Change From the Middle?
Exploring Middle Manager Strategic and Sensemaking Agency


Raymond Caldwell
Professor of Organizational Change
BIRKBECK COLLEGE
University of London
Introduction
What roles do managers, and especially middle managers, play in processes of innovation and organizational change? Are they agents of change or simply its targets? These questions have often been answered negatively. As the intermediary ‘linking pins’ at the operational core of organizational hierarchies middle managers are in a position to block change, both from above and below (Likert 1961). There is an extensive literature that has documented how middle managers can obstruct information flows, impede decision-making, over-manage subordinates and create unnecessary duplication of tasks and specialist functions (Argyris 1990). Moreover, their role as guardians of administrative efficiency and functional expertise in large bureaucratic organizations puts them in a position to defend hierarchy and status, and ensure that procedures and processes are transformed from means into dysfunctional ends (Merton, 1968). It is no surprise then, that middle managers have been condemned by a combination of their positional power and ‘over-conformity’ as a powerful constituency to resist change: the notorious ‘change resistant lump in the middle’.

With the onset of large-scale organizational restructuring over the last two decades, however, the villains now appear to have become the victims (Newell and Dopson 1996; Redman et al 1997; Thomas and Dunkerley 1999). Downsizing has reduced the numbers of middle managers, while delayering has compressed the levels in organizations, creating a vice squeezing out unnecessary variable costs and eliminating duplication in the name of ‘flexibility’. Middle managers have been caught in the middle of this process, as well as the imperatives of process redesign and outsourcing. Process redesign in its various forms (e.g. reengineering, shared services) has streamlined information flows and integrated work processes reducing the need for supervision, while outsourcing has broken the boundaries of organizations creating the spectre of work substitution by external providers, including consultants and interim managers. These processes have in turn led to the emergence of intensified work regimes and the erosion of traditional career paths in flatter and boundaryless organizations, creating a new double negative image of middle managers. They are now overworked, highly stressed, demoralised survivors and the victims of ‘change fatigue’, ‘concertive control’ and the ever powerful exhortations of corporate ideology (Turnbull 2001; Barker 1999; Musson and Duberley 2007). Moreover, as responsibility for managing is increasingly devolved to the local level and becomes a ubiquitous requirement of all employees – everyone is a manager- the unique function, role and identity of middle managers has been called into question. Some have even predicted the death of middle management and the rise of organizations without managers (Semler 1989; Grey 1999).

If the question ‘what is happening to middle managers’ has produced a generally gloomy prognosis, the alternative question, ‘what influence do middle managers have in managing innovation and change’ has produced more encouraging perspectives (Huy 2001, 2002; Rouleau, 2005). From the onset of restructuring in the eighties there were those who suggested that managers could be ‘innovators’, or at least ‘adapters’ in change implementation (Kanter, 1982, 1986; Burglemann 1983). The extraordinary ascendance of HRM on the back of workplace restructuring also indicated that middle-level line managers were assuming an expanded, more generalist and increasingly strategic role within devolved forms of management control that emphasised the virtues of employee involvement and commitment (Walton 1985). Evidence also began to emerge that middle managers could be agents for improving self-renewal processes in organizations. Nonaka (1988) argued that middle managers contributions were being underestimated in resolving the gaps between strategic vision and the details of
implementation, and he proposed the notion of ‘middle-up-down management’ with middle managers playing a crucial role in ‘information creation’ and the generation of new ideas (Nonaka 1988; Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995; Nonaka et al 2000). Building on this work, Floyd and Wooldridge (1992, 1997, 2000) argued that middle managers played more than an operational role in implementing ‘deliberate strategy’; they also highlighted their more proactive roles in synthesising information, facilitating adaptability and championing innovative ideas. More recently, Balogun (2003, 2006) has also characterised middle managers as ‘change intermediates’ who can play four interrelated roles during change implementation: they can be effective in two key ‘sensemaking’ roles of ‘undertaking personal change’ and ‘helping others through change’, and these two roles compliment the other more conventional roles of ‘implementation necessary changes’ and ‘keeping the business going’. There is now a growing literature that suggests middle managers can exercise both strategic and sensemaking agency during organizational change, and that the old dichotomies between innovator and maintainer roles, leading and managing, line and staff functions, and strategy and implementation must be reformulated to accommodated new organizational forms and the changing nature of managerial work in both private and public sector organizations (Caldwell 2006).

This chapter offers a critical examination of the changing roles of middle managers in processes of organizational innovation and change by comparing and contrasting strategic and sensemaking agency perspectives. While these perspectives have emerged mainly from research on private sector organisations, they also highlight broader generic issues that have major implications for the changing roles of middle managers in public service organisations (Currie and Proctor 2005; see Boxes 1 and 2). The research work of Floyd and Wooldridge (1992, 1997, 2000) and Balogun (2003, 2006) is taken as broadly illustrative of the contrasting positions and their theoretical assumptions. It will be argued that strategic agency analysis provides new insights into the enhanced role of middle managers in the ‘strategy process’, while sensemaking interpretations provide a greater understanding of their role in the construction of meaning and self-identity during organizational change processes. However, the theoretical limitations of both strategic agency and sensemaking agency perspectives undermine attempts to build broader models of agency and change in organizations (Caldwell 2006). Strategic agency perspectives within the ‘strategy process’ tradition still remain tied to role-centred and instrumental discourses on deliberate strategy which seriously underplay the possibilities and limitations of actor autonomy and reflexivity during processes of organisational change. In contrast, sensemaking perspectives partly abandon rationalist models of strategy and managerial agency without critically theorizing the nature of agency or organizational change. It is concluded that strategic agency perspectives need to be re-conceptualised to accommodate new forms of dispersed leadership and distributed knowledge creation in organizations that redefine the scope of managerial agency, while sensemaking perspectives need to be extended by developing a more systematic and critical concept of ‘sensemaking agency’ that encompasses a synthetic understanding of both agency and change in organizations. Finally, without broader bridge building exercises and the associated search for mediated theories and categories, strategic and sensemaking agency perspectives may increasingly become fragmented managerial research methodologies that lack epistemological coherence and practical efficacy.

**Conduits and creators**
The idea that middle managers are primarily strategy implementers derives from a
particular view of how ‘strategy’ is conceived in large hierarchical organizations and public service bureaucracies. If strategy formulation is a rational policy planning process operationalised as sub-strategies for successful implementation, then middle managers play a crucial role in implementation. The underlying assumptions of this perspective are fourfold. First, strategy is a centralised planning function that can be control and coordinated from the top of organizations – it is leaders or policy makers who create strategies not managers. Second, there is a clear distinction between strategy formulation and implementation, or between planning and execution – and by implication leadership and management. Third, strategic change and innovation is an incremental process of diffusion and technology transfer (Clarke 2003). Fourth, strategy implementation is a cascade of sub-projects and means-ends decision processes that can be subject to supervision and monitoring. Overall, middle managers are positioned as intermediary links in this hierarchical process, both positively and negatively. They execute decisions, but if anything goes wrong they can be partly blamed for implementation failures.

There is, however, a well developed ‘strategy process’ literature in the strategic management field that has consistently questioned one or more of these assumptions (Bower and Gilbert 2005). Bower (1970) gave middle managers a role as influential judges of resource allocation decisions, while Burglemann (1983) emphasised their role as organizational champions of new initiatives emerging at the operational level. Similarly, Schitt (1987) emphasised their important upward influence on strategic decisions. This research led to a growing re-evaluation of the role of middle managers in strategy implementation processes and the emergence of a distinct ‘middle management perspective’ within the strategy-process research field (Floyd and Wooldridge 1992, 1997, 2000; Hutzschenreuter and Kleindienst 2006).

With the growing loss of faith in top-down strategic planning processes during the eighties, the re-evaluation of middle management roles entered a new phase. There was an intensified assault on strategy as a ‘deliberate’ process with a clear distinction between formulation and implementation. This was reinforced by broader attacks on organizations as goal-oriented systems and management as a set of prescriptive functions that defined managerial behaviour. Instead the contextual focus was on ‘what managers do’ in all its bewildering complexity (Hales 1999). In particular, managerial work was characterised by its intrinsically hectic pace, fragmented nature, brevity and variety, iterative decision-making processes and extensive dependence on verbal communication and informal networks (Mintzberg 1975).

This led to a revaluation of the multiple activities of both senior and middle management roles. Middle managers were no longer categorized as the functional intermediaries of coordination and direct supervision: they could also act as figureheads, influence management decisions, allocate resources, negotiate with various stakeholders, handle conflict, and ‘initiate strategic change’ (Mintzberg 1979:29-30). With this combined re-evaluation of the nature of planning and managerial work, it became clear that for strategy to be effective it had to be conceived as an emergent process of political compromises, consultations and bottom-up initiatives in which the implementers were directly involved in formulation (Mintzberg 1994: 273). This allowed middle managers a much more enhanced role in strategic change processes. Rather than simply conduits of senior management decisions they were increasingly conceived as exercising strategic agency in creatively adapting or generating new processes, systems and ideas.
One of the most useful synthetic attempts to capture the new roles of middle managers as strategic actors has been outlined by Floyd and Wooldridge (1992, 1997, 2000). Using survey data on 259 middle managers in 25 organizations, they propose a fourfold typology of middle management roles during the strategy process that can potentially accommodate both deliberate and emergent strategies within specific organizational contexts (Figure 1). This is theorized in terms of a matrix of upward and downward influence patterns, and a cognitive continuum of strategy processes that range from integrated to divergent (Floyd and Wooldridge 1992: 154). Upward influences can be either divergent or integrated allowing middle managers two strongly discretionary and potentially creative roles: championing alternatives and synthesizing information. The former roles allow middle managers to decisively influence resource allocation decisions and the shape of strategic ideas in a context where strategic ideas are divergent and senior management are susceptible to upward influence. The latter roles assume that middle managers are in a position to evaluate and integrate information that is of strategic value to senior management. Alternatively, traditional downward influences that can be either divergent or integrated define two more conventional implementation roles: facilitating adaptability and implementing deliberate strategy. The former roles allow some adjustment and refinements to corporate and operational sub-strategies in a top down strategy process, while the latter roles are the classical functional roles of the middle managers in the execution of strategy.

**FIGURE 1: A Typology of Middle Management Involvement in Strategy**

![Figure 1: A Typology of Middle Management Involvement in Strategy](image)

Source: Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992

Wooldridge’s and Floyd’s (1992) model has all the considerable strengths of a synthetic typology; it simplifies and clarifies an enormously complex empirical picture, and this has allowed it to be widely applied in both private and public sector organizations (Currie and Proctor 2005). There are, however, issues regarding the boundaries that define roles, the range of roles encompassed in the typology, the internal complexity of roles, and the
potential for role conflict and ambiguity.

Wooldridge and Floyd use their survey evidence to confirm the traditional role of ‘implementing deliberate strategy’, but the precise scope and subdivisions of the role need more clarification. One potentially missing sub-type is the implementation role middle managers play during strategic change as change project managers. These roles would appear to have grown enormously as change initiatives have been conceived as ‘projects’ or ‘programmes’ that can be planned and monitored as implementation proceeds. Yet there have been few attempts to explore the roles of middle managers as internal project managers during change implementation processes (Buchanan and Boddy 1992; Caldwell 2001). The growing ‘projectification’ of change initiatives and the rise of project-based organizations within an increasingly ‘project driven economy’ makes this an important area for further research (Bresnen et al 2004).

Alternatively, the role of synthesising information is somewhat narrowly defined, when it may be a potentially much more wide-ranging role, especially in information-intensive and knowledge creating organizations. Nonaka and Takeuchi’s (1995) work indicates that the sources of knowledge creation can be localized and pluralistic, tacit and explicit, allowing middle managers a vital creative role as ‘knowledge producers’; although they are less clear on what mechanisms and practices facilitate ‘knowledge conversion’ processes (Clarke 2003). More broadly, Nonaka et al also argue that organizations constantly create new knowledge out of firm-specific capabilities: ‘The organization is not merely an information processing machine, but an entity that creates knowledge through action and interaction’ (2000:6).

Applying the Floyd and Wooldridge role model to public service organizations has also raised important issues regarding the scope of middle manager influence (see Box 1). Currie (1999) has shown how middle managers are purveyors and recipients of strategic change in the National Health Service, and how they can modify the implementation of strategy. But Currie and Proctor (2005) also illustrated how middle manager role conflict and ambiguity limits the more strategic roles envisaged for middle managers in public services organizations

Some of the substantive gaps in Floyd and Wooldridge’s role types may of course be partly resolved through more empirical research on the inner dynamics of strategic change (Mantere, 2007; Floyd et al 2008). But the real problem with the model is that despite its apparent emphasis on emergent strategy it tends to read off roles as middle management functions in a deliberate strategy process (1992:154-155). Their stated theoretical intent is to achieve ‘a synthesis of action and cognition’, but the model operates with an implicit distinction between strategy formulation and implementation; and this is reinforced by the absence of a reference within the model to emergent theories of organizational innovation and change that treat goals as problematic. In other words, the model is intrinsically static, and this limits the range of middle management roles that can be included in the strategy process. This also partly explains why issues of ‘legitimacy’, ‘strategic intent’ and managerial power are treated as unproblematic, and why the multifarious issues of role conflict and identity confusion that have plagued middle management positions are rarely mentioned (Currie and Proctor 2005). In addition, questions of how middle managers interpret top management intentions and the implementation gaps between senior management plans and what actually happens cannot be fully examined (Balogun 2003, 2006; Balogun and Johnson 2005). As an essentially intentional model of strategy implementation underpinned by a functionalist
reading of roles, all of these perplexing issues tend to get written out of the scripts of the four roles. Paradoxically, a model conceived to underscore the strategic agency of middle managers, tends to reinstate the autonomy of senior managers in exercising strategic choice, both in formulating strategy and directing its implementation.

**Box 1: The changing roles of middle managers in public service organisations**

Middle managers in public service organisations have often been conceived as neutral administrators or benign bureaucratic functionaries who occupy a formal and impersonal role defined by the execution of rule bound policies that are applied equally to everyone and without regard to individual self-interest. In practice the roles of middle managers have always been much more complex and they appear to becoming more diverse and problematic. Increasingly the roles of public service middle managers are being stretched far beyond the ideal of the neutral administrator inspired by a public sector ethos; they now encompass new roles as market-led service providers (Poole et al 2006). This has created new ideological tensions in the political-administrative relationship that underpins public service provision as well as deeper tensions between formal roles, social values and the identity and self-images of middle managers. These tensions are likely to intensify in response to:

- The erosion of the boundaries between public versus private sector provision and delivery models and the horizontal ‘deconcentration’ of the welfare state: e.g. contracting out, outsourcing, internal markets, voluntary sector provision, shared services, process redesign, public-private partnerships, private sector ownership and delivery of public services (Boyne 2002).
- The growing redefinition of public services in terms of ‘competition’, ‘customer service’ and ‘choice’ (Le Grand 2007).
- The increasing introduction of performance targets, outcomes and effectiveness measures into almost every areas of public service provision.
- The relentless drive to cut costs and ‘to do more with less’ in more areas of the public services.

Are there any ways of moderating this bias towards rationalism, deliberate strategy and strategic choice? Mantere (2007) has recently tried to both critique and extend Floyd and Wooldridge’s typology of roles by highlighting how role expectations both enable and limit middle manager ‘strategic agency’. This is certainly a valuable avenue for exploring the growing ambiguities of middle management roles in both private and public service organizations. For Mantere middle managers have strategic agency within imposed role expectations that are ‘structurally determined’. So the question becomes how is ‘strategic agency’ possible given the ‘disabling effects’ of functionally prescribed role expectations?

Mantere defines strategic agency as ‘an individual’s capacity to have a perceive effect upon the individuals own work or an issue the individual regards as beneficial to the interests of his or her organization’. Ostensibly, this Giddens-influenced definition treats ‘agency’ as strategic if middle managers ‘affirm organizational interests as a motivation for their actions’. It also allows Mantere (2007) to clearly uncover the limitations of functionalist role models by highlighting eight of the conditions that enable middle managers to exercise strategic agency: narration, contextualisation, resource allocation,
respect, trust, responsiveness, inclusion and refereeeing.

Yet paradoxically, Mantere’s overall definition of agency as ‘knowledgeability’ combined with interest and motivation seems to exclude the other critical requirements of intentional or strategic agency, namely autonomy and reflexivity (Caldwell 2005; Llewellyn 2007). When Giddens (1984, 1991) defines ‘agency’ he includes self-identity or how prescribed roles are reflexively redefined so agents have the capability to act and the autonomy to ‘act otherwise’. Mantere also tends to leave out the discursive or rhetorical formation of agency and how middle managers struggle for role clarity, meaning and self-identity in increasingly complex organizations, although there are undercurrents of these themes in his discussion of the eight enabling conditions. In practice, ‘narration’ may not just be an enabling condition of new roles, but an expression of discourses of ‘flexibility’ and ‘change’ that undermine the possibilities of middle manager self-identity and their capability to act (Turnbull 2001; Musson and Duberley 2007). It is perhaps no surprise then that the enabling conditions of roles and agency are in conformity with both senior managers’ expectations of middle manager roles and the functionally imposed forces of external market conditions. Ultimately Mantere may have extended Floyd and Wooldbridge’s model, but he cannot fully extricate ‘agency’ from the normative and functionalist determinism of role theory, even though he moves towards a broader theorisation of the enabling and limiting forces of strategic agency.

Sensemaking and sensegiving
If strategic agency models partly redefine the role of middle managers in the strategy process, they still remain strongly indebted to concepts of deliberate strategy. In ‘sensemaking agency’ perspectives, however, the primary focus is on the emergent or interactional nature of strategy, and this appears to mark a much broader attack on rationalist ideas of management decision-making and strategic change. But can sensemaking as an implicit exploration of agency and change in organizations really replace or subsume the territory of strategic or intentional agency? Can it bring agency back into organizational change theory?

Sensemaking perspectives assume an enormous variety of forms, although their common epistemological origins are in pragmatism, symbolic interactionism and cognitive psychology (Garfinkel 1967). Undoubtedly the most influential proponent of the sensemaking perspective in organizational theory is Karl Weick (1995, 2001). He defines sensemaking as a three stage cognitive learning loop consisting of enactment, selection and retention. Enactment refers to processes of meaning creation through which individuals and groups interpret information from an uncertain environment to create interpretations of the organizational world they inhabit. This usually occurs in situations of equivocality rather than simply uncertainty, when there are too many meanings rather than too few (Weick et al 2005). The inductive cognitive processes of sensemaking are therefore by definition selective. Certain interpretations of the world are rejected in coping with equivocality while others are retained as a plausible ‘empirical basis’ for action, mainly because people need to make the unexpected and unpredictable ‘manageable’ by ‘structuring the unknown’ (Weick 1995: 127). In this sense ‘sensemaking is an attempt to produce micro stability amidst continuing change’ (Weick 2001:22).

If the cognitive theoretical underpinnings of sensemaking are deceptively simple they also involve a series of related assumptions that are more complex and intriguing - and
ultimately more confusing. These include the view that organizations are ongoing processes of enactment rather than systems, structures or functional entities with goals. In this respect, enactment occurs through narratives, symbols, talk and labels that create ‘plausible stories’ of events, actions and causes. For Weick ‘plausibility’ is always more important in sensemaking than accuracy or rationality. Weick also argues that managerial action is informed by self-fulfilling prophecies in which decisions become realised when they are treated as if they were true; or, alternatively, they are treated as rational when they are realised – strategy and strategic intent are self-confirming or post-rationalising actions (Weick 2001: 170). Finally, it is assumed that human behaviour and identity is not prescribed by authority, rules or formal roles but is constructed through the pragmatic self-efficacy of practice (see Box 2).

**Box 2: Middle Manager Sensemaking in Public Service Organizations**

There have been few systematic attempts to apply sensemaking to the understanding of middle manager roles or ‘identity construction’ in public service organisations. The key assumptions of sensemaking may be useful because they partly debunk strategic models of managerial agency and challenge the idea that organizations have rational goals. The focus is on how managers attempt to selectively make sense of events and outcomes for themselves and others, especially during major disruptions of organizational routines (Weick 1995, 2001). This is undoubtedly an important issue in many public service organisations. In particular, the blurring of the boundaries between private and public service provision and the increasing ‘disconfirmation’ of the traditional role and ethos of the public servant place new strains on the identity, professional values and autonomy of public service middle managers (Poole et al 2006).

Despite this micro construction of the macro, the decoupling of rationality from intent, and the disjunction between cause and effect, Weick’s concept of sensemaking is not relativistic (Weick 2001: 98). Sensemaking may appear diffuse, confusing and arbitrary, but it is not meaningless. We can create stories and coherent narratives of the world and our actions through the retrospective ‘induction generalisations’ that we cognitively enact, select and retain. It is this epistemological faith in generalisations and narration that gives sensemaking a privileged scientific status, and this in turn allows Weick to keep at bay the more disconcerting anti-realist discourses of social constructionism that render scientific objectivity, narrative meaning, identity and agency deeply problematic (Gergin 2001). Ultimately for Weick sensemaking in all its varieties is a methodological defence against the corrosive possibilities of non-sensemaking.

There have been a wide-range of case studies that have sought to understand how managers interpret events and make choices by applying ‘sensemaking’ and ‘sensegiving’ to processes of strategic change (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1994; Maitlis and Lawrence 2007). Gioia and Chittipeddi define sensemaking as ‘the construction and reconstruction by involved parties as they attempt to develop a meaningful framework for understanding the nature of intended strategic change’ (Italics added). In contrast, they define the reciprocal process of sensegiving as the attempt to ‘influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others towards a preferred redefinition of organizational reality’ (1994:442). Given that these two processes work in tandem and tend to be linear, Gioia and Chittipeddi group sensemaking and sensegiving into a four-stage change cycle: envisioning and signalling by top management, and re-visioning and energizing by key stakeholders, including middle managers.
Balogun (2003; 2006) and Balogun and Johnson (2005) have recently taken the study of sensemaking and sensegiving concepts a stage further by applying them to the interpretation of middle managers roles during the implementation of strategic change. Using a case study of a UK privatised utility, with data collected through participant diaries, interviews and focus groups, Balogun classifies middle managers into four interrelated ‘change intermediary’ roles: ‘undertaking personal change, helping others through change, implementing necessary changes in their departments and keeping the business going’ (2003:70). The typology (Figure 2) is designed to extent and deepen Wooldridge’s and Floyd’s four implementation roles by questioning the nature of these roles in ‘more detail’ (2003:79). Effectively this means moving away from the strategic agency and strategy process focus of Floyd and Wooldridge (1994,1997) by giving priority to the emergent roles of middle managers as interpreters of change events who undertake personal change and help others through change. These are essentially personal ‘sensemaking’ and collective ‘sensegiving’ roles enacted through self-reflection, lateral communication and dialogue. Balogun therefore gives central importance to the interpretative-therapeutic role rather than the instrumentalism of planned implementation: ‘Undertaking personal change is in fact the key task for middle managers, since it informs all the other roles’ (2003:79). And because ‘roles’ are enactments of sensemaking and sensegiving interpretations this appears to open up the possibility of ‘an alternative explanation of what Floyd and Wooldridge (1994) term as the implementation gaps between senior-manager intent and what actually happens’ (Balogun 2003:79). For Balogun (2006) and Balogun and Johnson (2005) the intended and unintended outcomes of strategic change occur in the discontinuities between sensemaking and sensegiving.

**FIGURE 2: Middle Managers as Change Intermediaries**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of Activity</th>
<th>Sensemaking</th>
<th>Coordination</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Peer / Self</strong></td>
<td>Undertaking personal change</td>
<td>Keeping the business going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organization</strong></td>
<td>Helping others through change</td>
<td>Implementing changes to departments</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Balogun, 2003:75

While Balogun’s overall image of middle managers as ‘change intermediaries’ is more subtle and context rich than conventional strategic action perspectives on managers as
implementers of change, it also generates other problems. The image is richer but it sometimes appears curiously passive and reactive: the roles of middle managers as change champions, adapters or information synthesisers that one finds in strategic agency models recedes from view. This shift in emphasis may be partly attributable to a different evidence base (e.g. qualitative case study findings versus quantitative survey data), but the counterpoint also appears intrinsic to the epistemological assumptions of the sensemaking approach. The idea of middle managers as strategic agents during the strategy process is replaced by the primacy of their sensemaking roles as creators and communicators of meaning, and these more reactive roles are invariably circumscribed by to managerial changes imposed from above that have both intended and unintended consequences.

Of course, other more proactive interpretations of middle manager change agent roles are possible. For example, Huy (2001) outlines a fourfold classification of middle manager roles that overlaps with Balogun’s – entrepreneur, communicator, therapist and maintainer. The key difference is that Huy tends to treat all four roles as proactive and adaptive forms of change agency that enhance middle manager’s crucial stabilising roles, especially during radical organizational change (2001:73; 2002:32).

These differences in focus raise the awkward question of how ‘roles’ are conceptualised in sensemaking perspectives. It would appear that the key task of ‘interpreting’ personal change proposed by Balogun (2003, 2006) is not a prescribed role with pregiven functional or organizational attributes and a self-development remit; instead it appears as essentially an identity construct enacted within the sensemaking process. But unfortunately, there is no clear definition of how ‘roles’ or ‘identity’ relate in the sensemaking process, and this raises additional questions. Do organizations as hierarchical entities, with recursive socialisation processes or systems of rules produce and reproduce ‘roles’; or does the search for ‘identity’ construction enact organising? One can only assume that Balogun like other sensemaking theorists tends to drift towards the latter view when she suggests, following Weick (2001), that ‘sensemaking is grounded in identity construction’ (italic added, 2003: 79).

The lack of clarification of the concepts of ‘role’ and ‘identity’ is a persistent problem in sensemaking perspectives, as well as task-focused theories of managerial behaviour (Hale 1999; Mantere 2007; Simpson 2008). Traditional role theories with their functional connotations suggest that roles are learned and prescriptively acted-out. So they are, in principle, independent of the person who performs them: the classic justification for the ‘neutral’ logic of bureaucratic rationalism in public service organisations (Kallinikos 2004). In contrast, sensemaking suggests that roles are creatively made-up: they are a retrospective interpretative construct within identity that can be changed. However, most sensemaking perspectives do not resolve the conceptual tensions between how roles are structured and constructed, preferring instead to weave in and out of ‘role systems’ and ‘role sets’ by treating them as underlying performative prescriptions for pragmatic action that are open to redefinition, reinterpretation and individual choice (Weick 2001).

This problem is not a new one of course. In symbolic interactionist theories roles are the ongoing reworking, redefinition and renegotiation of meaning in processes of human interaction (Garfinkel 1967). But sensemaking theories do not really take the legacy of interactionist analysis much further. Instead, Weick (2001) appears to blur role-identity construction as sensemaking, essentially replacing interaction with enactment while making the process more subjective and ephemeral: individual cognition takes priority
over social interaction. Moreover, unlike symbolic interactionism which sought, in principle, to restore the actor’s creative intentionality, enactment appears to pacify agency, partly because Weick is strongly opposed to the more instrumental implications of rationalist decision models: ‘sensemaking is accepting and coming to terms, rather than control and manipulation’ (Weick 2001:96,401).

More broadly, Weick’s more passive image of agency as sensemaking and identity construction also has implications for the understanding of ‘structure’. Sensemaking as a process construct tends to conflate agency with structure, conceiving both as cognitive modes of ‘enactment’, with the result that one is never sure when ‘organising’ as ongoing microprocesses of action become relatively fixed and enduring. Nor is it clear where or when organising as a change process begins and ends or how actors effect change.

Again these are not new problems. Like the traditions of symbolic interactionism, sensemaking has enormous difficulties in theorising systemic linkages between episodic streams of meaning and action, mainly because the concept of ‘enactment’ treats individual processes of learning and meaning creation as momentary, circular and self-referential (Contu and Wilmott 2004). Organizations are therefore not treated as macro entities with recursive properties of production and reproduction that precede or define the individual, and which can be analysed, redesigned or changed as a whole (Weick et al 2005:410). Rather organizations are ‘a stream of problems, solutions and people tied together by choices’, and this creates the possibilities for incremental change (Weick 2001: 28).

This optimistic de-structuring of organizations and the identification of agency and change with choice also has major implications for the theorisation of power. By conflating agency and structure as sensemaking, Weick does not seek to identify the points at which organizing as a process of sensemaking becomes identical with organizations as systems of power and control. This partly explains why power in organizations is rarely examined in sensemaking approaches, except in an ad hoc manner or as an incidental afterthought (Contu and Wilmott 2004; Weick et al 2005). Even ‘sensegiving’ as the more explicit attempt by leaders/managers to exercise power over others by defining ‘reality’ is rarely subjected to interrogation as a form of manipulation and potential managerial control. Without an analysis of power and by definition ‘structure/structuring’, the self and self-identity as constructions of sensemaking and sensegiving can potentially float free of power and the always intimate complicity between knowledge and power (Foucault 2000).

Discussion
Strategic agency models of middle managerial roles in the strategy process mark an important shift from a purely intermediary implementation role for middle managers to a greater emphasis on their proactive involvement in strategic change (Floyd and Wooldridge 1992, 1997, 2000). Yet despite this shift of emphasis, these models tend to implicitly operate with either a ‘deliberate’ concept of the strategy process or a broadly hierarchical concept of organizations that limit upward-downward influence to processes of implementation, delegation and authority sharing.

A potentially more promising formulation of the changing nature of middle manager roles is possible if the influence process is situated within the context of ‘knowledge creation’ activities mediated through a panoply of information sharing networks, cross-functional teams and collaborative projects. In this distributed model middle managers are
potentially key knowledge producers and creators. For example, Nonaka and Takeuchi’s (1995) innovative focus on the process of middle-up-down management clearly opens-up this possibility. They conceive middle managers as strategic intermediates between top management and other organizational stakeholders: ‘they are at the intersection of the vertical and horizontal information flows in the company’ (2000:22). In this role they can create knowledge from below as well as strategy from the middle, mainly because they can leverage their tacit knowledge and understanding of organization systems, processes and procedures.

But even this apparently more proactive, centred and distributed model of knowledge creation and leadership tends to overemphasise the logical linkages between organizational vision and strategy processes. Nokana et al (2000) also underplay the chaotic and often disjointed nature of innovation and strategic change processes in organizations – as well as their unintended outcomes: ‘To create knowledge dynamically and continuously, an organization needs a vision that synchronises the entire organization...Therefore, it is important for top management to articulate a knowledge vision that transcends the boundaries of existing products, divisions, organizations and markets’ (Nokana et al 2000:23, italics added). This formulation of knowledge creation and strategy formulation shares uncomfortable affinities with earlier versions of post-industrialism and the ‘knowledge economy’ in which organizations were integrated systems or structures with strategies that could be pre-programmed through the technocratic interventions of experts and leaders.

The new political economy of network forms of organising suggests, however, not only that organizational boundaries are blurred and hierarchies of control are undermined, but that markets and workplaces are fragmented, creating spatially diffuse and new virtual forms of organising that are localised, heterogeneous and inherently risk-based (Castells 2000). Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) partly recognise local-ness, issues of risk and the diversity of agents within networks, in their ‘hypertext’ concept of organizational layers, but they seriously underplay the tensions between the relatively autonomous role of middle managers as knowledge creators who can engender innovation and change and how this process is then managed or transferred through the strategic agency of leaders. Paradoxically, they still appear to be enthralled by overarching concepts of ‘strategic intent’ and centred leadership in what are essentially decentralised network organizations and work systems in which agency, knowledge and power are increasingly more widely distributed (Gronn 2002; Buchanan et al 2007).

If strategic agency models overly rely on the increasingly problematic notions of rationality, strategic intent and leadership in managing organizational innovation and change, sensemaking perspectives address these limitations, although not without engendering their own theoretical deficits. Sensemaking perspectives largely abandon the idea of strategy as a linear–adaptive process founded on formulation-implementation dichotomy: ‘execution is analysis and implementation is formulation’ (Weick 2001:353). Or in Weick’s more cryptic formulation: ‘doing is knowing’ (2001). From this cognition-as-practice viewpoint, strategic change and organizational redesign is ‘shaped more by action than plans, and more by interpretation than by decisions’ (Weick 2001: 72). Moreover, the reference point of strategy is not rational managerial actors or leaders operating within integrated organizational systems defined by goals, rather, organizations are conceived as ‘loosely coupled systems’ of self-organization in which improvisation and experimentation are central to the incremental processes of organising, changing and strategizing (Weick 2001:301).
This critique of strategy, strategic change and by extension change leadership also has broader implications for sensemaking as a potentially ‘middle-range theory’ that operates somewhere ‘in-between’ organizational change and agency. In Weick’s loosely coupled systems organizational change is emergent and continuous while agency appears diffuse, iterative and distributed. Continuous change engenders improvisation as a normal response to organizational uncertainty; and it is through small-scale actions and the micro-practices of enactment that innovation and change occurs: ‘small-scale micro behavioural commitments can have macro consequences’ (Weick 2001:15). It is, however, ‘microchanges’ that predominate over their potentially larger effects (Weick 2001: 400). Weick therefore conceives loosely coupled systems as ‘the ultimate neutralisers of managerial hubris’ and rationalist models of strategic agency: ‘Actors in a loosely coupled system rely on trust and presumption, persist, are often isolated, find social comparison difficult, have no one to borrow from, seldom imitate, suffer pluralistic ignorance, maintain discretion, improvise, and have less hubris’ (Weick 2001: 401).

While these ideas are intrinsically receptive to explorations of innovation and change in less hierarchical, complex systems, especially in information-intensive and knowledge creating organizations, they also raise broader questions regarding the nature of agency and change (Caldwell 2006). Because sensemaking cannot specify strategic ends it is always in danger of becoming its opposite: self-validating actions or self-fulfilling prophecies that simply reproduce more of the same. Weick (2001) appears to reinforce this view when he suggests that self-belief, optimism, enthusiasm and behavioural commitment are more important in realising goals than plans, predicted outcomes, collective beliefs or expert inferences as to the causality of events: ‘Whether people are called fanatics, true believers, or the currently popular phrase idea champions, they all embody what looks like strategy in their persistent behaviour. Their persistence carries the strategy; the persistence is the strategy. True believers impose their view on the world and fulfil their own prophecies’ (Weick 2001: 349-350).

Are Weick’s apparently contradictory views on the limitations of management hubris and the possibility of self-fulfilling prophecies somehow compatible? Yes. Paradoxically, the passive self-image of sensemaking as a counterforce to the hubris of strategic agency has a Janus face: the voluntaristic self-affirmation of individual action and choice by those who act as sensegivers.

Conclusion
Some of the most persuasive attempts to reinstate the strategic agency of middle managers in processes of innovation and strategic change are based on attacks on concepts of deliberate strategy and top down models of managerial action. Yet these new approaches to strategic change, organizational innovation and knowledge creation from the middle invariably faltered because they have been unable to fully explore the distribution or dispersal of strategic agency in organizations. To do so would require a deeper and more sustained exploration of agency and change that can accommodate issues of knowledge creation, network organizing and new modes of coordination, control and power in organizations. Ultimately this may lead to a more critical concept of strategic agency that can articulate not only the enabling and limiting conditions of middle manager roles (what I do), but also the ability of middle managers to question the growing discourses of ‘change’, ‘flexibility’, and ‘innovation’ that simultaneously affirm and threaten their self-identity (who I am, what I believe and how should I act). All too often managerial research on middle manager roles has positively affirmed their growing
influence and capacity to effect change and innovation, while failing to explore the
degree of autonomy they have in organizational change processes or their capacity to
reflectively examine their conduct or actions (Thomas and Dunkerley 1999; Turnbull
2001). A concept of strategic agency must include not only intentional action and the
exercise of influence, knowledge or expertise; it must also include the boundaries and
limitations of middle manager autonomy and reflexivity (Caldwell 2006).

Sensemaking perspectives also promised to restore the roles of middle managers in
strategic change, by exposing the limitations of top-down strategic action. But this shift of
focus created new blind spots. The limitations of sensemaking models of managerial
agency derive from their inability to provide a convincing systematic or counter-concept
of agency that goes beyond cognitive concepts of enactment, selection and retention.
These are essentially information processing and communication models of organizing.
Weick can therefore replace the modalities of managerial agency as intentional action
and instrumental control with essentially cognitive and interpretative schemas for the
understanding of intentionality that rely on conversation, narration or story telling (Weick
2001). This is in many respects a positive development; it appears to open-up new
possibilities for the exploration of agency and change that partly levels hierarchies of
expertise, knowledge and power while challenging managerial hubris.

But paradoxically Weick’s attempt to write control and manipulation out of the script of
management, also allows him to idealise the inductive self-creation of individual meaning
and identity through sensemaking as an empirical mechanism for controlling and
managing meaning. We are apparently free to construct our identity without succumbing
to the intentional thrust and determinism of rational action, but this occurs within
discourses and narratives that offer us control of uncertainly. In this sense, sensemaking
offers a retrospective and choice-driven concept of management control rather than an
instrumental one. However, Weick does not ask whether sensemaking can be subject to
ideological interpretation or the political construction and manipulation of identity. If
meaning is imposed and agency and self-identity are socially ‘interpolated’, then
sensemaking and sensegiving may be affects of power, rather than the ongoing
outcome of choice or inductive identity construction (Caldwell 2007).

Weick’s quasi-voluntarist elevation of choice also partly explain why there appear to be
no stable means-ends linkages in organizational decision-making processes that can be
subject to some degree of rationality, objectivity or expert knowledge. Instead, the self-
confirming logic of sensemaking treats interpretation, narrative and story telling as ‘real’
causes and rationality as post-rationalisation, although paradoxically all interpretations
are not equally valid. Weick the researcher as sense-giver appears to take precedence
over other sensemaking actors who only understand their actions respectively, and this
is disconcertingly similar to his concept of idea champions and change agents who
realise their self-filling vision by imposing their views on the world. If classical managerial
discourses on organizations as systems with rational actors pursing goals begin and end
with the vagaries of purposeful action, strategic decision-making and prescriptive role
models, sensemaking begins and ends with the equally problematic ideas of identity
construction and agency as self-validating action and choice.

Where does all this leave middle managers and the possibilities of change from the
middle, both as a theoretical project and as an exploration of practice? Attempts to build
bridges between strategic and sensemaking models of middle manager roles and
identity construction during processes of innovation and change are likely to continue. In
In this respect there may be greater scope for creating synthetic ‘middle range theories’ with common or at least more convergent research agendas (Floyd et al 2008). Undoubtedly this will take various forms, but one central task must be the clarification of how roles and identity construction are conceived. Is self-identity an enduring cultural construct subsuming normalising and temporal managerial roles, or do roles have a life of their own as powerful patterns of prescribed action and behaviour that are both fixed and transitory? Weick et al (2005) suggests that identity construction differentiates sensemaking from both role theory and cognitive psychology, and that identity is a ‘mutable continuity’. These ideas need to be unpacked and more closely examined (Simpson 2008).

The more critical research task, however, will be to clarify concepts of ‘agency’ and ‘change’ that allow an exploration of the possibilities and limits of strategic and sensemaking perspectives. Currently the concept of middle manager ‘strategic agency’ is still too dependent on actor rationality, deliberate strategy and conventional role theory, with the result that both the limitations and possibilities of change from the middle are understated. In contrast, sensemaking perspectives have until recently avoided an exploration of ‘agency’ as prospective action and intention, as well as its constructionist counter images: agency that is widely distributed or decentered (Caldwell 2006). This is understandable. Sensemaking is conceived as a retrospective process of meaning creation that is self-confirming: agency is therefore subsumed within sensemaking practices: ‘The language of sensemaking captures the realities of agency, flow, equivocality, transience, re-accomplishment, unfolding, and emergence, realities that are often obscured by the language of variables, nouns, quantities, and structures’ (Weick et al 2005:410). This is certainly true. But the underlying nominalism of Weick’s epistemological formulation of agency inevitably pushes sensemaking towards voluntarism as a strategy for change through self-affirming action while also critically disabling it as a systematic basis for a structural or relational exploration of power and control in organizations. Ultimately, a concept of agency is unsustainable if it refuses to confront the realities of power and knowledge as power (Foucault 2000).

Another potentially important bridge building task in creating more coherent research agendas will be to draw the strategy process analysis of strategic agency and sensemaking organizational perspectives into emerging ‘strategy-as-practice’ research programmes (Jarzabkowski et al 2007). Practice perspectives on the strategy process focus mainly on the micro-actions of ‘strategy making’ by practitioners as they are enacted through on-going strategy routines, social interaction and everyday conversation, as well as the analytical tools used in the process (Whittington 2006). Strategy is therefore something organisational actors do (i.e. ‘strategizing’) rather than something an organisation has. This new focus promises a ‘reinstatement of agency’, including middle manager agency, in the sensemaking processes and practices of strategy formation (Jarzabkowski et al 2007:6,12). There is a danger, however, that strategy-as-practice perspectives may abandon the conventional macro-level strategy process focus on ‘strategic change’ as well as concepts of ‘change agency’. This would be a somewhat paradoxical outcome: the practices of strategy formation would be uncovered in all their bewildering complexity, but we may gain little insight into the ‘how to’ of practice or the challenges of ‘managing’ organisational change.

Finally, the prospect of conceiving ‘middle-up-down management’ as a new panacea for organizational innovation and strategic change from the middle must be treated with considerable caution. The realm of the middle in organizations can no longer be defined
by the inward looking structural-functionalist default of ‘adaptation’ through conformity. This left organisation theory without a concept of agency (Giddens 1984). Nor can the middle be located in top-down hierarchies of control that once multiplied the dysfunctions of bureaucracy (see Merton’s classic analysis, 1968). We may not, of course, be moving inexorably towards ‘post-bureaucratic’ or even remotely ‘post-hierarchical’ organisations in a new post-modern landscape, but there is mounting evidence that the old patterns of ‘command and control’ are being replaced by new distributed patterns of network organising, empowerment and ‘concertive control’ (Barker 1999; Kallinikos 2004). This shift undoubtedly suggests more positive roles for middle managers in change processes, although one suspects that middle managers may still be capable of activating the old patterns of conformity, self-interest, and resistance that made them the authors of their own negative self-images. But this controversy over positive versus negative self-images and changing roles may simply miss the point. There are other more disconcerting forces lurking within new organizational forms that may irrevocably turn the old villains into new victims. These forces are often ignored by research agendas that identify ‘emergent’ or ‘processual change’ as the only constants in managerial discourses about middle manager roles, for they often obscure how new managerial rhetoric’s of ‘change’, ‘transformation’ and ‘flexibility’ challenge and ultimately erode the organisational rationale of middle manager values, autonomy and self-identity. The harsh reality is that in the new political economy of information networks, horizontal coordination and concertive control the middle layers in organizations may be further compressed and even eliminated. With this prospect change from the middle may be the beginning of the end for middle managers.
References


Grey, C. (1999). ‘We are all managers now; we always were: On the development and demise of management’, *Journal of Management Studies*, 36, 5:561-585.


practice perspective’, Human Relations, 60,1:5-27.


