



Vaasan yliopisto  
UNIVERSITY OF VAASA

Emilia Salminen

**Master's thesis:**

Strategy Implementation from a Microfoundational lens: The Role of  
Middle Managers

Johtamisen Yksikkö  
Master's thesis in Strategic  
Business Development

Vaasa 2026

---

**VAASAN YLIOPISTO****Johtamisen Yksikkö**

<b>Tekijä:</b>	Emilia Salminen		
<b>Tutkielman nimi:</b>	Strategy Implementation from a Microfoundational lens: The Role of Middle Managers		
<b>Tutkinto:</b>	Kauppätieteiden maisteri		
<b>Oppiaine:</b>	Strategic Business Development		
<b>Työn ohjaaja:</b>	Marko Kohtamäki		
<b>Valmistumisvuosi:</b>	2026	<b>Sivumäärä:</b>	57

---

**TIIVISTELMÄ:**

Strategiatutkimus on kehittynyt merkittävästi viime vuosikymmenien aikana. Kehityksestä huolimatta organisaatiot kamppailevat edelleen strategian toimeenpanon kanssa. Strategiatutkimus on pitkälti keskittynyt makrotasolle, mutta viimeaikainen tutkimus on siirtänyt painopistettä vähitellen makrotasolta mikrotasolle. Microfoundations -näkökulma tarkastelee makro- sekä mikrotason välistä dynamiikkaa ja tutkii näiden kahden tason keskinäistä vuorovaikutusta. Sen avulla voidaan paremmin ymmärtää yksilötason toiminnan vaikutusta laajemmassa mittakaavassa. Tarkastelemalla strategian toimeenpanoa organisaatioissa mikrotason kautta, kuten yksilöpiirteiden, rutiineiden sekä kommunikaatioyhteyksien vaikutusten myötä, voidaan löytää yhteyksiä makrotasolle sekä tehdä tärkeitä havaintoja, jotka auttavat strategian toimeenpanossa.

Keskijohdolla on merkittävä rooli strategian toimeenpanossa erityisesti suurissa organisaatioissa, joissa he toimivat ylimmän johdon sekä operatiivisen tiimin välissä. Heidän toimintansa ja kokemustensa ymmärtäminen on siten olennaista strategian toteutuksen onnistumisen ja epäonnistumisen tutkinnassa. Tämä tutkimus tarkastelee keskijohdon roolia strategian toimeenpanossa, microfoundations -näkökulman kautta. Tutkimus pyrkii syventämään ymmärrystä keskijohdon roolista strategian toimeenpanijana sekä selvittämään, minkälaisilla mikrotason keinoilla, rutiineilla tai luonteenpiirteillä on tähän vaikutusta. Tutkimuksessa käytetään aineistoa, joka on kerätty haastattelemalla eri organisaatioiden keskijohtoa.

Tuloksissa korostuvat keskeiset strategian toimeenpanoon vaikuttavat tekijät, kuten OKR-mallien, empatian sekä viestinnän merkitys. Nämä teemat havainnollistavat mikrotason käytäntöjen vaikutusta tiimi- sekä organisaatiotason tuloksiin. Haastatellut keskijohdon edustajat kuvailivat strategian toimeenpanon olevan haastavaa, joka vahvistaa mikrotason tutkimuksen merkityksen. Tämä tutkimus osoittaa, että mikrotason tarkastelu tarjoaa hyödyllisiä näkökulmia organisaatiolle sekä keskijohdolle strategian toimeenpanoprosessissa.

---

**AVAINSANAT:** strategy, microfoundations, strategy implementation, middle management

---

**UNIVERSITY OF VAASA****Johtamisen Yksikkö**

<b>Author:</b>	Emilia Salminen		
<b>Title of the thesis:</b>	Strategy Implementation from a Microfoundational lens: The Role of Middle Managers		
<b>Degree:</b>	Master of Science in Economics and Business Administration		
<b>Discipline:</b>	Strategic Business Development		
<b>Supervisor:</b>	Marko Kohtamäki		
<b>Year:</b>	2026	<b>Pages:</b>	57

---

**ABSTRACT:**

Despite the significant developments within the strategy field over the past decades, strategy implementation remains a persistent challenge for organizations. Strategy research throughout the history has focused on macro-level, although recently, the focus has been shifting more towards the micro-level. Microfoundations -perspective investigates the dynamics and interplay between the macro- and micro-level and provides a useful lens for examining how individual actions and interactions shape broader organizational outcomes. Looking at strategy execution in organizations from micro-level, such as characteristics, routines and communication styles, beneficial perceptions can be made, which can be utilized in strategy implementation.

Middle managers play a critical role in strategy implementation, particularly in large organizations where they operate between the top management and operational teams. Understanding their actions and experiences is therefore essential for explaining successes and failures in strategy execution. This study investigates the role of middle managers through a microfoundational lens, exploring their impact on the strategy implementation process. This research aims to deepen the understanding of middle managers' role as executing the strategy and find out which different micro-level actions, routines or characteristics impact on this. Data for the study was collected through interviews with middle managers from multiple organizations.

The findings highlight key factors influencing strategy implementation, including the role of OKR's, empathy and communication. These themes illustrate how micro-level practises contribute to team- and organization-level outcomes. The interviewed middle managers consistently described strategy implementation as challenging, reinforcing the importance of micro-level focus. The study suggests that focusing on microfoundations could offer valuable insights into improving strategy execution and provide practical implications for organizations seeking to strengthen implementation processes.

---

**KEYWORDS:** strategy, microfoundations, strategy implementation, middle management

## Contents

1	Introduction	6
1.1	Motivation for the study	6
1.2	Research gap	7
1.3	Aim and research question	8
1.4	Thesis structure	9
2	Literature review	10
2.1	Strategy implementation	10
2.1.1	Conceptualization of strategy in the thesis	14
2.2	Microfoundations framework	15
2.2.1	Bathtub model	19
2.3	The role of middle managers	21
2.4	Synthesis	23
3	Methodology	25
3.1	Methodological approach	25
3.2	Data collection	27
3.2.1	Unit of analysis	27
3.2.2	Data Collection Method	28
3.3	Data analysis	30
3.4	The assessment of the quality of the data	32
4	Findings	33
4.1	Strategy implementation	33
4.1.1	Guiding implementation through goals and structures	34
4.1.2	Breaking down strategy and setting OKRs	36
4.2	Middle managers' communication in strategy implementation	37

4.3	Middle managers' engagement at the operational level	40
4.4	Synthesis	42
5	Discussion	44
5.1	Theoretical and managerial implications	49
5.2	Suggestions for future research	50
5.3	Limitations	51
	References	52
	Appendices	56
	Interview questions listed	56

## Figures

Figure 1.	Structure of thesis	9
Figure 2.	Bathtub model (Contractor et. al, 2018)	19
Figure 3	Results in a visual form	43

## Tables

Table 1.	Interviews	29
Table 2.	Data structure	31

# 1 Introduction

This study aims to provide more comprehensive understanding on the interplay between micro- and macro level phenomena in organizations and especially its effect on strategy and strategy implementation through microfoundations perspective. This chapter presents the background of the study as well as research questions that the study further on aims to provide answers for. Structure of the thesis will also be presented.

## 1.1 Motivation for the study

Strategy has been a widely researched topic for decades, yet it remains as an essential construct for any company that aims to gather systematic understanding of the direction of the company and the means to achieve the targets (Barney, 1991). Instead of focusing on large-scale organization view, this study emphasizes the individuals that the strategy fundamentally gets implemented through; their actions, interactions and thoughts. The focus of the research is born out of the interest between micro- and macro level correlation in an organizational context and the recognition of the vast majority of strategy research focusing solely on the macro level (Felin & Foss, 2015). Without questioning the necessity of comprehensive macro-level understanding, this study acknowledges the close relationship between macro-level and micro-level phenomena and the need for micro-level knowledge to properly understand macro-level (Contractor et. al., 2019). Hence, in order to comprehend the “big picture”, individuals and micro-level processes need to be studied rather than neglected or overlooked. Therefore, the particular focus of this study are the individuals and micro-level phenomena.

Creating a strategy may be relatively easy – the challenges and complexity often begin along the execution. Estimated percentage of eventually failing strategic initiatives is around 50-90%, often due to inadequate skills or resources in the implementation phase (Cândido & Santos 2015). As strategy execution consists of individuals executing it, it could be assumed that the root causes – whether the implementation has succeeded or not - can be found from the individual level. The underlying argument of this study is

that successful strategy execution is dependent on the people in the organization and the individual level should be deeply researched in order to achieve the desired outcome. As an example of the correlation between the micro and macro level is that individual-level behaviours have an impact on organizational outcomes. Emotions and intuitions – individual psychological processes – influence how middle managers perceive organizations' actions, which then impacts on the implementation process. This study aims to add on the existing research on strategy implementation by using a microfoundational lens. Individual psychological processes are a strong impactor and should not be overlooked. Therefore, we need to elaborate our understanding on its impact on strategy implementation.

## **1.2 Research gap**

Regardless of the existing comprehensive research on strategic management a research gap in strategy implementation from microfoundations perspective can be identified. Recent strategic organization research emphasizes structure, routines and capabilities, leaving the core foundation of any organization into shade – individuals (Felin & Foss, 2005). The significance of nonconscious and emotional processes in strategic management should not be neglected, however it seems that these are inadequately considered in the field (Hodkinson & Healey, 2009). Looking at organizations from macro-level is beneficial, however by shifting the focus on micro-level and individuals – who are actually making the decisions - we can discover new angles and improve our understanding on strategy execution. According to Felin & Foss (2015) emphasizing individual as the primary starting point for strategic research is an area lacking research, with potential to turn out extremely beneficial. Behind every strategic decision in an organization is an individual or a group of individuals – each of which are shaped by personal propensities, experiences and demographic factors. These characteristics lead and affect on different strategic decisions. Due to only few restrictions in the field, multiple theories around microfoundations have emerged.

After having discovered the lacuna for further research on microfoundations, significant process has been made. In fact, various researchers have proven micro-level and individual actions to be determinative concerning macro-level outcomes. Regardless of the increasing research on micro-level and individuals, the need for further research clearly remains. The most profound reason to why the vast majority of strategy research have a structural perspective over managerial one lies in the elusiveness and difficulty of studying humans (Duhaime, Stimpert, & Chesley, 2011). Conceptual challenges and difficult data partly explain the lack of research in this area (Contractor et al., 2018). It is time-consuming and difficult to gather micro-level data and examining individual characteristics requires deep interviews. In addition, bridging the gap between micro- and macro-level is complex. The topic is intractable to measure due to the complexity of examining personal characteristics. Furthermore, acquiring valid data often requires long-term data collection. Yet, after the 2000's, vast development has been seen on the field and the growth is expected to continue that path.

### **1.3 Aim and research question**

As the research gap for micro-level processes in an organization has been presented, this study aims to provide insights and contribution on the individuals' role on strategy implementation. Driving successful implementation in organizations requires individuals; more specifically, middle managers have a strong role in it as the strategy tends to flow down to all levels via middle managers. Therefore, this study presents the research problem through middle managers in large organizations. As touched upon earlier, this study approaches the problem through using microfoundations perspective as a theoretical lens. Inherent for microfoundations perspective is to emphasize and focus on individuals; their characteristics and interactions. The term will be opened up further on in the literature review. The author is interested in finding out how middle managers are able to successfully participate in the strategy implementation through a microfoundational lens: are there any recurring patterns or certain characteristics that can be identified? Thus, the research question is:

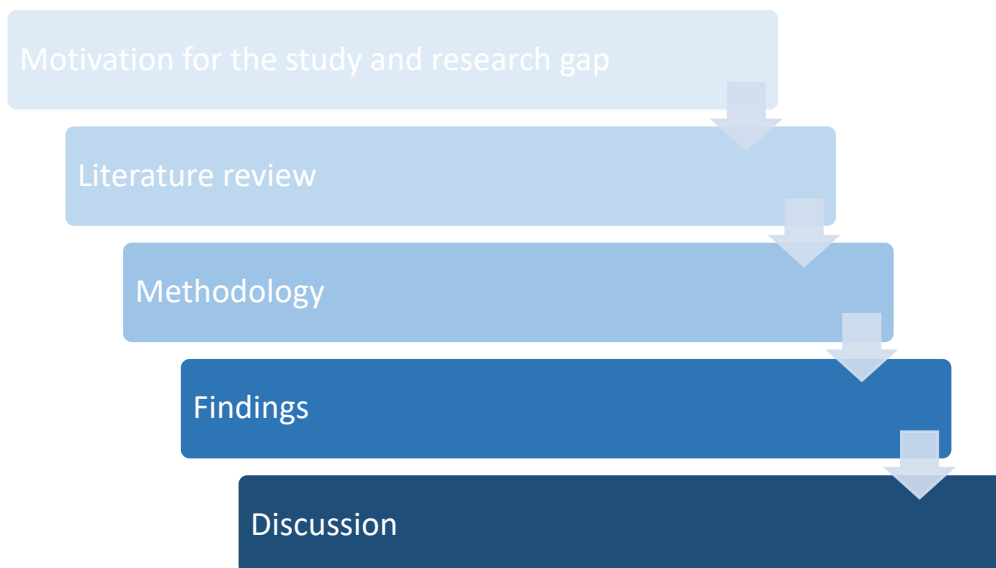
*What is the role of middle managers in strategy implementation?*

Following the research question, the following supporting question has been identified:

- 1) *How to understand strategy implementation and the role of middle managers through the microfoundations framework?*

#### **1.4 Thesis structure**

This thesis consists of five chapters. To begin with introduction, the first chapter presents the motivation for the study and background for the research. Continuing with the research gap and research questions identified, the first chapter concludes to presenting the structure of the thesis, which “Figure 1” also illustrates. The second chapter presents the theoretical background for the study to prepare for the subsequent chapters qualitative research. That is followed by methodology of the study and findings. Lastly, the discussion ties the research together by combining the findings and theory to relevant implications and offering the reader intriguing viewpoints to deepen the understanding of the matter and its relevance.



**Figure 1. Structure of thesis**

## **2 Literature review**

This literature review acts as a theoretical basis for the subsequent research part of the thesis by aiming to determine and analyse the relevant theories and research regarding the topic. The literature review begins with presenting strategy implementation and as a support for that defines the theory behind strategy and its background. Secondly, this chapter will cover the theoretical lens of the study – microfoundations – by defining the term and analysing its origins and impact on the field of strategic management. As a continuum to microfoundations a widely used bathtub model is introduced to offer practical insights and concretism to support the microfoundations framework. Thirdly, the literature review provides theory on the role of middle managers. Lastly, the literature review concludes to a synthesis of strategy and microfoundations to tie the two topics together and illustrate the relationship between them.

### **2.1 Strategy implementation**

Multiple definitions have emerged around strategy implementation. Floyd & Woolridge (1992) define strategy implementation as the managerial interventions aligning organizational action with strategic intervention. Tawse and Tabesh (2021) define strategy as “dynamic, iterative and complex process” that consists of different actions done by employees and managers towards bringing contemplation into life. Hrebiniak (2006) conceptualizes strategy into a managerial process in which strategies are translated into coordinated actions through commitment, coordination and collaboration across organizational levels. The strategy unfolds over time through a series of integrated decisions and actions, which often rely greatly on middle managers. Strategy implementation is a part of the strategic management process; separate from strategy formulation (Hrebiniak, 2006).

Implementing strategy efficiently is essential to an organization's success and it may provide a competitive edge for the organization (Tawse & Tabesh, 2021). Strategy implementation refers to consistent ground-level action taken in the organization in

order to achieve strategic goals set (Whittington et al., 2023, chapter 15.1.) According to Bonoma (1984), in order to achieve the intended outcome of the strategy the firm must succeed in the implementation (Noble, 1999). As Bonoma (1984) and Cespedes (1991) have stated, achieving tremendous success regarding new strategy requires excellent strategy formulation as well as implementation, meaning that these two are strongly connected and have influence on one another (Noble, 1999, p. 132). Nonetheless, Noble (1999) argue strategy implementation to be left in the shadow of strategy formulation in organizations and research too often and points out the still existing research gap around strategy implementation. Organizations are often strong in planning and poor strategy is rarely the challenge. Consistent to Noble's viewpoint, Tawse & Tabesh (2021) have pointed out the lack of conceptual understanding of the strategy implementation process despite of its importance being widely recognized and agreed on. Aligned to previous statements, according to Hrebiniak (2006) observation, while the strategy formulation is greatly appreciated in research and organizations' management, the execution is continuously receiving inadequate attention. The common sentiment over the strategy implementation seems to remain ambiguous throughout the decades regardless of its' equally agreed relevance in the organization's strategy. In addition, implementation takes significantly longer compared to strategy formulation – and the time of the implementation process varies greatly between organisations depending on multiple factors, such as the managers, size of organization and the new strategy (Hrebiniak, 2006). Implementation also involves significantly more people than formulation process, which highlights the need for clear communication and coordination. These factors inherently add challenges related to the process.

Due to strategy's dynamic nature and variance between organizational contexts one might argue that strategy implementation is dependent on the organizational context due to its intractable nature cannot be strictly defined. Nevertheless, several frameworks have been developed to structure and support the implementation process by identifying key organizational elements that must be aligned for successful execution.

One universally recognized framework is Higgins' (2005) Aligned 8S Model, which builds on McKinsey's well-established 7S Model, placing explicit emphasis on strategy implementation. Aligning with the contemporary organizational practices, the 8S emphasizes strategy execution and extends the 7S framework by incorporating measurement of outcomes and performance. In addition, another difference compared to the original model is replacement of "skills" with "resources" to be more aligned with the contemporary organizational practises. This extended framework, called "The Aligned 8S Model", emphasises the importance of alignment between different functions. The model includes eight "S"; strategy, structure, systems and processes, leadership style, staff, resources, shared values, and strategic performance, each representing one crucial point in order to achieve successful strategy implementation.

To better illustrate the concept of misalignment in strategy, Higgins has created an "Unaligned 8S Model", which depicts the common status and conditions prevailing in many organizations. The function of this illustration is to reveal the impact of unaligned processes on the strategy implementation. Despite all the "S" having a certain direction and goal, in case the directions differ with one another a unified end result is impossible to achieve, which leads to partly wasted resources. Thus, defining aligned goals according to each "S" is significant in terms of the successful strategy execution. While the framework highlights the structural and organizational requirements for strategy implementation, is limited in providing full insights on how strategy is enacted through middle managers and individuals. Strategy implementation is therefore often approached from a macro-level perspective. While understanding structural and organizational conditions is important, such a focus has limitations, which motivate the adoption of a microfoundational framework later in the literature review.

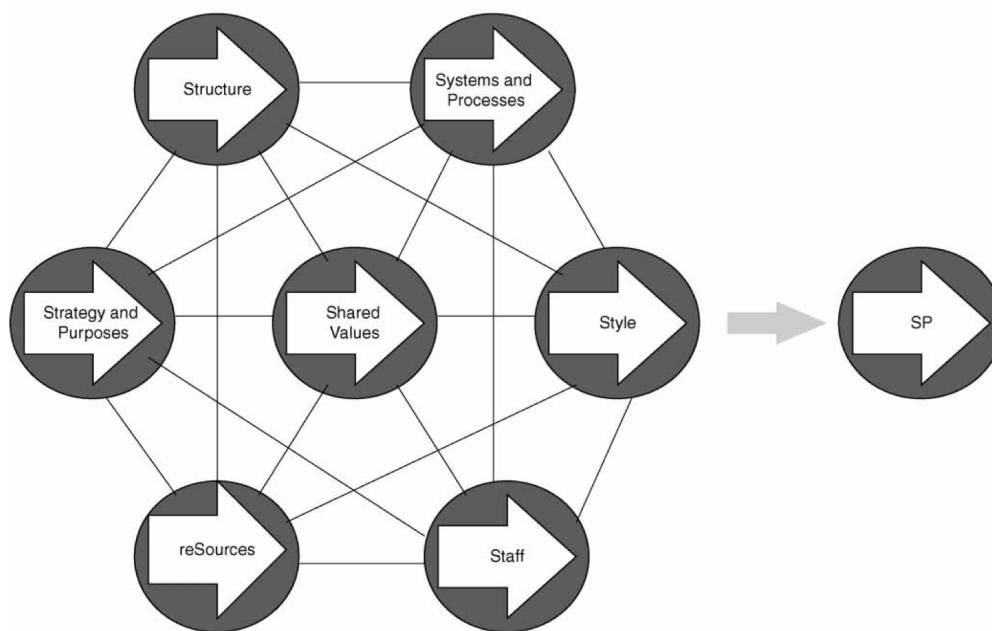


Figure 1. Aligned 8S model (Higgins, 2005)

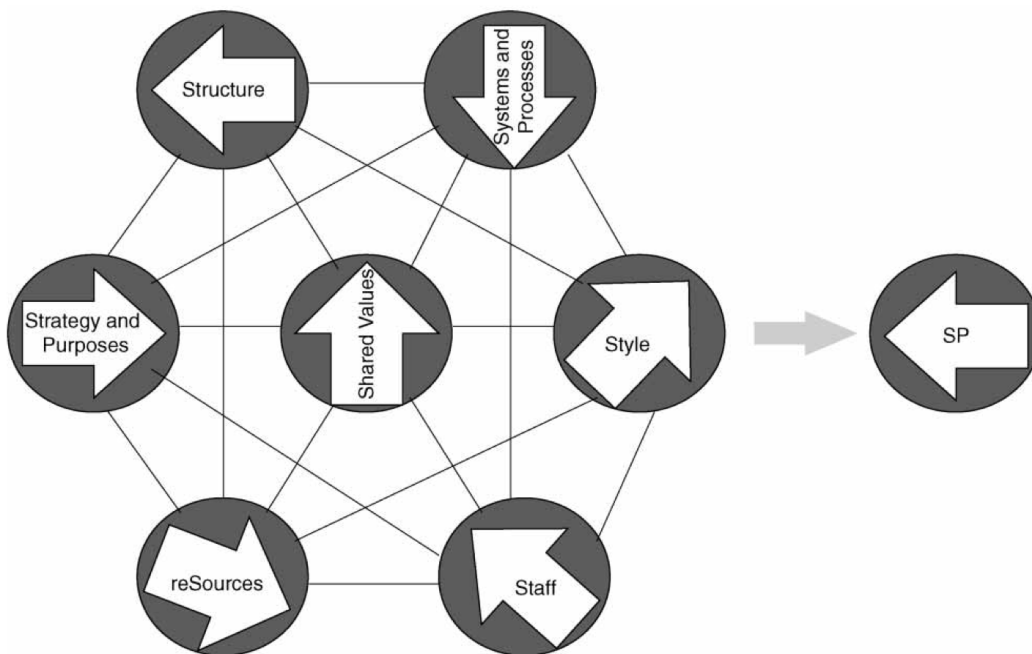


Figure 2. Unaligned 8S model (Higgins, 2005)

### 2.1.1 Conceptualization of strategy in the thesis

Rather than reviewing all perspectives on strategy – which are many – this section aims to clarify how strategy is conceptualized in this thesis in order to support the analysis of strategy implementation. This chapter mainly focuses on the strategy conceptualizations emphasizing action and decision-making, as these are the most relevant for understanding strategy implementation in practice.

Mintzberg's well-established framework of the "five P's" defines strategy as *plan, ploy, pattern, position* and *perspective* (Mintzberg et al., 1998). While the framework provides valuable conceptualizations on the multidimensional nature of strategy, this thesis approaches strategy as a *pattern*. Strategy as a pattern refers to a stream of consistent decisions and actions that eventually accumulate into organizational outcomes at the collective level. The purpose of this approach is to draw attention to the level of action – emerging through behaviors rather than existing as a predefined plan. Hence, looking at strategy through "pattern" aligns with studying explicitly strategy implementation.

Approaching strategy as a pattern does not exclude the intentional plan behind it. In fact, despite the emergent nature of the definition of "pattern" there probably are deliberate characteristics as well. Strategies can be roughly distributed into two categories: deliberate intentions and emergent outcomes, and in most cases, strategy is a combination of both (Mintzberg, 2008). Deliberate refers to a strategy that is realized just as intended, whereas emergent for one that evolves throughout the process and is not realized the same as it was intended. (Mintzberg, H., 2008). Business environments tend to change rapidly, and issues may arise unexpectedly, and therefore new strategies emerge as a response for that (Duhaime, Stimpert, & Chesley, 2011). A deliberate strategy refers to an environment that is fairly predictable. However, today's world often offers rather unpredictable circumstances and predicting might not be too easy.

Contemporary strategy research further emphasizes the dynamic nature and the continuous pursuit of competitive advantage. Vuorinen (2013) argues that strategy is increasingly involving continuous adaptation and emergent elements rather than traditionally executing fixed long-term plans. Accordingly, Porter (1991) highlights the need for firms to remain dynamic and continuously seek new opportunities in order to sustain competitive advantage. These perspectives reinforce the view of strategy as an evolving process shaped by ongoing decisions and adaptive approach rather than a static fixed plan.

This thesis conceptualizes strategy as a dynamic combination of deliberate intention and emergent adaptation that unfold through patterns of decisions and actions over time. This understanding provides a suitable foundation for examining strategy implementation as a process and prepares the ground for the subsequent introduction of the micro-foundational perspective, which focuses on how such patterns arise from individual-level actions and interactions within organizations.

## **2.2 Microfoundations framework**

To achieve more profound understanding of macro-level phenomena and decisions in organizations, the focus should be shifted from macro to micro-level (Felin & al., 2015, p. 575). Aiming to comprehend the correlation between individual-level and organizational-level factors, microfoundations seeks to broaden the other existing micro research by examining individuals in macro contexts (Felin & al., 2015, p. 600). Microfoundations can be defined as a collection of heuristics for formulating theories and theory-based empiricism that looks for causal explanations for firm-level characteristics and strategies based on the unique behaviours, interactions, and tendencies of organisational members (Contractor & al., 2019). It is rather a movement or perspective than a theory, which provides valuable heuristics for macro management and can be used in making strategic decisions as well as comprehending the previous ones made (Felin & al., 2015, p. 618). According to Contractor & al. (2019, p. 4) the aim of microfoundations literature is “connecting the thinking and backgrounds of individual managers with

strategic decisions their firm makes”. Despite the growing number of research in the field of microfoundations, a consensus in defining the term is still missing (Barney, Felin, 2013). Nonetheless, the core of any microfoundational discussion is addressing the link between micro- and macro-levels (Barney & Felin, 2013). The following citation ingeniously summarizes the underlying purpose and benefit of analyzing microfoundations and the micro- and macro-level relationship:

*“The call for microfoundations is a methodological point about the power of looking at lower-level constituent units when explaining higher levels of analysis (Barney & Felin, 2013)”.*

Micro- and macro-level are strongly interlinked. As many dependent variables and organizational capabilities are often looked at from macro-perspective, microfoundations can offer valuable insights and a shift of focus leading to improved performance in many ways (Molina-Azorin, 2014). Delving into the subject of individual interactions, examples of concrete outcomes microfoundations can explain are predicting competitive advantage over operational performance of a company or heterogeneity in social outcomes (Felin & al., 2015, p. 600). Despite acknowledging the importance of profound comprehension on macro-level functions in an organization, Molina-Azorin (2014) advocates that individual micro-level actions affect the macro-level outcomes and firm performance. After all, macro-level decisions fundamentally consist of individual-level actions and there are various characteristics that may affect decision-making, such as emotions, perceptions and personal experiences (Molina-Azorin, 2014, p.104). As Foss (2011) points out, a firm’s certain capability originally results from complex micro-level actions and interactions that eventually lead to macro-level capability that the organization can then benefit from. Individuals not only have influence on firm performance and capabilities, but the organization as a whole and the collective behaviour of it (Molina-Azorin, 2014). Thus, every firm should notice the micro-level effect on the organization, where the key to superior performance on macro-level often lies as well.

The roots of microfoundations movement in economics have arisen in the early 1960's (Foss, 2011). The conversation around micro and macro theories had been continuing and causing tension in different scientific orientations, such as sociology and economics, for a long period of time, and as a result, microfoundations perspective originated. For reference, social sciences have been debating for a hundred years on whether individuals or social collectives should be emphasized (Felin & Foss, 2015, p. 579). According to Felin & Foss (2015, p. 597), microfoundational work has been increasing rapidly in terms of emphasizing its importance and the vast growing amount of research published around the movement. Thus, despite of its origins tracing back to 1960's, the movement is somewhat recent and there is still room for further work. Although microfoundations perspective is relatively new and has only taken off in research during the last decades, the roots of the perspective go way back. On 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century humans began to look for explanation from individuals for certain occurrences (Contractor et al., 2018). Considering that, one could argue that the relatively late foundation of microfoundations perspective and emphasis on individual-level in organizations is bizarre.

Regardless of an increasing interest in microfoundations especially from 2010 and onwards, the movement has faced a share of criticism. Barney and Felin (2013) define a few misconceptions around microfoundations in the article "What are microfoundations?". Microfoundations have received critique of sharing too many similarities with other micro disciplines in the strategy field, such as organizational behaviour. Other causes for criticism have been similar concepts to other fields applied to macro level and microfoundations debilitating structure on macro-level, leading to questioning the whole usefulness of microfoundations (Felin & Foss, 2015, p. 607). Barney and Felin (2013) deny the interpretation about microfoundations solely focusing on individuals, and instead emphasize the necessity to include the interactions and the organizational context in order to achieve a comprehensive approach to microfoundations.

To get a stronger grasp on why microfoundations matter and differ from other micro disciplines, linkages between microfoundations and micro disciplines have to be looked at. Microfoundations shares many similarities with micro disciplines, however their focus differs despite of the adjacent topics (Felin & Foss, 2015, p. 600). Instead of aiming to mimic the theories in micro research – the core of microfoundations is to add on to existing research by taking it further and broadening the area of micro research by linking micro to macro instead of remaining solely on micro-level (Felin & Foss, p. 600). Later on the author will delve into “The Coleman Bathtub” in chapter 2.4., which further discusses about the distinctions between micro research and microfoundations.

Microfoundations offer a causal explanation for the emergence, development, and contribution of strategic resources and competencies to company performance. Instead of approaching microfoundations on solely abstract level, scholars have increasingly examined them within the context of resource-based theory (RBV) (Foss, 2011). The resource-based view (RBV) explains differences in firm performance by focusing on firm-specific resources and capabilities that are valuable and rare (Barney et al., 1991). In this perspective, competitive advantage arises not primarily from industry structure but from internal resource heterogeneity across firms. The field of strategic management research has frequently relied on RBV, since it provides a powerful explanation for why some firms outperform others (Foss, 2011). Barney et al. (1991) argue that since its development, RBV has become one of the most dominant theoretical frameworks for understanding organizational dynamics and competitive advantage. Despite its macro-level focus on firm resources, RBV has increasingly moved toward incorporating micro-foundational explanations, that connect individual actions and interactions with organizational outcomes. Progress in strategic management research requires greater attention to micro-level processes underlying firm performance (Barney et al., 1991).

### 2.2.1 Bathtub model

For illustrating the concept of microfoundations and offering structure to the movement, James Coleman has developed a bathtub model or the “Coleman boat” (Felin & Foss, 2015, p. 590). The model aims to differentiate micro and macro level – individual and organization - from each other, providing a general illustration of correlation between micro and macro factors through a layered structure (Felin & Foss, 2015, p. 590). The model has faced criticism due to its simpleness and it has been criticised for being blunt. Nonetheless, another angle to look at the model is through its flexibility, which makes it feasible for different contexts as it does not set rigorous rubrics nor limits for usage (Contractor & al. (2019, p. 9).

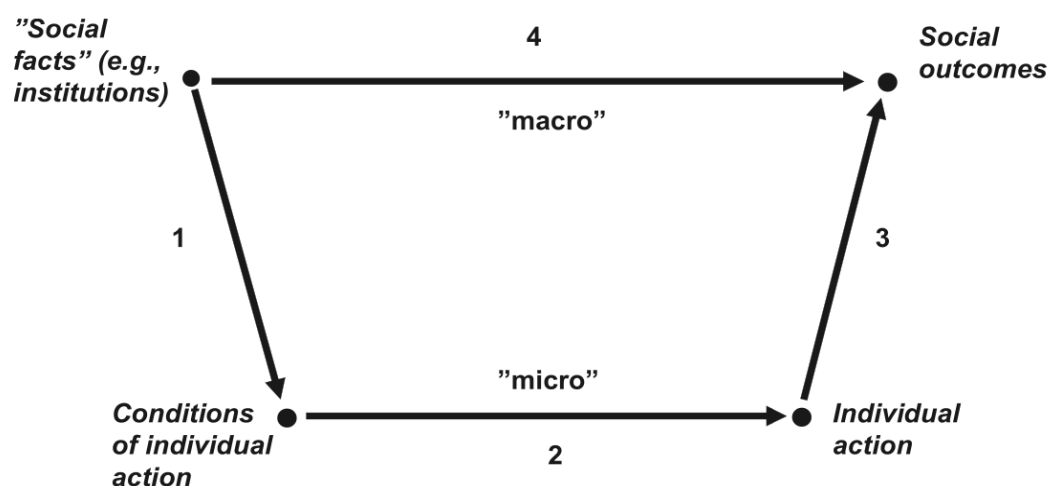


Figure 2. Bathtub model (Contractor et. al, 2018)

Contractor et. al (2018) walk the reader through the different arrows of the Coleman boat in the article “Viewing global strategy through a microfoundations lens”. As the fundamental aim of microfoundations lies in discovering causal explanations for macro-level phenomena in firms from employees and their predilections and actions, Coleman boat is dyadic in terms of including two levels: micro and macro. The model consists of four arrows illustrating causal flow among micro- and macro-levels and leading to different meanings and representations each, which will be presented next.

To begin from the overview, according to Contractor et al. (2018), the nodes in the middle of arrows have two meanings: for macro-level they illustrate different phenomena and for micro-level behaviours and actions. Depicting macro factors such as institutions, the first arrow reflects how the macro level factors have a hold over individuals and power of shaping their natural propensities. The second arrow represents how the prevailing conditions of individuals - that partly originate from arrow one – determine the enthusiasm and will the individuals preserve. Consequently, this effects on the actions the individual takes. Hence, the second arrow represents micro-micro relationship. Based on the second arrow and individual actions, different outcomes arise which is the key to arrow three. Micro-level actions lead to macro-level (described in the model as “social”) outcomes, as the third arrow presents. Lastly, the fourth arrow is known to be reviewed only after a considerate investigation of the other arrows at first. Alone it does not offer anything but shallow explanations due to its bypassing of micro-level factors. Therefore, all the arrows should be contemplated in order for it to derive to fully uncovering the causality and understanding the phenomena.

As the Coleman bathtub model is malleable and leaves room for versatile utilization, Contractor & al. (2019, p. 9) suggest an alternative for acquiring more depth into the analysis by vertically arranging the bathtubs on top of one another. In that case, each bathtub has its own level or purpose to represent, such as a team or an individual. Trying out different alternatives for the bathtub model creates new perspectives for the issue. For the purposes of this research the Bathtub model can function as an illustrator between the two levels – micro and macro – and add concreteness to the research problem through shedding light on the interaction between these levels. Applied to this study and understanding strategy implementation through the bathtub model the pattern could be applied as the following: first arrow represents formal structures/decisions in the organization from macro to micro -level. Second arrow visualizes micro-micro interaction, such as reacting and interacting between one another. The third arrow presents the micro-macro phenomenon as micro-level

interactions as a result for a decision for example, turn into macro-level outcomes such as organization-level resistance or satisfaction on the decision. Finally, the outcome and results modify and shape the organization as a whole.

### **2.3 The role of middle managers**

Middle managers occupy a role that is positioned between the seniors and leadership and junior or other employees, which allows them to coordinate between different levels (Harding et al. 2014). A middle manager's role in organization is impactful, as their position enables them to contribute to decision-making and hence, they effect on lower-level employees and influence organization culture through their actions (Contractor & al., 2019). According to Mintzberg's definition (1989) middle managers hold responsibility over a particular business unit and are positioned in below the top management and above the first-level management – which defines them as middle managers. This study focuses on large companies that have similar organizational structure which clearly includes the level of middle management.

Middle managers role has evolved throughout the history as they have not traditionally been involved in the strategy process (Floyd & Wooldrigde, 1992). However, over past decades a shift has occurred and middle manager's role has evolved to influence strategy implementation as well as defining strategy. They are implementing the strategy through communication, coordination and interpretation (Huy, 2001). The position in the middle is beneficial as it enables capturing the context of strategy as well as the effects and requirements from each level. Especially in large organizations strategy gets implemented through middle managers; they are familiar with different organizational structures and are able to take consistent action towards new ways of working while maintaining a harmony in the organization (Huy, 2001). Due to possessing wide knowledge of organizational processes and core values middle manager's contribution is highly impactful in strategy work (Huy, 2001). Additionally, Floyd and Lane (2000) conceptualize middle managers strategic roles as championing, facilitating, synthesizing and implementing. Through these roles, middle managers translate

strategic information into operational level and action while simultaneously navigating information to top-level management. From the perspective of microfoundations middle managers are important, since they hold a critical role in linking individual actions to organizational-level strategic outcomes (Floyd & Lane, 2000). The underlying consensus between different authors on the topic sets in to middle managers operating in an irreplaceable position, possessing strategically necessary information from below and above them. The strategically unique position occupied by middle managers allows them to gather a comprehensive understanding of the company's operations and drive the strategy implementation forward.

Previous studies have discovered evidence for middle managers enhancing flexibility in organizations and facilitating adaptability of new principles and strategic initiatives (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992). Huy (2001) emphasizes middle managers' emotional capabilities, which are highly influential as enablers for strategic change. Middle managers' often have acquired the skill of maintaining stability in organization while simultaneously promoting change. In addition, they are familiar with operational processes which in turn allows them to recognize emergent issues when they arise or alternatively new opportunities (Mintzberg, 2008).

Regardless of the increased amount of research on the level of middle managers during past decades the need for further research on the topic of middle managers effect on strategic implementation still exists. Delving into micro-level and mechanisms that middle managers use for influencing strategy implementation in practice is less explored, however have a lot of potential for exploring.

## 2.4 Synthesis

Strategy and microfoundations are strongly intertwined, as strategic outcomes ultimately emerge from the actions, decisions and interactions of individuals within organizations. While strategy research has traditionally focused on organizational-level structures, the microfoundations perspective emphasizes the fundamental impact of individuals and their knowledge, capabilities and behaviours (Felin & Foss, 2015). Therefore, as understanding strategy requires attention to strategic intent and objectives, the micro-level must be focused on to understand how strategy unfolds in practise and is sustained. Therefore, strategy implementation is a converging point between strategy and microfoundations. Despite of being the process of execution of predined plans, strategy implementation is a process in which strategic intentions are translated into action by organizational members (Floyd & Woolridge, 1992). From the perspective of microfoundations, strategy implementation is dependent on how individuals coordinate and realize strategic tasks in their everyday work, which eventually leads to micro-level actions accumulating into implementation outcomes in an organizational level (Barney & Felin, 2013).

From a strategic management perspective, the fundamental goal of strategy is to achieve and sustain competitive advantage (Foss, 2015). Similarly to strategic management, one of microfoundations perspective's core concepts is in achieving competitive advantage in an organization through managers' decisions. (Molina-Azorin, 2014, p. 104). Microfoundations contribute to this objective by explaining how competitive advantage arises through individual-level actions, decisions and skills that eventually shape organizational capabilities (Molina-Azorin, 2014). Despite of management not having control over individuals and their characteristics such as personal traits, strategic outcomes can be influenced through hiring, role design and allocation of responsibilities (Foss, 2011). Thus, they can align the personnel with the strategy of a company and aquire the competences they are looking for. This illustrates the importance and power of microfoundations in strategic management. Hence, by integrating microfoundations

into strategic management research the understanding on the correlation between individual actions and organizational outcomes can be expanded (Barney et al., 2011). Thus, microfoundations perspective benefit strategic management by providing insight into how strategies can be executed through micro-level mechanisms.

The integration of microfoundations into strategic management research reflects a broader shift in the field. In the early strategy research rational and analytical models were emphasized, as one major milestone in the field of strategic management was Porter's positioning approach from the 1980's (Porter, 1996). It was widely used and shaped strategic thinking for years. However, there was a slow realization of the approach not fully explaining the differences in firm performances. In order to comprehend the knowledge, capabilities and proficiency prevailing in the organization – which directly correlate with strategy – individuals must be understood on a deeper level (Felin & Foss, 2015, p.442). Thus, it led to attention shift from outside perspective to inside the firm, which then caused the increased popularity of resource-based theory and further on the rise of microfoundations perspective as well (Foss, 2011). Recently, psychological perspectives have increasingly been incorporated to explaining strategic decision-making and organizational performance (Hodkinson & Healey, 2011). The shift has occurred through evolution in the field, partly due to limitations of macro-level approaches in explaining variations in firm performance (Porter, 1996). Microfoundations and micro-level research can fill in the deficiency of comprehensive understanding of the causal relationship between individuals and strategy. Based on the research around the perspective, it seems to be warranted for organizations to embed the aim to increase individual understanding for achieving a positive trajectory that can improve the performance. Therefore, an organization that seeks multilevel performance increasement and deeper understanding of the underlying elements affecting to the outcome, might benefit from shifting the focus to micro-level.

### **3 Methodology**

This chapter will define the methodology chosen for conducting the empirical research of the study. The purpose of this research is to foster the perception of the role of middle managers in strategy implementation and review the role in particular by using the microfoundations framework. This chapter of methodology will first present the methodological approach, and the research philosophy utilized. Following that, data collection method will be introduced, and the scope of the study outlined. Lastly, the chapter will tie the methodology section together by covering the data analysis methods used to conduct the analysis and the credibility of research.

#### **3.1 Methodological approach**

This research utilizes a qualitative research method for acquiring understanding about the interplay between micro and macro level in organizations - microfoundations and strategy implementation – from the perspective of middle managers. Qualitative research method is based on non-numeric data that consists of open responses or questionnaires (Saunders et al., 2019). The method is excellent for a topic which is layered and cannot be measured or investigated in numbers. Qualitative research method has been chosen for the study as is suitable for researching complex phenomena that relate to experiences and words. Qualitative research's characteristics include a scope for social phenomena that require in-depth investigation by conducting narrative data from observations, interviews or documents (Saunders et al., 2019). This research seeks answers for questions that are subjective for the participant and therefore require a research method that allows for in-depth exploration of personal experiences, perceptions, and interpretations. This approach ensures that the data captures not only the participants' explicit responses but also the nuances, reasoning, and patterns underlying their actions, which is essential for understanding how middle managers implement strategy in practice.

Qualitative research method can be categorized into two distinct approaches: inductive and deductive (Saunders et al., 2019). Deductive approach refers to working from a hypothesis of theory towards gathering data and testing the hypothesis. On the contrary, inductive approach implies to a reverse order; data is collected first and followed by presenting a theory that has emerged according to the data collected (Saunders et al., 2019). This study is utilizing an abductive approach, which is a hybrid model of the previous two introduced. Abductive approach allows the researcher to alternate between theory and empirical insights (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). As the aim for the research is to gather new knowledge and understand links and similarities between theory and research rather than simply testing an existing theory or building one solely from the data collected, abductive approach is the most reasonable choice for a profound analysis (Dubois & Gadde, 2002).

Defining a research philosophy is important as it describes the nature of the research and affects the data collection as well as analyzation (Saunders et al., 2019). This study employs an interpretative research philosophy. Interpretivism emphasizes the sociality and variation present in humans, which leaves room for elasticity and subjectivity in comparison to researching objects that are easily measured. The difficultness – and richness – in interpretivism lies in gathering complex data that cannot be measured as easily as numbers or objects but offer deeper insights from different persons' experiential viewpoint. Interpretivism requires an empathetic approach from the researcher; recognizing the variance and uniqueness of one's experiences. The philosophy of interpretivism stems from phenomenology and symbolic interactionism. The first one relates to how humans understand the ambient world around us. The latter represents a viewpoint from which humans continuously interpret other's actions and interactions that eventually lead to basing or adjusting own interactions accordingly.

## **3.2 Data collection**

This chapter outlines the selected research context and explains the chosen data collection method, including details of the interviews of the participants from whom data were gathered. It aims to justify the chosen field for the study and the relevance and suitability of contacted interviewees for the study.

### **3.2.1 Unit of analysis**

The data collection of this study is conducted through interviews from a selected field; IT and software industry. The particular field was chosen since it's highly relevant in the age of artificial intelligence (AI) and rapidly evolving technology. Interviewing middle managers from this field gives valuable data for identifying characteristics and ways of working in growing companies that face the need for skilled strategy implementation and navigating in tight competition. Successful companies in the field have most likely adapted efficient habits and acquired valuable knowledge regarding strategy implementation and navigating between the top- and bottom level as a middle manager. Due to the relevance and future potential of the field it is valuable to gain further understanding of how the middle management operates withing the evolving field and demanding objectives.

Defining a specific field is crucial in order to preserve a focused scope, allowing the research to explore the chosen topic in depth and generate detailed, context-specific insights. Five middle managers from the field of IT- and software industry were selected for a semi-structured interview with open-ended questions. To gather variance for the research, each interviewee represents a different company within the same industry, in the scale of large organizations. The five companies the interviewees work at employ over 250 employees and therefore are defined as large. This size has been chosen due to the need of researching the position of middle managers, and large companies are typically structured and hold such level. All five interviewees occupy a role between the top management and operational level and have a team to lead, and therefore are

responsible for implementing the strategy to their team. This ensures the convenience and reliability of the research scope as each of the participants are operating within the same industry in a comparable role.

### **3.2.2 Data Collection Method**

As the purpose of this research is to gather new knowledge through empirical, subjective experiences and viewpoints the chosen data collection method is semi-structured interviews. It is a discussion-like form of interview in which the researcher prepares a structured list of questions to ask from the interviewee relating to the theoretical and organizational context (Saunders et al. 2019). Semi-structured interviews are often used in qualitative research for their ability to follow a conversational flow despite of being planned and structured (Saunders et al. 2019). This form allows the interviewee to bring out new perspectives and experiences regarding the topic even if they are not strictly asked about – which fosters the richness of the conversation.

In this study the interviews are thematic, meaning that they evolve around a specific theme and structured topics in order to discover different nuances around participants' experiences and behaviors (Braun & Clark, 2022). Thematic interviews are commonly used in qualitative research, as they are optimal for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data. By focusing on predefined themes while remaining open to new directions of conversation in addition to expected ones the researcher is able to capture the depth and complexity of participants' experiences (Braun & Clark, 2022). This approach supports in elaborating a fruitful conversation with the interviewees that covers the essential themes and relations between microfoundations and strategy implementation, leaving room for their own words and thoughts which is crucial for the depth of the research.

To ensure fitting the qualifications and the scope of the research potential interviewees were first contacted through phone calls after defining companies within the scope. After discussing about the interview on phone and agreeing on a date they were sent the structure of the interview. The purpose of sending the interview structure before was

to establish enhanced conditions for a rich conversation during interviews, as they were able to familiarize themselves with the questions beforehand and therefore provided deep and profound answers. Each interview was recorded with the permission of the interviewee to ensure the further analyzation of the interview. All five interviews were held on Microsoft Teams during December 2025. Due to approaching of Christmas - one of the busiest times of the year - the reserved time per one interview was 30 minutes. Defining the length beforehand allowed the researcher to interview the relevant firms in the industry that were seen to be most beneficial for the study, as longer length would have cut down great options due to the busy season and tight calendars. Nonetheless, due to sending the structure beforehand and communicating the timeline clearly in the beginning, in all the interviews enough time was had to discuss the relevant questions, and the time frame also allowed asking specified questions when needed. The interview questions can be found from Appendix 1. All the interviews were transcribed after the interview by reviewing the video and writing text accordingly.

**Table 1. Interviews**

Interviewee:	Date of the interview :	Length of the interview :
Middle manager 1	10.12.2025	29 min
Middle manager 2	15.12.2025	28 min
Middle manager 3	17.12.2025	28 min
Middle manager 4	17.12.2025	32 min
Middle manager 5	22.12.2025	29 min

Further in the findings section the interviewees will be referred as “MM1” or “MM2” to avoid the repetition of term middle manager.

### 3.3 Data analysis

The study utilizes the Gioia method to ensure qualitative and structured data analysis (Gioia et al., 2013). To create a fundamental reliable analysis of qualitative data, it is important to follow a structure. By using Gioia method for data analysis, the validity of the findings and relevant presenting of the findings is ensured. The Gioia method is based on the assumption that the employees of the organization are “knowledgeable agents”, meaning that the interviewees are employees of organizations that are skilled in their area of expertise and know what they are aiming to do, and therefore they are qualified to participate in the research with explaining their thoughts and actions (Gioia, 2013). In addition, the method assumes that the researcher is qualified and knowledgeable to conduct the research and recognize the patterns, concepts and results from data.

The Gioia method suggests creating a data structure for dividing the key findings into similar groups to help with understanding the concepts emerging from the study (Magnani & Gioia, 2023). First, the data derived is divided into two groups: 1<sup>st</sup>-order information-based group and 2<sup>nd</sup>-order research-based understandings. The underlying benefit of this dividing method is ensuring the reliability of the research and consistency in findings – this method precludes the researchers to draw own conclusions from data before systematic analysis of it. In addition, this approach allows reviewing the data from multiple perspectives and acknowledge emerging themes and surprising elements as well.

The figure 2 represents the data structure created with the Gioia method. The data structure is visualized in a left-right format, beginning with the 1st-order categories, which then are illustrated through second-order themes and finally concluding to aggregate dimensions on the right.

1st order concepts	2nd order themes	Aggregate dimensions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Defining goals, OKR's and metrics to manage performance</li> <li>-Breaking down the strategy to measurable objects</li> <li>-Monitoring progress through structured follow-up</li> <li>-Aligning individual objectives with strategic direction</li> <li>-1-to-1's and team meetings</li> <li>-Filtering the information and communicating the relevant matters to team</li> </ul>	Communication	Guiding implementation through goals and structures
	Prioritization	
	Teamwork	
	Performance management	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Ensuring alignment across organizational levels</li> <li>-Open discussions with top and bottom level</li> <li>-Being present with the team</li> <li>-Ensuring the strategy is understood</li> <li>-Understanding how to communicate within the team</li> <li>-Translating strategy from the top down to team-level</li> </ul>	Regular feedback	Middle managers' communication in strategy implementation
	Transparency	
	Repetition	
	Strong communication	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being actively involved in day-to-day work</li> <li>Giving direct support to employees when challenges and problems arise</li> <li>Being constantly available for the team</li> <li>Working alongside employees rather than directing from distance</li> <li>Building trust through joint work</li> </ul>	Managerial availability	Middle managers' engagement at the operational level
	Empathetic leadership	
	Building trust	
	Encouraging ownership	

**Table 2. Data structure**

### **3.4 The assessment of the quality of the data**

Reliability of research is an essential part which aims to ensure the findings are and remain expressed truthfully based on data (Saunders et. al., 2019). The reliability of the research can be surveyed through different perspectives; occasion, observer bias and transparency.

According to Saunders et al. (2019), choosing Friday or Monday might distort the results due to natural motivation and concentration that may vary throughout the week.

In this research, the dates for the interviews arranged were mainly agreed for the middle of the week, such as Tuesday or Wednesday – to ensure as “neutral” conditions within the week as possible. To reduce the risk for observer bias, the anonymity of each participant was held throughout the process, which allowed the interviewees to answer naturally, therefore preserving the credibility of the study. Another mean to enhance the credibility of the research was to record all the interviews. To ensure the efficiency of each interview, the interviewees were asked to familiarize themselves with the questions before. However, they were not requested to craft any answers before the interview. To maintain the reliability and prepare for the further steps in the research, all the interviews were littered.

## **4 Findings**

This chapter presents the findings of the research. The subsequent findings sections are aligned with the themes in literature review and structured through the data constructed with Gioia method, aiming to ensure a coherent flow to the analysis and structure of the thesis. Firstly, the findings sections will present findings around the topic of strategy implementation. Secondly, the author will delve into middle managers' communication and lastly, explain findings that strongly relate to middle managers engagement at the operational level. The aim of the research is to gather deeper understanding of the role middle managers occupy and look at it from microfoundational perspective. All the findings presented in this chapter are derived from the data gathered from interviews and presented aligning with the data structure created with the Gioia method. This chapter establishes the foundation for the fifth chapter, discussion, which delves deeper into the findings and aims to connect them with the theory and literature and provide suggestions for future research.

### **4.1 Strategy implementation**

This chapter presents the findings on strategy implementation, specifically focusing on middle managerial actions and means to guide the implementation. A few of the interview questions revolved around strategy implementation and the different means middle managers may use when aiming for a seamless implementation. The aim of the questions was to gather data that could be used to understand how middle managers approach and view strategy implementation and most importantly – how they manage to implement it down to their team, and if there are factors that facilitate or complicate the process.

#### 4.1.1 Guiding implementation through goals and structures

The interviewees were asked how they see their role as a middle manager regarding to strategy implementation. All the interviewees recognized not only the strategic importance the role holds but also the challenge of being pressured from two directions due to operating between the top and bottom level. Strategy implementation was described as one of the core tasks to include the position of middle manager.

MM 3: *"Implementing strategy is our principal task."*

All the interviewees agreed on that implementing strategy to team-level can be challenging at least from time to time. When asked about how difficult implementing strategy to team is, the responses varied depending on the nature on new strategy. The consensus was that the further the new strategy seems to land from operational level and each persons' work and targets, the trickier it is to implement. And vice versa, if strategy feels highly relevant for the individual and one's work, implementation can be relatively easy.

MM 5: *"It depends on how relatable the strategy is. If the North Star is really clear and everyone agrees that this is a really good direction we're going in, then it's really easy to break it down."*

Middle managers act as translators of the strategy – they make it make sense to their team. The level of difficultness varies, however all the middle managers leaned towards the conclusion that in most cases, strategy implementation is challenging.

MM 4: *"If the sharpest point of the strategy doesn't hit the team's work right now, then it can often raise questions about whether we're a bit on the sidelines here and why we're here. It's probably more challenging if there are big policies that go beyond our own work in a certain way."*

Implementing strategy can become a real challenge in case the new strategy doesn't seem to benefit or rely on the team's work. It requires reflecting from the middle manager to understand the direction the organization is headed towards and be aware of what it requires from the team.

*MM5: "It's really challenging sometimes. But even in those challenging situations I come back to the question if what we did was the right thing. And if I think it is, then I want to believe that this will still be rewarded. But then if I see that we haven't done enough, then of course you realize that you yourself have failed and haven't been able to lead that work."*

As middle managers are in the position to implement the strategy made by top management, it requires patience and different means to ensure it gets involved in daily work while top management might already be on new challenges.

*MM 1: "One of the most difficult aspects of strategy is that it is being made by top management and by the time it is published, they have been thinking about it for six months and have moved on to thinking about the next challenges and new things."*

Strategy implementation also requires prioritizing; the more information there is, the more carefully middle managers should prioritize what areas to focus on. One middle manager described that in order to support strategy implementation, prioritizing and filtering matters is important. Being able to see the most valuable matters and emphasize those to team keeps the focus on track.

*MM 5: "I feel that if I went into it and just wanted to vomit up everything that's happening and being done at the moment without filtering anything, the team wouldn't see the forest for the trees."*

One of the key things that became emphasized in all the interviews was collaboration with the team. All the middle managers valued their teams and were ready to take on tasks on the operational level and help in solving challenges whenever needed. Developing team spirit and a collective mindset to work towards goals are highly valued within the middle managers interviewed. In addition, respect, staying humble and not seeing oneself as too big of a leader to handle operational tasks and operating on team-level was described to increase and build trust.

*MM 5: "I want to get to know them, understand their strengths and support them where needed. I don't see myself as too big a leader in anything, I just do what needs to be done. I believe that this creates trust and the feeling that we work together as a team."*

#### **4.1.2 Breaking down strategy and setting OKRs**

When asked about the concrete means of implementing strategy, a specific theme was raised by all the interviewees: breaking down the strategy and defining objectives and key results (OKRs). This way the middle managers are able to translate the strategy coming from the top level to the operational day-to-day level for the team. The key in strategy implementation was described to lie specifically in breaking the strategy down to small enough pieces. The interviewees also agreed on that OKRs and measuring is one way for ensuring that the strategy stays relevant in daily work. Tracking performance brings clarity not only to middle managers but the team and individuals as well. The middle managers emphasized the importance data-driven leadership, arguing that improvement requires systematic measurement and insight into performance.

*MM 1: "The team also hopes for it, it brings evidence and transparency so that everyone knows where we are going and how it is going. If this is not the case, it is difficult to monitor whether we are moving towards the strategy, and it is difficult to take "ownership" of the new strategy and way of operating."*

MM2: *“You get what you measure, and things happen according to what you measure.”*

Measuring and setting targets is a core principle in implementing strategy and significantly helps to keep track on what has been and hasn't been done. In addition, consistent measuring allows to identify the situations when targets can be raised or modified and notice whether they are realistic or not.

## **4.2 Middle managers' communication in strategy implementation**

Excellent communication is a great mean to effectively and systematically bring strategy down to a team-level from top management. On the contrary, lack of communication may even lead to failing strategy implementation. As middle managers occupy a unique role between the top management and team, communication is one of their greatest assets in implementing the strategy. Nevertheless, communication is not necessarily easy, which is exactly why it needs to be looked into more. The interviewees were asked about their style of communication as they operate in the middle level. The responses were largely similar valuing transparency and openness, with a couple of more niche viewpoints. They believe everything that can be said should be and the communication should always remain transparent. As another important aspect, the middle managers raised the importance of repetition; the role of middle manager often allows the person to familiarize themselves with new information before it can be communicated onwards. While the middle manager might hold a belief that the matter is clear, it is possible that the team is only starting to understand it. Therefore, repetition holds power and most of matters become deeply understood solely after repeated and revisited multiple times. Similarly, ensuring the strategy is really understood is important. In addition, the importance of multichannel communication was raised. All in all – communicating in person and through digital channels create the conditions for delivered and understood message.

MM 3: *“If it's difficult, it's a matter of faith, you have to talk like Runeberg about what this means and create that belief that this is because of this - and I don't think it helps that it's done in one channel, and communication has to be done repeatedly.”*

Despite of communicating to the team, middle managers also communicate up to top management. They hold a crucial position in terms of being able to word experiences and aspects from operational level to top level, which can be highly valuable in understanding the employees better.

MM 1: *“At the same time, changes usually always cause some kind of fear, and if there are any genuine concerns, I will express them in a way that senior management can understand.”*

In addition, team-specific approach was highlighted from a couple middle managers. When implementing strategy down to team, you need to get the “buy-in” from them – to get them actually motivated and onboard in order to get the desired results. Middle managers have the strength to personally get to know the team members and therefore tailor the message in a suitable way for them.

MM 4: *“Senior management can't do it; they don't know how to implement it for each team. Knowing the team is really important to find your own angles. The same story can have many angles and sides, and you just have to find the right angle for that team.”*

Similarly, couple of middle managers agreed on that it is their responsibility to communicate even small matters down for the team in order to give them time to process upcoming changes, before the changes are properly announced. However, one middle manager emphasized the importance of filtering information to avoid overwhelming the team, as presented in the previous chapter.

Consistent with the following citation of Middle Manager 1, all the managers valued that the strategy touches the individual and they are able to understand the reasoning behind it. However, middle managers are responsible for offering them this understanding through communication and their wording. Being able to word the strategy in other terms is translating it from top to down. Interestingly, sense of meaningfulness was also raised, but only from one interviewee. This middle manager values highly tailoring the objectives individually within the team. In case every team member doesn't feel strongly connected with their work, it starts to challenge self-organized teams. In addition, three middle managers brought up empathy as significant approach in managing a team.

*MM 1: "When you think about strategic communication, success is when you communicate the strategy, and every person is able to find themselves in that new strategy and say what the change is and what we are doing now."*

One building block in communication is regular feedback. All the interviewees raised giving feedback regularly crucial for development. However, the feedback can be given in many ways; and it is up to the middle manager to understand which approach suits the best to the receiver. Throughout the interviews respecting the team members became evident. As presented in the following citations, the expectations regarding ways of communication are often gone through in the hiring process already, which facilitates the work of middle managers later on.

*MM 2: "It's good to be honest and it's important to take into account the situations and circumstances in how you package the message, so that the message is productive for the recipient and not, for example, a discouraging message".*

Consistently within all the interviews, the managers value positive and motivational approach and see one of their key objectives the succeeding and developing of the

team members. Embracing positivity and raising successes foster the culture of transparency and openness that all of the respondents' firms aim to hold.

MM 5: *"In team meetings, I don't embarrass anyone publicly, but instead bring up positive things about everyone, praise them, or do something positive. If I need to give constructive feedback, I usually give it after the situation is over, between the two of us. I try to give that all the time."*

### **4.3 Middle managers' engagement at the operational level**

Throughout all the interviews, it became evident that the middle managers value their team high and see supporting and being available for them invaluable. A couple interviewees emphasized that they perceive offering conditions for employees to release their full potential as one of their main goals. This can be done in many ways; middle managers' strong presence at the operational level is where everything starts.

MM 5: *"I'm pretty much there hands-on supporting them. Some need it more and some less. I'm always available for whatever they need. When I'm with them, I'm always present, I don't multitask."*

Building trust was highlighted in all the interviews. Trust is built through day-to-day actions and collaboration. One middle manager encapsulated trust to be a byproduct of showing empathy. Honesty and empathy were raised by almost all middle managers interviewed. In addition, being friendly and trying to see the person as they are beyond the positions and work environment was mentioned. However, finding the potential of the employee, being able to excite them and guide them, are characteristics of a successful middle manager. One middle manager described trust as a given from the start, which enables building transparent and long-term relationship, which often carries further compared to one in which the employee has to prove themselves continuously. The latter may decrease the motivation and lead to weaker trust over time. Nonetheless, building trust is a core foundation when aiming for a long-term cooperation.

MM 2: *“Trust comes as a given. Of course, you can lose that trust, but I think that every time someone new comes along, that trust comes as a gift and you don't have to earn it, it's there.”*

Another key theme raised by middle managers interviewed was encouraging taking ownership and giving responsibility. Three of the middle managers strongly stated that they are more than happy to give as much responsibility for the employee as they would like to take.

MM 5: *“You must be able to know the customer base pretty well. I have learned to appreciate that intuition more and that I am strongly involved in what the team members do. I get a lot more information from that than if I just stared at some numbers.”*

Close engagement with the operational level allows the middle managers to understand the phenomena that is happening in the market and the customers significantly better. They are responsible for interpreting the information and ensure the right decisions are made. In addition, they are evaluating whether the team should be sticking to a plan or change direction; and all this information is found from the operational level.

Regular team meetings and 1-to-1's was discussed and almost everyone brought up the importance of them not only from performance point of view but also from the aspect of leadership and collaboration. In addition, one middle manager emphasized the importance of deeper discussion with the employees regarding their work, its meaningfulness and ways to contribute to strategy. This facilitates middle managers' understanding of operational level and the prevailing conditions there.

MM 4: *“If we are talking about the big picture and direction, how do team members see their own work contributing to the achievement of strategic goals? This question is always discussed with team members.”*

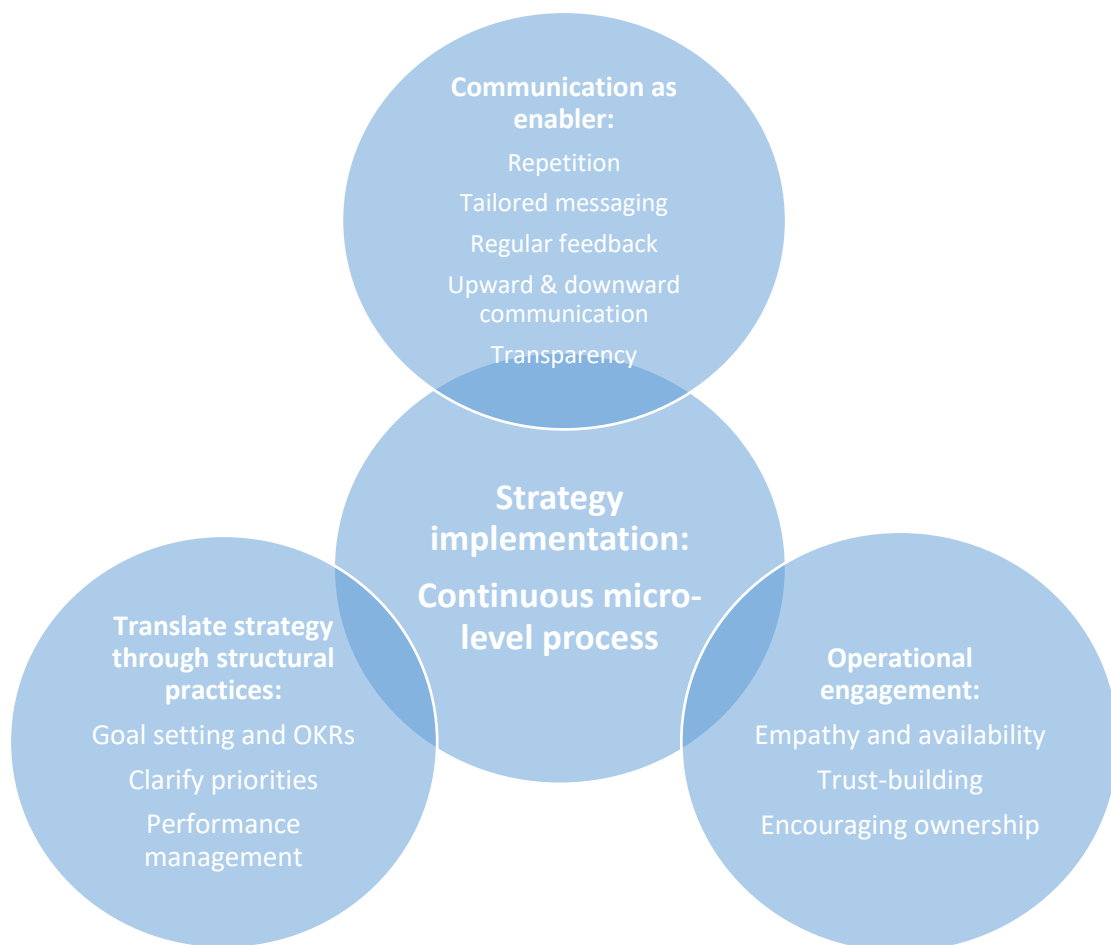
#### **4.4 Synthesis**

This synthesis chapter aims to tie together the key findings of the research, based on the previous chapter. The synthesis provides a foundation for the subsequent discussion chapter, which interprets these findings on a deeper level. The findings presented illustrate middle managers see strategy implementation as a continuous, micro-level process. Middle managers describe strategy implementation as unfolding through a combination of structure managerial practices, ongoing communication and close engagement and collaboration at the operational level. Across all the interviews, middle managers describe strategy implementation as one of their core responsibilities, emphasizing the need to translate abstract strategic intentions into concrete, relatable actions for their teams.

Consistent within all the interviews, the middle managers guide strategy implementation through mechanisms such as goal setting, OKRs and performance management, which enhance clarity and transparency between teams and individuals. These mechanisms are a great mean for enabling the translation of strategy to the level of everyday work and support prioritization in highly competitive environments. Simultaneously, the effectiveness of these mechanisms depends heavily on how they are communicated and interpreted within teams.

Middle managers described communication as a critical enabler of strategy implementation. Middle managers occupy a role which requires them to act as translators and intermediaries between different organizational levels while ensuring that strategic messages are not only delivered but also understood. Transparency, repetition, tailored messaging and regular feedback are used to create shared understanding and commitment. In addition to communicating downward, middle managers also communicate upward, articulating operational-level concerns and experiences in a for that senior management can understand.

The findings highlight the importance of middle managers' engagement at the operational level. Close involvement in day-to-day work, availability, empathy and building trust enable middle managers to understand operational level phenomena and work, support employees and encourage ownership and responsibility. The hands-on engagement at the operational level allows middle managers to continuously assess and impact on whether strategic plans remain relevant and to adjust actions when necessary.



**Figure 3 Results in a visual form**

## 5 Discussion

This discussion chapter of the thesis aims to provide answers to the research questions presented in the very beginning of the thesis; *“What is the role of middle managers in strategy implementation?”* Following the research question, a supporting question was defined as *“How to understand strategy implementation and the role of middle managers through the microfoundations framework?”* The purpose of this discussion chapter is to interpret how the empirical findings presented in the previous chapter contribute to a deeper understanding of strategy implementation through microfoundational lens. This research extends the existing literature on strategy implementation and microfoundations, in particular through discussing the middle managers’ role in it from microfoundational perspective. Deepening the understanding of middle managers’ position and their impact facilitates organizations’ strategy implementation processes and strengthens the likelihood of successfully implementing a new strategy.

The main research question was explored through a pattern of questions revolving around the role of middle managers, communication and strategy implementation. Firstly, when the interviewees described how they see their role, the answers were consistent and emphasized the strategic position middle managers hold. They operate in a unique position between the top management and operational level, which allows them to translate down the strategy to understandable actions. Vice versa, it is beneficial for the company to have the level of middle management, as they are able to bring the experiences and views of operational level to top management – information that the management would not receive otherwise. This supports the view of strategy implementation as a continuous managerial process rather than a discrete execution phase (Tawse & Tabesh, 2021).

The findings show a similar pattern within the mindset of middle managers. They all emphasized openness, transparency and empathy. This indicates that individual characteristics play a significant role in the strategy process. The findings support the previous

research with showing that middle manager's emotional intelligence – demonstrating intuition and empathy in work – foster collaboration and transparency in work. According to the results, empathetic middle managers experience meaningful relationships within their team and have a sense of being able to support and help them adequately. Therefore, findings suggest that empathetic middle managers are better positioned to translate strategic objectives into team-level action. Middle managers had received feedback from their teams that flexibility and understanding from their leaders is highly valued – qualities that stem from empathy. When teams are led with empathy, the team members are likely to preserve their motivation leading to delivering better results. In addition, transparency was highly valued and respecting team members. Aiming to provide all necessary information and being genuinely interested in them was raised within the interviews. From a microfoundational perspective, these findings highlight how individual level propensities shape collective outcomes. Strategy implementation does not occur solely through formal structures or plans; it is enacted through everyday interpersonal interactions. The emotional and relational capabilities middle managers possess function as micro-level mechanisms influencing how strategy becomes interpreted and executed within teams.

The findings indicate that middle managers play a pivotal role in guiding strategy implementation through goal setting, performance metrics (OKR's) and structured follow-up practices. This aligns with prior research emphasizing that strategy implementation depends on managerial coordination and the translation of strategic intent into operational level objectives (Floyd & Woolridge, 1992). From a microfoundational perspective, these results illustrate how micro-level managerial actions generate macro-level outcomes. Activities such as defining goals, monitoring performance and prioritizing tasks collectively shape organizational execution and give concretism to strategy. Consistent theme across all the interviews was the strong belief in performance measurement. Middle managers described the use of OKRs as prerequisite in guiding strategy execution. From microfoundational perspective, setting OKRs translates to linking abstract strategic objectives to micro-level actions, to bring strategy down into

everyday operations. OKRs function as a practical mechanism for approaching strategy as actionable targets, aligning with employee competences and organizational priorities. While the importance of structured performance systems has been recognized in prior research, the present findings reinforce their significance from a microfoundational perspective. Aligning with the view of Whittington et al. (2023), the findings indicate that the success of strategy implementation depends on how well the strategic goals are managed to embed into daily operational practices.

The findings underline the importance of communication as a central mechanism enabling strategy implementation. Floyd & Woolridge (1992) emphasize the communicative role of middle managers in translating strategic intent. The findings of this study refine this view by demonstrating that communication is not merely downward transmission but a continuous, two-directional process between top management and operational teams – coordinated by middle managers. They act as intermediaries that both interpret strategy for their teams and mediate operational feedback upward, thereby shaping how strategy is understood and enacted across organizational levels.

The findings support the view of strategy implementation as a continuous managerial process rather than a discrete execution phase (Tawse & Tabesh, 2021). As presented in the findings, middle managers are strongly linked with their team and actively guiding implementation through OKRs while fostering a culture of openness, communication and transparency. Across interviews, participants emphasized the importance of working closely with their team and maintaining proximity with them. This aligns with the process-oriented perspectives on strategy, which conceptualize implementation as an ongoing pattern of managerial actions. From a microfoundational standpoint, strategy emerges through repeated interactions, routines and everyday leadership practices. Therefore, the results suggest that successful implementation depends less on formal plans and more on continuous enactment of strategy through collaboration and shared understanding.

In addition, the position middle managers occupy enables them to drive strategy execution by ensuring operational alignment. This supports Higgins' (2005) Aligned 8S Model, which emphasizes the importance of consistency across organizational functions. The findings indicate that middle managers play a critical role in translating alignment into practice through communication, transparency and coordinating targets. Profound alignment forms through consistent managerial actions. From a micro-foundational perspective, these actions demonstrate how alignment emerges from repeated micro-level practices. By clarifying goals, reinforcing priorities and coordinating team activities, middle managers contribute to maintaining the strategic coherence throughout the organization. Consistent with Higgins' (2005) framework, the results indicate that clear goals and performance indicators help with sustaining strategic focus in complex organizational environments.

From a microfoundational perspective, the findings illustrate how individual managerial behaviors aggregate into organization-level strategy implementation outcomes (Felin & Foss, 2015). In line with this perspective, the findings show that middle managers aim for a strong presence at the operational level and invest time in getting to know their team members on an individual basis. These practices highlight how strategy implementation is shaped through micro-level interactions rather than solely through formal structures or plans. The findings further suggest that the effectiveness of feedback as a managerial practice depends on the ability of middle managers to adapt their communication to the needs of individual team members. This supports prior research emphasizing that managerial judgment and discretion play a central role in translating strategic intentions into action (Floyd & Lane, 2000). By tailoring feedback to individual personalities and preferences, middle managers increase the likelihood that feedback is perceived as motivating and constructive, thereby supporting learning and performance improvement. Some may prefer a softer approach while the other thrives from getting strong, direct feedback. These findings highlight the importance of individual-level differences – such as personality, preferences, and emotional responses – in shaping how managerial actions are received and enacted. Rather than applying general

communication practices, middle managers benefit from adjusting their approach based on personal knowledge of their team members. This illustrates how strategy implementation emerges through situated, context-dependent managerial behavior. This reinforces the view that organization-level outcomes are not the result of standardized processes alone but are built through individualized interactions that accumulate over time (Barney & Felin, 2013).

Aligning with the previous research of Molina-Azorin (2014) and Foss (2011), the findings suggest that individual micro-level actions contribute meaningfully to macro-level organizational outcomes and performance. The findings of this research indicate that especially middle managers have a significant role in terms of influencing their team. As stated, individuals have a great impact on the performance, and middle managers have influence over multiple individuals, which the team consists of. Therefore, their role can be seen highly relevant and influential in terms of affecting the direction of an organization and its operations. As presented in the findings, the middle managers were aware of the influence and strategic positioning that is included in their occupied role. From a microfoundational perspective, this reinforces the view that firm-level performance is partly built through accumulated individual actions. The results suggest that attention to microfoundational processes can strengthen strategy implementation. This may influence positively on competitive advantage of a firm as well, although this research cannot directly state that.

To better interpret the findings, the position of middle managers can be reviewed through the bathtub model (Contractor et al., 2018). In this framework, the role middle managers are occupying corresponds to the nodes of the bathtub model between the first and second arrows and between the second and third arrows, which represent individual actions. In this context, these actions are middle managers' everyday managerial behaviors. According to the bathtub model, individual actions lead to social outcomes, which can be interpreted here as team-level outcomes, that subsequently

translate into organization-level outcomes. Therefore, from microfoundational perspective, middle managers role is undeniably impactful from the aspect of whole organizations outcome and results. As an addition, they are in a position to shape not only the culture of an organization, but also the processes and actions taken within, since their position enables seamless communication for two directions: top and down. Analyzed through microfoundational perspective, the model helps to illustrate the significance middle manager's position. Their actions serve as a bridge that converts individual actions into organization-level outcomes, while enabling two-way communication between the top and the team. This allows middle managers to shape not only team practices, but also organization culture, processes and patterns, that influence overall performance.

## **5.1 Theoretical and managerial implications**

Following the discussion chapter and deeper analysis of the results derived, this chapter aims to provide theoretical and managerial implications that can be drawn from this research.

After reviewing the theory and findings, a clear managerial implication for companies would be to further shift attention to micro-level and individual decision-making, motivation and challenges. According to theory in microfoundations especially multinational firms and global strategy would benefit from this emphasis (Contractor et al., 2018), however this can be applied to an organization of any size. Valuing and understanding the cause of macro-level outcomes comes down to focusing on micro-level phenomena and individual decision-making as well as teams. The findings show that the interviewed middle managers often find strategy implementation challenging. Therefore, by utilizing microfoundational perspective more actively organizations could further understand the different means middle managers can actualize to improve the process of strategy implementation.

A key managerial implication concerns the structured use of OKRs as a performance management tool. While OKRs are already widely adopted in many organizations, the findings highlight that their effectiveness depends on consistent follow-up and active managerial engagement. Setting goals alone is insufficient; middle managers benefit from continuously monitoring progress and maintaining awareness of their team's pace and capacity. The results also underline the importance of communication and transparency as core managerial capabilities. Effective strategy implementation requires not only clear targets but also an environment in which expectations, feedback, and priorities are openly discussed. A practical implication is therefore the need to invest in developing middle managers' communication and interpersonal skills. Strengthening these skills could improve alignment, motivation and ultimately organizational performance.

## **5.2 Suggestions for future research**

Various opportunities for further research can be identified from this study. The field of microfoundations is clearly under researched, despite of the significant increase in research over the past decades seen within the field (Felin & Foss, 2015). However, the research gap for the topic still exists and micro-level should be further investigated and linked to macro-level in organizations. The research could be continued also from the perspective of team members; this research is centralized to the middle managers' tools and ways to operate between the team and upper management – to include the team members view to the research would further enrich the results found and strengthen the key findings. Another interesting research idea would be to compare the performance of different companies, in which one of them clearly places emphasis on microfoundational perspective in strategy and when training middle managers and the other significantly less. One research proposal would be to conduct a case study within one organization to investigate the emphasis of microfoundations perspective and the effect on outcomes. Another theme to investigate further could be empathy in leadership and organizations.

### 5.3 Limitations

This research faces certain limitations that must be recognized to understand the reliability of the research. One prominent limitation relates to the size of the sample of data gathered. To gather wider and more reliable results, more interviewees could be contacted. In addition, it can be stated that another limitation of the research is length of the interviews; all of them lasted approximately 30 minutes – by holding longer interviews richer data may be collected. However, the interviews were prepared well to ensure efficient use of time. Nonetheless, by interviewing for a longer period one could gather more unexpected data that could turn out very beneficial in the study. In addition, the sample size of firms used in this research are from the IT and software industry but different organizations. To broaden the scope and increase variance to insights, different fields could be incorporated. Worth mentioning is additionally the complex topic of the research that is difficult to measure. Personal experiences and viewpoints are always subjective, which should be taken into consideration. Therefore, gathering more data would enhance the reliability of the research.

Generative AI tools (ChatGPT, OpenAI) were used in the thesis to check grammar in writing and to brainstorm topics. AI was used solely for these purposes. All interpretations, analysis and conclusions remain the author's own responsibility and are independently reviewed for accuracy.

## References

Porter ME, Lee TH. Why strategy matters now. *N Engl J Med*. 2015 Apr 30;372(18):1681-4. doi: 10.1056/NEJMp1502419. PMID: 25923546.'

Porter, M. E. (1991). Towards a dynamic theory of strategy. *Strategic Management Journal*, 12(S2), 95-117. <https://doi.org/10.1002/smj.4250121008>

Mintzberg, H. (2008). *Tracking strategies: Toward a general theory*. Oxford University Press.

Eldring, J. (2009). *Porter's (1980) generic strategies, performance and risk : An empirical investigation with german data*. Diplomica Verlag.

Foss, N. J. (2011). Why micro-foundations for resource-based theory are needed and what they may look like. *Journal of Management*, 37(5), 1413-1428. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206310390218>

Felin, T., & Foss, N. J. (2005). Strategic organization: A field in search of micro-foundations. *Strategic Organization*, 3(4), 441-455. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476127005055796>

Hodgkinson, G. P., & Healey, M. P. (2011). Psychological foundations of dynamic capabilities: Reflexion and reflection in strategic management. *Strategic Management Journal*, 32(12), 1500–1516. <https://doi.org/10.1002/smj.964>

Duhaime, I. M., Stimpert, L., & Chesley, J. (2011). *Strategic thinking : Today's business imperative*. Taylor & Francis Group.

Whittington, R., Regnér, P., Angwin, D., Johnson, G., & Scholes, K. (Eds.). (2023). *Exploring strategy: Text & cases*. Pearson Education

M.E. Porter, 'What is strategy?', Harvard Business Review, November–December 1996, p. 60.

Azaddin, S. K. (2023). Contesting Mintzberg's five Ps for strategy: it is time for a product recall. *Journal of Strategy and Management*, 16(1), 112-127. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JSMA-12-2021-0243>

Vuorinen, T. (2013). *Strategiakirja: 20 työkalua*. Talentum.

Contractor, F., Foss, N. J., Kundu, S., & Lahiri, S. (2019). Viewing global strategy through a microfoundations lens. *Global Strategy Journal*, 9(1), 3–18. <https://doi.org/10.1002/gsj.1329>

Noble, C. H. (1999). The eclectic roots of strategy implementation research. *Journal of Business Research*, 45(2), 119–134. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0148-2963\(97\)00231-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0148-2963(97)00231-2)

Molina-Azorin, J. F. (2014). Microfoundations of strategic management: Toward micro-macro research in the resource-based theory. *Business Research Quarterly*, 17(2), 102–114. <https://doi-org.proxy.uwasa.fi/10.1016/j.brq.2014.01.001>

Barney, J. B., Ketchen, D. J., Wright, M., & Foss, N. J. (2010). Invited Editorial: Why Micro-Foundations for Resource-Based Theory Are Needed and What They May Look Like. *Journal of Management*, 37(5), 1413-1428. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206310390218> (Original work published 2011)

Barney, J. B., Ketchen, D. J., & Wright, M. (2011). *The future of resource-based theory: Revitalization or decline?* *Journal of Management*, 37(5), 1299–1315. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206310391805>

Harding, N., Lee, H., & Ford, J. (2014). Who is 'the middle manager'? *Human relations (New York)*, 67(10), 1213-1237. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726713516654>

Quy Nguyen Huy. (2001). In Praise of Middle Managers. *Harvard Business Review*, 79(8), 72–79. <https://research-ebscocom.proxy.uwasa.fi/c/slwlh3/search/details/d6nvqrscdz?db=bsu&limiters=&q=%28SO+%28Harvard+Business+Review%29%29AND%28DT+2001%29AND%28TI+in+praise+of+middle+managers%29&modal=cite-details>

Floyd, S. W., & Lane, P. J. (2000). Strategizing throughout the organization: Management role conflict in strategic renewal. *Academy of Management. The Academy of Management Review*, 25(1), 154-177. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/strategizing-throughout-organization-management/docview/210977665/se-2>

Barney, J., & Felin, T. (2013). What Are Microfoundations? *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 27(2), 138–155. <https://doi-org.proxy.uwasa.fi/10.5465/amp.2012.0107>

Hodgkinson, G. P., & Healey, M. P. (2011). Psychological foundations of dynamic capabilities: Reflexion and reflection in strategic management. *Strategic Management Journal*, 32(13), 1500–1516.

Dubois, A., & Gadde, L.-E. (2002). Systematic combining: An abductive approach to case research. *Journal of Business Research*, 55(7), 553–560. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0148-2963\(00\)00195-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0148-2963(00)00195-8)

Saunders, M. N. K., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2019). *Research methods for business students* (8th ed.). Pearson Education.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE Publications Ltd.

Floyd, S. W., & Wooldridge, B. (1992). Middle management involvement in strategy and its association with strategic type: A research note. *Strategic Management Journal*, 13(S1), 153–167. <https://doi.org/10.1002/smj.4250131012>

Tawse, A., & Tabesh, P. (2021). Strategy implementation: A review and an introductory framework. *European Management Journal*, 39(1), 22–33.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2020.09.005>

Higgins, J. M. (2005). The eight ‘S’s of successful strategy execution. *Journal of Change Management*, 5(1), 3–13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14697010500036064>

Cândido, C.,J.F., & Santos, S. (2015). Strategy implementation: What is the failure rate? *Journal of Management and Organization*, 21(2), 237-262. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jmo.2014.77>

Hrebiniak, L. G. (2006) Obstacles to effective strategy implementation. *Organizational Dynamics*, 35(1), 12–31. [10.1016/j.orgdyn.2005.12.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orgdyn.2005.12.001)

Magnani, G., & Gioia, D. (2023). Using the Gioia Methodology in international business and entrepreneurship research. *International Business Review*, 32(2), Article 102097. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ibusrev.2022.102097>

Gioia, D. A., Corley, K. G., & Hamilton, A. L. (2013). Seeking qualitative rigor in inductive research: Notes on the Gioia methodology. *Organizational Research Methods*, 16(1), 15–31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428112452151>

Hrebiniak, L. G. (2006). *Obstacles to effective strategy implementation*. *Organizational Dynamics*, 35(1), 12–31. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orgdyn.2005.12.001>

## Appendices

### Interview questions listed

General:

1. Can you describe your current role and key responsibilities, and how long have you been working in this position?
2. What is your professional and educational background leading up to this role?
3. How would you describe the company and industry you're working in?

The role of a middle manager

4. How would you describe your position and responsibilities as a middle manager working between top management and your team?
5. How do you build trust in your team and motivate them in daily work?

Microfoundations

6. How do you communicate within your team and outside of it? How would you describe your style of communication?
7. Have you developed recurring habits or routines that positively influence the effective functioning of your team?
8. How do you see interactions within your team shaping the results and motivation of the employees?
9. Are there any behaviours or routines that sometimes have a negative impact on cooperation?
10. How do you see the role of individual actions impacting on collective level and organizational outcomes?

Strategy implementation

11. What is your role in strategy implementation as a middle manager?
12. How do you communicate strategy to your team?

13. How does your team participate in implementing the strategy?
14. How difficult or easy do you find navigating strategy implementation in your team and why?
15. How do you ensure that strategic goals remain relevant in your team's daily work over time?