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Middle Management as Change Executors & The Importance of Senior Management Support

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ABSTRACT:

Tämän kandidaatintutkielman tarkoituksena on tarkastella suunnitellun muutoksen prosessia nykyaikaisessa tietointensiivisessä organisaatiossa. Erityinen huomio kohdistuu keskijohdon rooliin sekä niihin tukimuotoihin, joita ylin johto voi tarjota muutoksen toteutusvaiheen aikana muutoksen vaikuttavuuden ja onnistumisen parantamiseksi. Tutkielman lähtökohtana on organisaatioiden toimintaympäristöjen jatkuva muutos, joka edellyttää systemaattista muutosjohtamista ja eri johtotasojen välistä yhteistyötä.

Tutkielman teoreettinen viitekehys rakentuu muutosjohtamisen ja muutoksen toimeenpanon ympärille. Työssä tarkastellaan keskeisimpiä muutosjohtamisen malleja sekä eri johtotasojen vastuita muutoksen toimeenpanon ympärillä. Tutkimuksen tavoitteena on lisätä ymmärrystä muutoksen onnistuneesta toimeenpanosta tunnistamalla keskijohdon merkitys muutoksessa sekä ne käytännön keinot, joilla ylin johto voi tukea ja sitouttaa keskijohtoa muutostilanteissa. Tutkielma on toteutettu kirjallisuuskatsauksena, jossa hyödynnetään aiempaa tutkimuskirjallisuutta muutosjohtamisesta, organisaation muutoksista ja johtamisen eri tasojen rooleista muutoksen aikana. Aineisto koostuu alan keskeisistä tieteellisistä lähteistä, joiden avulla on muodostettu kokonaiskuva muutoksen toteutuksesta. Tarkastelun kohteena on erityisesti tietointensiiviset organisaatiot, joissa henkilöstön osaaminen, asiantuntijuus ja vuorovaikutus korostuvat muutoksen onnistumisen kannalta.

Tutkielmassa korostuu johtamisen merkitys muutostilanteissa. Muutosjohtaminen todetaan olevan jäsenelty prosessi, jossa suunnittelu, toteutus ja seuranta yhdistyvät sekä teknisten että inhimillisten tekijöiden huomioimiseen. Tämä on erityisen tärkeää dynaamisissa toimintaympäristöissä, joissa muutoksen onnistuminen edellyttää vastarinnan vähentämistä ja henkilöstön sitouttamista. Keskijohdon havaitaan olevan keskeisessä asemassa strategian viemisessä käytäntöön, viestinnän välittämisessä sekä työntekijöiden tukemisessa epävarmuuden ja muutosvastarinnan aikana.

Tutkielman perusteella voidaan myös todeta, että ylimmän johdon tuki on ratkaisevaa muutoksen onnistuneessa toimeenpanossa. Selkeä ohjaus, riittävät resurssit, näkyvä sitoutuminen sekä keskijohdon aktiivinen osallistaminen vahvistavat keskijohdon kykyä toimia tehokkaina muutostoimijoina. Onnistunut muutos edellyttää johdon eri tasojen yhteistyötä, avointa viestintää ja yhteistä ymmärrystä muutoksen tavoitteista. Näiden tekijöiden avulla voidaan parantaa muutoksen läpivientiä ja varmistaa organisaation tavoitteiden saavuttaminen muuttuvassa toimintaympäristössä.

KEYWORDS: Change Management, Change Implementation, Leadership, Middle Management and Senior Management

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1 Introduction

Organizations operate in a modern business environment which is constantly changing. Rapid technological development, increasing competition and globalization force companies to adapt changes faster than ever before. As a result, change has become a widely discussed and researched topic as organizations aim to understand how changes can be implemented effectively and permanently. Still, according to previous research more than half of change initiatives fail and most failures occur precisely at the stage when the change is put into practice.

Although the importance of middle managers in organizations is widely acknowledged, exciting literature focuses more on their general role in the change process. Research show limited insight into the concrete actions on how senior management can support middle managers during the critical implementation phase of the change process even though senior management is recognized as an enabler of successful change. This creates a research gap in the practical, day-to-day mechanisms of support that can improve change execution. The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the dynamics of a planned change process within contemporary knowledge-intensive organizations.

1.1 Research objective and research questions

This thesis examines the essentials of change management, the role of middle managers in the change process and the ways in which senior management can support them during the implementation to ensure successful change.

The thesis is structured upon three research questions:

1. What is change management and why is it important for organizations?
2. What is the role of middle managers in change management?
3. How can senior management support middle management in the implementation phase of the change to ensure the success of the change?

1.2 Thesis Structure

The thesis consists of four main chapters and their sub-sections. The first main chapter is the introduction, and it presents the topic of the study, the selected research questions and explains the key concepts related to the subject. The theoretical part of the thesis is divided into two main chapters which examine the topic through scientific sources and contemporary literature. The first theoretical chapter discusses change management from the perspectives of leadership of change and in its sub-sections it explains key definitions, central theories and the strategic importance of the phenomenon. The second theoretical chapter examines middle managers' role as change executors and the ways senior management can engage and encourage middle managers during change, and its sub-sections present key theories related to commitment and support. The final chapter of the thesis presents the conclusion. The last chapter answers the research questions introduced in the introduction and provides a summary of the main findings of the study. It also highlights the future study opportunities.

1.3 Key Concepts of the Thesis

Change Management has been described in many ways, and it is difficult to find a single, clear definition of the term. According to Candrasa (2024, p. 4126), change management is a process where an organization is implementing changes in the existing situation: structure, culture or ways of working. In addition, Orabi (2024, p. 196) describes Change Management as process of planning, executing and monitoring changes to reach a desired outcome. The thesis looks at change management from the perspective of three levels of support: senior management, middle managers and employees.

Change Implementation is seen as a mechanical process where the planned actions are carried out from a master strategy conceived by the top management (Floyd & Wooldridge, n.d., p. 49; Kumar & Singhal, 2012, p. 148). It involves translating change and strategies into concrete actions, aligning people, processes and resources, as well as ensuring that the intended changes are effectively adopted within the organization.

Leadership is the ability to guide, influence and motivate individuals or teams to achieve common goals effectively. According to Rahman and Dev (2024, p. 1) Leadership in an organization involves clearly communicating the mission and vision and also motivating employees to use their competences to achieve goals aligned with the strategic plan. In addition Nandasinghe (2020, p. 28), concludes that leadership is a process of encouraging others to work towards shared goals and leadership is essential for establishing a clear vision for employees to understand their roles and responsibilities.

Middle Management refers to the group of managers between top leadership and frontline employees. According to Van Niekerk et al. (2022, p. 273), there are six practices for middle management during change: adapting, effective change, collaborating, mobilizing, peacekeeping and overseeing. In this study the term middle management is used as an umbrella concept referring to notions found in the literature such as change agents, supervisors and project managers as these share the idea of translating change strategy into practice.

Senior Management refers to the highest level of organizational leadership. They hold authority over all organizational members and control the resources involved in a change (Zmud & Cox, 1979, p. 37). In this study the term senior management is used as an umbrella concept referring to notions found in the literature, such as top management as these share the same idea of highest level of leadership.

2 Change Management

One of the key drivers of organizational success in a fast developing corporate landscape is the ability to manage change (Allam et al., n.d., p. 17). Organizations must pay attention to change management to stay adaptive in their operations in an increasingly complex and dynamic business environment (Abu Orabi et al., 2024, p. 196; Errida & Lotfi, 2021, p. 5).

In this chapter, the definition of change management and the leader's role in change are examined. The chapter also explores the most used and well-known change management models as well as change management from leadership perspective. This chapter answers the first research question: *What is change management and why is it important in organizations?*

2.1 Different Definitions of Change Management

One way to describe change management is that it is a systematic approach to guiding individuals, teams, and organizations from their current state towards a desired future state (Allam et al., n.d., p. 17; Mahamoud Hasan et al., 2025, p. 2). Change management involves different steps such as preparing, implementing, and tracking changes in order to achieve a desired outcome (Abu Orabi et al., 2024, p. 208). Allam et al. (n.d., p. 20) state that there are four different change categories which are process-oriented changes which aim to improve efficiency and workflows, people-oriented changes that focus on culture and engagement, structural changes which involve reporting lines and structure, and strategic changes that affect an organization's mission and strategy.

Research on change management in business organizations has identified several key themes, including change process models, leadership, communication, managing resistance to change, organizational culture, and the role of change agents to success in the change process (Abu Orabi et al., 2024, p. 208; Allam et al., n.d., p. 18; Mahamoud Hasan et al., 2025, p. 2). In addition, Hasan et al. (2025) highlight that focusing on

employee's wellbeing, both mental and physical is essential for change management success as it enhances productivity and overall organizational performance. Organizations strengthen their ability to manage change by recognizing different types of change and aligning initiatives with strategic goals (Allam et al., n.d., p. 26). Organizations that are expecting a long-term success must implement change management as a critical activity (Abu Orabi et al., 2024, p. 196).

The change management process is not just a one-off process. Once the change is implemented, organizations need to evaluate the impact of the transformation and they need to be ready to make adjustments when necessary (Candrasa et al., 2024, p. 4126; Floyd & Wooldridge, n.d., p. 51; Vrcelj, 2023). Therefore, many organizations struggle with change projects and fail to get the expected outcomes (Errida & Lotfi, 2021, p. 11). Multiple studies have earlier highlighted the organizational change failure rate is up to 60-70% (Allam et al., n.d., p. 17; Errida & Lotfi, 2021, p. 2; Vrcelj, 2023, p. 2).

One of the reasons for change failure is identified to be employee's resistance to change. In the earlier research there is evidence that employees who have experienced poor change management are more likely to resist new changes in the future (Fuchs & Prouska, 2014, p. 361). Another reason for change management failure is the lack of guidance for the desired change (Kang, 2015, p. 28). This suggests that successful change management depends not only on formal processes and models, but also on how employees experience the change. Especially in knowledge-intensive organizations, resistance to change may reflect concerns about unclear direction or lack of involvement rather than opposition itself. Recognizing these dimensions provides the foundation for understanding the role of senior and middle managers in guiding change. In general, effective leadership is assumed to be the key to successful change (Nandasinghe, 2020, p. 28; Vrcelj, 2023, p. 11). The following chapters will examine how change management practices impact successful change implementation.

2.2 Change Management Practices

Researchers and consultancy firms have created multiple change management models that can help to improve the success of change projects (Errida & Lotfi, 2021, p. 2). Change management theories provide structured ways to comprehend change dynamics, including how employees act both in a group and as individuals throughout the change process. The theories also allow the change process to be successfully enacted and maintained (Allam et al., n.d., p. 20). The main purpose of the change models is to make the change last in the organization (Yli-Kerttula & Varis, 2023, p. 70). However, the use of only one or a few different change management models is not sufficient to cover all the different change situations and therefore, the selection of a model depends on the particular requirements of the change initiative and effective change managers often draw on several theories (Errida & Lotfi, 2021, p. 1; Yli-Kerttula & Varis, 2023, p. 73). Different approaches in the research to change management emphasize the need to address processes, people, structures and strategy while managing resistance and aligning initiatives with organizational goals.

This chapter examines the most well-known and widely used change management models and explains how these models help leaders guide employees and manage the emotional and operational challenges of change.

2.2.1 Lewin's 3-Step Change Model

One of the most famous and oldest change management models is the Kurt Lewin's Three step Model which was created in 1947 (Allam et al., n.d., p. 20; Vrcelj, 2023, p. 5). The model can be applied in many different types of organizations and various situations such as strategic changes, the implementation of new technologies or the development of organizational culture. This theory is respected for its clarity and its specific attention to the human side of change. The model highlights the need for change and the significance of reinforcing new ways of working. The model consist of "steps, stages and phases" (see Table 1.) which are highly in use when organizations are planning and

managing the change (Vrcelj, 2023, p. 5). It divides the change into three steps which are unfreeze, change and refreeze.

Lewin received some criticism by researchers for oversimplifying the change process but the model's foundational significance has remained unquestioned (Burnes, 2020, p. 31; Cummings, n.d., p. 33; Vrcelj, 2023, p. 5). Vrcelj (2023, p. 5) states that another criticism of the model is related to its accuracy in today's conditions of constant change as the process of freezing is never ending. Furthermore, according to Burnes (2020, p. 31), the three-step model is not "overly simple" or "underdeveloped" but rather a useful way to understand the complexity of human behavior and how it can be changed.

In Kurt Lewin's three-step change model, a capable middle manager is essential to guide the organization toward achieving the goals at each step. Throughout all phases of change middle managers and employees must collaborate closely as a team to progress from one stage to the next until reaching a stable state. This type of teamwork relies on a high degree of transparency and open communication (Yli-Kerttula & Varis, 2023, p. 70).

2.2.2 Kotter's 8-step Change Model

John P. Kotter is widely recognized as a leading expert on leadership and organizational change. He first presented his eight-step change model in the book titled *Leading Change* (1996). The model outlines a sequence of eight stages that organizations should follow to carry out change successfully (Errida & Lotfi, 2021, p. 2; Yli-Kerttula & Varis, 2023, p. 70). According to Allam et al. (n.d., p. 20), Kotter's model is another approach to change management but it is built upon Lewin's approach. Kotter's model offers a more comprehensive implementation path (See Table 1.).

The model emphasizes creating urgency, building a strong guiding team, developing and communicating a clear vision, motivating people, generating short-term wins, sustaining progress and implementing change into the organization (Vrcelj, 2023, p. 6). It is widely

appreciated because it focuses on building momentum and maintaining long-term commitment throughout the change process (Allam et al., n.d., p. 21). However, the model also has several limitations, such as it is often seen as too mechanistic, assuming that the change follows a clear and linear sequence, and it does not explain how to sustain the organization in its new state (Vrcelj, 2023, p. 7).

Although many theories have been introduced for implementing and managing change over the past 80 years, there has been only limited advancement in the actual development of theory within this field (Vrcelj, 2023, p. 2). While Kotter ja Lewin emphasize structured implementation through stages, more recent literature highlights the importance of flexibility and adaptation during change. This suggests that change models may be less effective in knowledge-intensive organizations because of uncertainty and rapid changes. Change is highly complex and context dependent. Every organization differs in its culture, leadership, industry and external environment. All these combined make it difficult to create one universal theory that works in all situations. This suggests that change management models should be seen as guiding frameworks rather than fixed instructions (see Figure 1.). Especially in complex and knowledge-intensive organizations, change rarely follows a fully linear process, which makes flexibility and managerial judgement essential. The literature also shows that leadership, communication and employee involvement are critical across all models which indicates that successful change implementation depends less on the model itself and more on how leaders apply it in practice (See Figure 1.).

Table 1. Different phases in Change Models.

Lewin (1947)	Kotter (1995)
Unfreeze	Create a Sense of Emergency Create Guiding Coalition Create & Develop Vision and Strategy Communicate the Vision
Change	Remove Obstacles & Give Authority to Act Create Short-term Wins

	Consolidate Gains & Produce Change
Refreeze	Make Change Permanent

This section highlighted widely used change management models and emphasized that multiple frameworks are often needed to address diverse organizational contexts. The discussion underscores the importance of structured approaches, communication and teamwork in implementing change. The next chapter will focus specifically on change leadership.

2.3 Change Leadership

This chapter examines the definition of leadership in change. “Despite the existence of numerous change models, organizational change leaders often encounter obstacles during the implementation phase that limit change effectiveness” (Mouazen et al., 2023, p. 1). The success of change from leaders’ perspective needs to be clearly defined before considering how the organization can succeed in the change process. According to Ford et al. (2021, p. 87), one way to describe successful change is: “functional point of view holds that change leadership is effective when the needs related to completing the task and maintaining and integrating the group are successfully met”. Strategic renewal is viewed as an outcome of leadership behaviors that foster strong relationships with employees and actively engage them in the organization’s vision and goals (Jinga & Oumer Hassen, 2025, p. 6). Successful change occurs when the key leadership tasks are carried out in a way that fits the situation. (Ford et al., 2021, p. 89).

According to Orabi (2024, p. 207), leaders must also be able to define the vision of change and support colleagues. Leadership plays a vital role in guiding organizations through change and it demands a strong knowledge of how change unfolds and leaders must have the ability to adapt the right approach to fit the situation (Biswas, 2024, p. 2287; Sacavém et al., 2025, p. 4). The most crucial competence for leaders who manage change is communication, as it is a key to motivate the team, reduce change resistance, show their own commitment, and encourage the participation of employees in the

decision making process (Allam et al., n.d., p. 23; Biswas, 2024, p. 2287; Candrasa et al., 2024, p. 4126; Mahamoud Hasan et al., 2025, p. 6). In the following sections, communication is examined in more detail, focusing on the roles of senior and middle managers.

Leadership effectiveness and the success of change should be evaluated from two perspectives at the same time: whether the necessary tasks are accomplished and whether the group remains functional, cohesive and supported throughout the change process (Ford et al., 2021, p. 104). Effective change management can help organizations improve productivity, reduce costs, and strengthen their competitive position in the market. However, it can also create uncertainty, resistance, and conflict (Abu Orabi et al., 2024, p. 196). Ford et al. (2021, p. 104) state that leadership in change is more than just one person's behaviors and the results that follow. From a functional perspective, leadership is a shared role that can shift between different people during the change process and successful change happens when the right leadership actions are carried out.

The reviewed literature broadly agrees that communication, employee engagement and leadership support are central to successful change. However, the sources differ in how leadership is understood: some emphasize formal leadership responsibilities and strategic direction, while others view leadership as a shared and dynamic process shaped through interaction between organizational actors. This thesis aligns more closely with the perspective emphasizing the active role of middle managers in enabling and sustaining the change in practice with the support of senior management.

In summary, change management can be understood as a continuous and systematic process where organizations adapt to evolving environments by aligning structures, processes and people toward a desired state. Its significance arises from its strong influence on organizational performance, the ability to adapt to change and the achievement of long-term success, particularly considering the high failure rate of

change initiatives. The literature emphasizes that while structured models provide valuable frameworks, but the success of change ultimately depends on effective leadership and the ability to address human factors such as resistance and engagement (See Figure 1.). This highlights the need to move beyond theoretical models toward practical implementation and underlines the critical role of middle managers as key actors in translating strategic change into everyday practices.

3 Change Implementation – Leadership Perspective

Change implementation is seen as a mechanical process where the planned actions are carried out from a master strategy conceived by the senior management but the reality is far more complex (Floyd & Wooldridge, n.d., p. 51; Kumar & Singhal, 2012, p. 139). Change implementation should not be viewed as a single phase, but as an ongoing process in which change is monitored, evaluated and adjusted. Successful implementation requires flexibility, learning and the ability to respond to emerging challenges as the change progress. The following section examines the responsibilities of different management levels during the change implementation phase.

The chapter addresses the second and third research questions by examining the distinct roles of both middle and senior management in the implementation phase of change, with a particular focus on how their responsibilities differ and complement each other.

3.1 Middle Managers as Change Executors

To get more change management capacity it is valuable to involve middle managers as engaged change agents (Buick et al., 2018, p. 232). Van Niekerk and Jansen Van Rensburg (2022) state that there are six main strategic practices for middle managers, which are “adapting, effecting change, collaborating, mobilizing, peacekeeping and overseeing”. Middle managers play a key role in promoting collaboration through active engagement, participation and transparent communication (Van Niekerk & Jansen Van Rensburg, 2022, p. 171). Enabling middle managers to contribute change more effectively organizations should see improved results from change (Buick et al., 2018, p. 232). “Change is difficult for everyone, but even more so for middle managers who are not only strategy implementors but also recipients of change” (Van Niekerk & Jansen Van Rensburg, 2022, p. 171). According to Idogawa et al. (2023, p. 20), middle management is the most important success factor in change management. In this chapter middle management is examined for their core responsibilities when executing change as well as the most common challenges during the implementation phase.

3.1.1 Translating Strategy into Practice

Middle managers are expected to act as intermediaries by explaining the central function's plan for the change and helping employees understand their roles, manage resistance and carry the change (Buick et al., 2018, p. 232). Middle managers are essential in ensuring that strategic intent is transformed into concrete actions at the operational level, making change implementable in practice rather than remaining theoretical (Floyd & Wooldridge, n.d. p.51). In practice, this means that middle managers need to translate high-level goals into specific responsibilities, priorities and workflows for employees. Positioned between top management and employees, they help to build a capable and committed team to drive the change forward (Allam et al., n.d., p. 24; Buick et al., 2018, p. 232). Their position between senior management and employees gives them a unique influence on whether strategic change becomes accepted at the operational level. In this way they reduce resistance and ensure that employees understand how strategic goals are reflected in their daily work. In addition, middle managers are responsible for aligning organizational processes, resources and structures with the requirements of the change (Floyd & Wooldridge, n.d. p.51). This alignment function is crucial as misalignment between strategy and operations can significantly obstruct the successful implementation of change initiatives.

Changes in organizations rarely unfold exactly as planned, which makes continuous measurement and monitoring essential (Jinga & Oumer Hassen, 2025, p. 6). Research shows that the success of change initiatives depends on effective evaluation and follow-up practices (Jinga & Oumer Hassen, 2025, p. 6). A middle manager has also the role of overseeing the change process and this role includes being involved in daily operations and monitoring both strategic goals and ongoing projects (Van Niekerk & Jansen Van Rensburg, 2022, p. 171). They track progress, evaluate whether strategic objectives are being met in practice and identify potential challenges in execution (Mouazen et al., 2023, p. 27). They adjust processes and ways of working to ensure that change remains on track and continues to move toward the desired outcomes.

3.1.2 Communication and Sensemaking

Effective communication in change implementation by middle managers should be clear, consistent and continuous, forming a central factor in a successful change process (Candrasa et al., 2024, p. 4126; Herzig & Jimmieson, 2006, p. 632). It should be inherently two-way enabling open dialogue where employees can participate, engage in discussions and contribute to decision-making, thereby fostering a sense of ownership and mutual understanding (Allam et al., n.d., p. 24; Candrasa et al., 2024, p. 4126; Herzig & Jimmieson, 2006, p. 636; Van Niekerk & Jansen Van Rensburg, 2022, p. 171). At the same time communication should aim to inspire and motivate employees, encourage new ideas and address individual needs while middle managers lead by example throughout the process (Mouazen et al., 2023, p. 3). Middle management must facilitate communication in both directions, from the senior management to the employees and from employees to senior management during the change process.

Even though the communication principles highlighted in the literature are critical for successful change implementation, their effectiveness depends not only on clarity, consistency and openness, but also on the volume of communication. Providing too much information can overwhelm employees and even weaken motivation. Therefore, it is essential to strike a balance by delivering only the necessary and relevant information to support understanding and engagement with the change.

Findings suggest that middle managers have the strong potential to act as active change agents who help employees understand and make sense of change (Buick et al., 2018, p. 232). Sense making is a continuous but temporary process through which individuals seek to structure and make sense of changes in a rational manner, both for themselves and for others (Ala-Laurinaho et al., 2017 p.368). According to Ala-Laurinaho et al. (2017, p. 284), it is demonstrated that collective sensemaking helps build a holistic understanding of change and supports effective and coherent action through structured and shared reflection. Collective sensemaking is facilitated by creating a space for

discussion and encouraging employees to participate in the change and this supports shared understanding and smoother change implementation. Middle managers support sensemaking by gathering relevant information, clarifying uncertain situations and engaging in open dialogue with employees. Sensemaking helps also middle managers clarify their role as change agents and support the organizational reconstruction (Tucker et al., 2015, p. 1048). The strong emphasis on sensemaking in the literature state that sense making is not only communication activity but also a mechanism through which middle managers actively shape how change is understood, accepted and implemented in practice.

3.1.3 Supporting Employees During Challenges

Qualitative research shows that middle managers play an important role in reducing employee resistance (Buick et al., 2018, p. 231). Resistance often evolves from different factors such as change fatigue, loyalty to old habits, the personality of the employee, uncertainty or the valuation of interest. Managing change effectively requires recognizing and understanding the reasons behind resistance, as well as actively addressing these factors (Li, n.d., p. 160). In practice, this means that middle managers must actively identify barriers to change, address employee concerns and create conditions that enable employees to adapt to new ways of working.

While some literature views resistance negatively as an obstacle to change, it can also be seen as valuable source of feedback for improving the change process. When resistance is constructively managed, it may contribute to organizational learning by encouraging the reassessment of change initiatives (Li, n.d., p. 160). By addressing resistance effectively and using it as feedback, organizations can improve both the long-term sustainability and overall success of change efforts (Li, n.d., p. 160). However, if it is not properly addressed it may escalate and lead to change failure.

Uncertainty management was found to be also important when guiding employees through the change (Herzig & Jimmieson, 2006, p. 637). Unclear communication by

middle managers about the scope and consequences of change can increase employees' feelings of uncertainty and reduce their sense of control (Li, n.d., p. 158). Buick et al. (2018, p. 229) state, that one way to reduce uncertainty is that middle managers clarify the possible outcomes of the change giving employees a greater sense of control over their own future. Another way to reduce uncertainty is peacekeeping. According to Van Niekerk et al. (2022, p. 282), it is important for middle managers to be able to handle disagreements, conflicts and criticism in an effective way. The literature also suggests that resistance and uncertainty should be viewed as valuable signals of how change is being experienced in practice. This makes middle managers critical not only for the implementation but also for providing feedback upward and adjusting change efforts in real time.

The reviewed articles on the topic showed that middle managers are one of the most essential parts of change management. Middle managers effectiveness is shaped by the tension between expectations from senior management and the attitudes of employees which places them in a structurally challenging position. If this tension is not managed well, middle managers may become a bottleneck rather than enablers of change that the literature emphasize. The next chapter will explore how senior management can provide targeted support to middle managers during the implementation phase, enhancing their capacity to lead change effectively.

3.2 Forms of Senior Management Support

Successful change implementation often depends on the engagement and support that middle managers receive from senior management (Buick et al., 2018, p. 232). This support can include communication, resources, guidance and trust. When middle managers perceive their senior managers as team-oriented, encouraging and quick in two-way communication, the organization experiences higher quality of work, improved service, increased innovation and greater employee satisfaction (Nandasinghe, 2020, p. 28). Therefore, understanding how senior management supports and encourages middle managers during change implementation is important for improving the change

processes. In this study, senior management support is examined from the perspectives of strategic guidance, information sharing, resource and capability support, role clarity and fostering commitment and ownership (See Table 2.)

Table 2. Different views of Senior Management Support to Middle Managers.

Literature view on Senior Management Support	Support Category	Key Implications for middle managers
Senior management provides clarity regarding middle managers' leadership role and expectations during change (Buick et al., 2018, p. 232).	Role Clarity & Capability Development	Strengthens middle managers' ability to interpret, translate and guide change in daily practice.
Senior Management ensures clear, continuous and formal communication and supports definition of roles, responsibilities and change intentions (Balogun, 2003)	Information sharing & Role Clarity	Reduces uncertainty and improves alignment between strategic intent and operational execution.
Senior management takes a broad support role including providing resources, funding, training, decision-making support and strategic guidance (Bitta et al., n.d.)	Resources & Strategic Guidance	Enables middle managers to implement change more effectively and consistently
Senior management emphasizes training, workshops and capability development and delegates authority to middle managers (Fareed et al., 2023)	Capability Development, Commitment & Ownership	Increases middle managers' engagement, autonomy and commitment, positioning middle managers as active change agents.
Senior management invests in change management training and education (Yli-Kerttula & Varis, 2023)	Capability Development	Enhances middle managers' readiness and competence for managing complex change process.
Senior management communicates benefits of change, provides feedback, and promotes employee empowerment and ensures that middle managers have the knowledge and	Information Sharing, Capability Development & Resources	Supports employee adaptation and strengthens sustainable change implementation

resources needed to adapt effectively (Zada, 2022)		
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3.2.1 Strategic Guidance

In the planned change process, middle managers refer to senior managers as role models due to their central role in initiating the change. The visibility of senior management is emphasized throughout the change process. Acting as a role model is not always reflected in explicit actions but also in the communication of priorities, which serves to reinforce the importance and necessity of the change (Van Der Voet et al., 2014, p. 181). One of the common challenges that arise during the implementation phase is an unsupportive senior management (Menon, 2024, p. 71). Change management may be perceived by middle managers as imposed targets and obligations when senior management provides little support. In such situations, change can feel less like a shared organizational effort and more like a top-down pressure to deliver results.

Senior managers are mainly responsible for guiding, protecting and managing the change process and they should encourage and inspire employees to support and adopt the change (Oakland & Tanner, 2007, p. 15; Zada, 2022, p. 5). Continuous guidance is especially important to help mitigate the pressures associated with demanding change initiatives (Van Niekerk & Jansen Van Rensburg, 2022, p. 281). Although the forms of strategic guidance identified in the literature are important, from a practical perspective it is also important to note that their implementation towards middle managers may be challenging, particularly in knowledge-intensive organizations. In today's environment, where multiple changes occur continuously it can be difficult to provide sustained and focused support for a single change process.

3.2.2 Communication and Information Sharing

The key characteristics of senior management communication towards middle management during the implementation phase of change include clarity, consistency, timeliness, two-way communication and the ability to support sensemaking. These

factors strengthen middle managers' capacity to act as effective implementers of change. Vrcelj (2023, p. 1) states that communication to middle managers should repeat the need for change and present customized practical guidance to assist employees during the change process. Continuous and open communication supports middle managers motivation, reduces resistance and helps integrate change as a routine practice (Mouazen et al., 2023, p. 3).

According to Buick et al. (2018, p. 232), it was clear that efficiency in the role of middle managers was restricted especially by a lack of clear and on-time communication. When communication was lacking, it meant that the reasons for the change were unclear and expectations were not well defined. As a result, middle managers found it difficult to provide clear guidance to end users and manage expectations in an uncertain situation. To ensure that employees understand the need for change and how it will be implemented, leaders should utilize all available communication channels (Mouazen et al., 2023, p. 2). In practice this refers to using a combination of formal and informal methods, such as emails, meetings, digital platforms and direct discussions. By leveraging multiple channels, senior managers can reinforce key messages of the change.

Conflicts are very likely to arise during change implementation when senior managers and employees are communicated with conflicting instructions (Vrcelj, 2023). Senior management teams are not a single unified group, instead, different leaders interpret change through their own local perspectives. These differing interpretations influence how they communicate change to middle managers and what expectations they pass down. Middle managers then construct their own understanding based on these messages, their experiences and their local environment. As a result, the same change can be understood differently at different organizational levels, affecting how the change is implemented. Senior managers' evaluations and emotions related to the change evolve over time and these shifts influence how middle managers respond (Balogun et al., 2015, p. 16). Therefore, it is particularly important that the communication from senior management is consistent. Oakland and Tanner (2007, p. 12) state that one

feature of a successful change process was that before making decisions, all alternatives were discussed and at the end senior management made a decision and stuck with it, also accepting that there could be risks involved.

3.2.3 Resource and Capability Support & Role Clarity

Effective management means getting the right things done through people (Menon, 2024, p. 71). Middle management may lack the necessary competences for leading change and therefore senior management should invest in training and development programs that can help build change management capabilities and can therefore significantly affect the successful implementation (Buick et al., 2018, p. 232; Menon, 2024, p. 68; Yli-Kerttula & Varis, 2023, p. 73; Zangana et al., 2024, p. 174). These capabilities include knowing different tools, processes and methods used in executing change (Menon, 2024, p. 68). Although the literature highlights technical knowledge of tools and processes, in practice middle management must also possess strong interpersonal and adaptive skills which should also be developed through training and support. Performance skills help middle managers use this knowledge to meet change requirements, while personal skills guide how they behave when working with change (Menon, 2024, p. 68).

Senior management should give a clear overview of planned initiatives to support informed decision-making, especially regarding resource allocation (Zmud & Cox, 1979, p. 39). Middle Managers assume the role of change agents alongside their ongoing operational responsibilities, such as managing daily activities, leading employees and meeting performance targets. Senior management must have concrete ways of support the managers during change and how resources are allocated to change initiatives (Balogun, 2003, p. 82). Therefore, in practice it is essential that the role of middle managers in the change process is clearly defined and integrated into their formal job descriptions and performance targets by senior management. According to Bitta et al. (n.d., p. 46), senior management support is a key factor in the successful implementation as it influences both the effectiveness of change management and the availability of

resources, thereby enabling the achievement of project objectives and the improvement of service quality. Clear role definition supports middle managers' commitment to change and strengthens their ability to act consistently throughout the change.

3.3 Fostering Commitment & Ownership Among Middle Managers

Senior management primary role in change implementation is to foster commitment among those involved in carrying out the change (Bitta et al., n.d., p. 32; Zmud & Cox, 1979, p. 38). Building commitment and psychological ownership among middle managers is essential for successful change implementation. Psychological ownership describes the feeling that the change initiative is personally meaningful.

Commitment to change is a central concept in understanding how individuals respond to change. According to Kayani et al. (2022, p. 797), it consists of three dimensions: affective, normative and continuance commitment. Affective commitment refers to middle manager's willingness to support change because they perceive it as beneficial or necessary, normative commitment is based on a sense of obligation, where middle managers support change because they feel it is the right thing to do and continuance commitment means staying committed to change because leaving it would be too costly or because it is necessary to stay in line with the organization (Kayani et al., 2022, p. 797). From the three dimensions of commitment, affective commitment appears particularly important for middle managers, as it reflects genuine willingness to support and promote change rather than compliance based on obligation or pressure.

Senior management may also experience resistance to change from middle management. Balogun (2003, p. 81) state that the findings suggest that role of middle managers in change is often underestimated and highly demanding, which may be misinterpreted as resistance. Buick et al. (2018, p. 232) state that senior managers need to acknowledge and appreciate the role of middle managers in implementing change and managing resistance from employees. According to Vrcelj (2023, p. 7), many leaders often assume that the change can be driven through formal authority or other forms of

power, rather than by engaging employees who are usually capable and motivated to understand and support the changes. By creating a genuinely participatory change process and sharing leadership responsibilities, effective change leaders demonstrate their commitment through their actions rather than only through their words (Van Der Voet et al., 2014, p. 171). Middle managers' positive response to being given autonomy by senior managers indicates that this is supportive, as it empowers them and demonstrates senior managers' confidence in their abilities (Vrcelj, 2023).

Psychological ownership refers to the feeling that a task, project or responsibility belongs to an individual in a personal and meaningful way. It is based on a subjective sense of possession that develops when a person knows the target well, has invested time and effort into it and has some influence over decisions related to it. When these conditions are present individuals begin to see the project as part of their role and identity. This often increases motivation, responsibility and commitment (Cocieru et al., 2019, p. 277).

Senior Management support is not valuable only because it provides resources or formal authority, but also because it creates the conditions that help middle managers lead change effectively (see figure 1). Without clear direction, consistent communication and visible commitment from senior managers, middle managers are placed in a position where they must manage uncertainty without sufficient support. This can weaken their credibility and their motivation to act as change agents. The literature also indicates that commitment cannot be created through hierarchy alone. Ownership emerges when middle managers are trusted, involved early and given real influence over implementation. This shifts the focus from control to partnership, where senior management's role is less about directing change from above and more about creating an environment in which middle managers can take responsibility for making change successful.

Senior management is primarily responsible for setting strategic direction, providing resources, ensuring role clarity and offering guidance. Their support significantly shapes

the conditions under which change can succeed (see Figure 1). Middle managers in turn are central actors in the execution of change. They translate strategic goals into practical actions, communicate them, align processes and resources with employees. Overall, successful change implementation depends on strong interaction between management levels (see Figure 1).

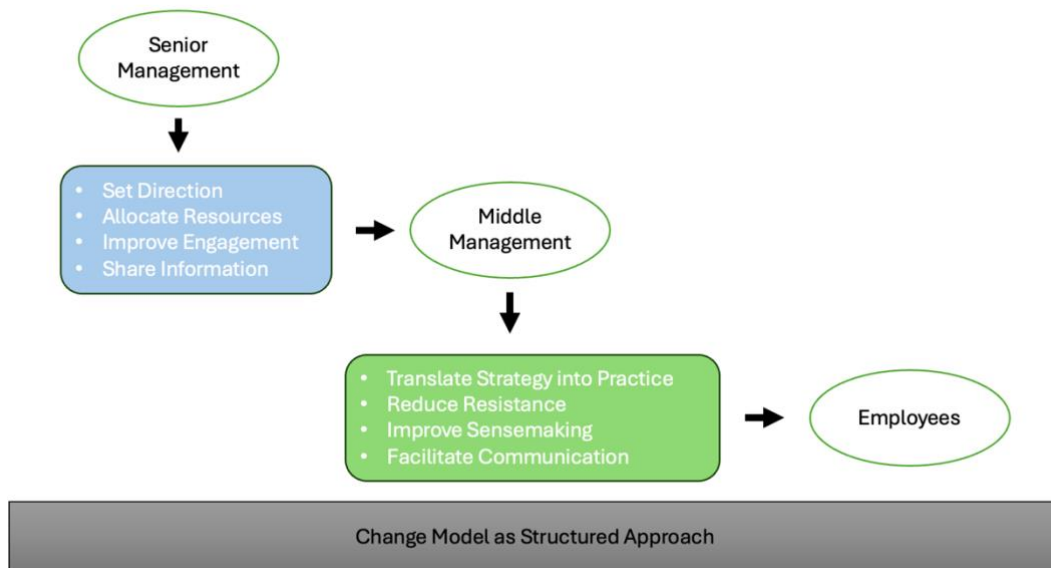


Figure 1. The Distinct Roles of Middle and Senior Management in the Implementation Phase of Change.

4 Conclusion

This thesis examined the essentials of change management, the role of middle management in change implementation and the ways in which senior management can support them during the implementation phase to ensure successful change.

This chapter provides a summary of the study and answers the research questions presented in the introduction. As it is the final part of the thesis, it also presents suggestions for future research based on the findings of the study.

4.1 Analysis of the Research Questions

The purpose of the first research question was to examine what change management is and why it is important. *Change management* refers to the systematic approach of implementing change initiatives in a structured way, while ensuring that the expected benefits are achieved by effectively managing the human side of the transition (Bitta et al., n.d., p. 31). It involves planning, implementing and monitoring change while addressing both technical and human aspects such as leadership, communication and resistance. Change management is important because organizations operate nowadays in increasingly dynamic and complex environments, where the ability to adapt is critical for long-term success. Effective change management reduces resistance, aligns change initiatives with strategic goals and increases the likelihood of successful implementation, especially given the high failure rates of change.

The second research question aimed to explore *the role of middle managers in change management, particularly during the implementation phase*. The literature highlights that middle managers play a crucial role in change management by acting as intermediaries between senior management and employees. Their responsibilities include translating strategic objectives into concrete operational actions, facilitating communication and sensemaking and supporting employees in coping with resistance and uncertainty (see figure 1). Middle managers also contribute to aligning processes

and resources with change requirements and monitoring progress to ensure that change remains on track. They help make change understandable, actionable and sustainable in everyday practice. Effective leadership promotes a supportive change culture, strengthens stakeholder commitment and enables successful implementation, while weak leadership may result resistance, uncertainty and the failure of change efforts (Jinga & Oumer Hassen, 2025, p. 17).

Senior management plays a critical role in supporting and engaging middle managers during change implementation through clear strategic guidance, ensuring resource and capability support as well as sharing information effectively. By providing consistent direction, acting as visible role models and ensuring clear and timely correct information sharing, senior management strengthens middle managers' ability to implement change effectively. In addition, investing in training and allocating sufficient resources enables middle managers to balance change management with their other operational responsibilities. Finally, fostering commitment and psychological ownership by involving middle managers in decision-making and demonstrating trust enhances their engagement and motivation. Overall, senior management support is essential for empowering middle managers to act as effective change agents and for ensuring the successful implementation of change (see figure 1). The success of the change implementation depends on the fit between senior management support towards Middle managers and the sensemaking of middle managers towards employees.

Although there is no universal agreement on the best way to manage change, researchers agree that change is occurring faster than ever and is driven by various internal and external factors that affect all organizations across industries (Vrcelj, 2023, p. 11). Therefore, it is important that middle management understands their role in the change process and that senior management provides the support that is both timely and sufficiently comprehensive.

4.2 Future Research

Future research on the roles of middle and senior managers in change management could be directed toward exploring the growing influence of artificial intelligence and data-driven leadership. In the future, organizations can enhance well-known change management models with AI to refine strategies and to make better decisions. In practice this could be to forecast potential resistance, task distribution and tailor career development paths (Dhawan et al., 2025; Mahamoud Hasan et al., 2025). According to Orabi (2024, p. 209), AI and machine learning have the potential to increase overall organizational performance and also their ability and to alter change management allowing companies to do more with less. In this context, future studies could examine how different levels of management utilize AI to change initiatives. Overall, future research could provide valuable insights into how digital technologies reshape leadership roles and the dynamics of change management.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Use of AI

Artificial intelligence tool (Microsoft Copilot) was used in this thesis as a language support.