in the strategy implementation process, ensuring that employees within their teams understand the strategy and can do their jobs to meet all business goals. As discussed, sensemaking is an important aspect of middle managers' daily practices to enact strategies and can contribute to the strategy implementation. Essentially, sensemaking happens through daily micro-practices that are repeated daily. Sensemaking is shaped by all interactions, communication, and

formal and informal actions practiced every day, and the way middle managers speak, such as the language, tone, repetition, and delivery of the message, influence the sensemaking of other employees.

Middle managers can influence sensemaking by creating micro practices such as having regular meetings, communicating in a way relevant to the staff and gaining their interest, and keeping the communication and the message consistent and transparent. Therefore, if middle managers can understand how their interactions and communication with other people within the organisation can affect their perceptions of the strategy and create a shared understanding when applied consistently, it can contribute to the strategy implementation and improve organisational performance. This highlights the significant influence that middle managers can have on strategy implementation, empowering them to shape the direction and success of the organisation.

Therefore, this research has not only answered the research question: 'How is sensemaking used by middle managers in the strategy implementation process in organisations?' but has also provided practical insights into the objectives of this research about the role of middle managers in strategy implementation and their utilisation of sensemaking. These findings, which contribute to the existing organisational studies, offer a practical view of middle managers' role in facilitating strategy implementation and highlight sensemaking as a crucial practice for successful strategy implementation. Importantly, these insights can inspire and motivate middle managers to apply sensemaking in their own work. However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this research, which are detailed below.

6.1 Limitations of this research

It is important to consider the limitations of this research to understand how these could impact the findings. One limitation is that the researcher is also an employee of this company, which could be a potential personal bias when interpreting the data and

findings. Conversely, if this research had been conducted by an external person with no prior knowledge of the case company and its employees, the researcher could have had a different perspective and interpretation of the findings.

Another limitation of this research is that only one case company was used as a single case study, which means that the results cannot be generalized. The findings from this research represent only a small population from a case company, which means that if the same research was conducted with another case company, it could reveal different aspects and findings from this research. However, the conclusions of this research enrich the understanding of middle management and sensemaking in strategy implementation and can be used to support any future research on a similar topic.

The research's sample size is also a potential limitation. A more comprehensive data collection, involving all middle managers of the case company, could have led to more nuanced findings. It's important to recognize that the inclusion of the other half of the middle managers could have potentially revealed different insights, underscoring the potential for further development of this research.

6.2 Suggestions for future research

This study offers opportunities for future research as this topic can be taken into different contexts and further explored from different perspectives. The same research could also be applied as multiple case studies, potentially revealing different findings that could lead to more enriched discoveries. In addition, another suggestion would be to conduct a similar study by using an international company as the case company and comparing how middle managers in different countries apply sensemaking. Another suggestion for future research could be to use an organisation with more hierarchical levels and study middle managers at different levels, as the definition of a middle manager can be applied to anyone in management working below the senior management and above the employees at the lowest level of the hierarchy. Therefore, one research direction could be exploring middle managers and how sensemaking is used at different levels.

Moreover, given that the primary focus of this research was middle management, there is a promising opportunity to explore the use of sensemaking in strategy implementation from different organisational members' perspectives. For instance, studying senior management or employees at the lowest level could provide valuable insights. It would be intriguing to uncover if these organisational members' sensemaking practices have any similarities or differences from those of middle management. This could potentially lead to even more significant contributions to sensemaking research in organisations, inspiring and motivating further exploration in this area.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview guideline and questions

Consent

You have been invited to take part in a master's thesis interview. The interviews and all the information gathered will be kept anonymous and confidential. The interviews are recorder however only the researcher will have access to them. After the master's thesis is complete all interviews and the data will be deleted. Thank you for your participation.

Interview questions

General:

1. How long have you been working in your current role (middle manager)?

Middle management

2. How do you see your role as a middle manager?
3. Can you describe your normal day at work?
4. How do you ensure that your team is working towards achieving the shared goals?

Strategy/Strategy implementation

5. Can you explain what the firm's strategy and goals are?
6. In your opinion, how aligned everyone in the firm is regarding their understanding of strategic goals? Why, in your opinion this is the case?
7. How is the strategy communicated and what are the main communication methods?
8. What is the current strategy implementation process?
9. What is your role in the strategy implementation process?
10. Can you think of ways to improve the strategy implementation process?

Sensemaking

11. What helps you best understand strategy?
12. What importance, in your view, does your role have in the creation of understanding and meaning of the strategy?

13. What helps others in your organization and your team to understand the strategy?
14. What helps you best to explain the meaning of the strategy to others?
15. Could you give some examples of how you explain strategy to others?
16. How do you know that they have understood the strategy?