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Organisational Change and Middle Manager Identity Work

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Organisational Change and Middle Manager Identity Work

Middle managers play a significant role in organisational change processes, both constraining and enabling change and impacting intended change outcomes (Balogun and Johnson 2004; Rouleau and Balogun 2011). Individual identity issues are central to the way that middle managers respond to strategic organisational change as such change tends to lead to uncertainty and encourage self-examination (Alvesson et al. 2008; Brown 2015). In this paper we draw on a two-year, real-time observation of a merger between an Art & Design faculty and an Architecture faculty to explore how a strategic organisational change impacts and is impacted by middle manager identity work. In doing so we contribute to knowledge of the role of middle managers in organisational change, the nature of middle manager identity work, and the impact of identity work on intended organisational change outcomes.

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Introduction

Middle managers play a significant role in organisational change processes, both constraining and enabling change and impacting intended change outcomes (Balogun and Johnson 2004; Rouleau and Balogun 2011). Individual identity issues are central to the way that middle managers respond to strategic organisational change as such change tends to lead to uncertainty and encourage self-examination (Alvesson et al. 2008; Brown 2015). In this paper we draw on a two-year, real-time observation of a merger between an Art & Design faculty and an Architecture faculty to explore how a strategic organisational change impacts and is impacted by middle manager identity work. In doing so we contribute to knowledge of the role of middle managers in organisational change, the nature of middle manager identity work, and the impact of identity work on intended organisational change outcomes.

Literature Review

Brown (2015:20) defines individual identity as ‘people’s subjectively construed understandings of who they were, are and desire to become’. There is much debate around the nature of identity, for example, whether identity is relatively stable and enduring or more fluid (Alvesson 2010; Brown 2015). There is increasing evidence that individual self-identity in the work place can change over relatively short periods of time (Beech 2006; Brown 2015; Coupland and Brown 2012; Gotsi et al. 2010; Watson 2008). For example, Beech (2006:46), from a constructionist perspective, argues that identities ‘adapt to social contexts and are open to modification and social processes’. From this perspective, individual or self-identities are constructed through ‘identity work’ which is defined as, ‘interpretive activity involved in reproducing and transforming self-identity’ (Alvesson and Willmott 2002:627). Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003:1165) define ‘identity work’ as people, ‘being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness’.

Identity research has tended to focus on times of significant organisational change as these are likely to lead to feelings of self-doubt and confusion which encourages self-examination (Alvesson et al. 2008; Brown 2015). Strategic change involves a shift in an organisation’s mission and priorities (Gioia et al. 1994) which often occurs during significant change events such as merger (Clark et al. 2010; Mantere et al. 2012), spin-off (Corley and Gioia 2004) or formation of a new venture (Gioia et al. 2010). Understanding the nature of identity work during strategic change is important because issues that arise as a result of identity work can impact the strategic change process and outcomes (Järventie-Thesleff and Tienari 2016; Langley et al. 2012; Mallett and Wapshott 2012).

Studies have shown that middle managers play a significant role in the social accomplishment of strategic change (Balogun and Johnson 2004; Balogun and Johnson 2005; Mantere et al. 2012; Rouleau and Balogun 2011). Balogun and Johnson’s (2004) study reveals that middle manager sensemaking can constrain and enable the strategic change process in unexpected ways, leading to unintended results. Mallett and Wapshott (2012) show that organisational change in a graphic design firm

is perceived as a threat to individual identity and leads some managers to distance themselves from the changes. However, despite the importance of middle managers in accomplishing strategic change and the likelihood of individual identity issues arising during strategic change, few studies focus on how strategic change impacts and is impacted by middle manager identity work. Thus, our research questions is firstly, how does strategic change influence middle manager identity work and secondly, what is the impact of middle manager identity work on the strategic change process?

Research Design

This research draws on a longitudinal, two year study of an internal merger between an Art & Design and Architecture faculty within a UK university. Langley et al. (2012) argue that mergers often trigger issues of identity and make the struggling that people experience more clearly visible. We also know that creative workers experience internal identity tensions and can be challenging to manage (Beech et al. 2012; Brown et al. 2010; Cohen et al. 2005; Gotsi et al. 2010). Thus, they provide a promising focal point to observe identity work during strategic change. A single exploratory case is suitable as we are studying a phenomenon which is poorly understood (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007; Yin 2013).

The lead author had extensive real-time access to the case site which allowed ‘deep immersion’ (Jarzabkowski et al. 2015; Ravasi and Canato 2013) in the site formally through interviews and attendance at meetings but also informally through regularly dropping in to exhibitions, talks and events. Over the two years 98 interviews were conducted onsite and each lasted an average of one hour. The focus for this paper is the 56 interviews with FMG members. The interviews were unstructured (Lincoln and Guba 1985) and included a series of prompts around people’s recent experiences of the merger. More informal interactions such as attending exhibitions and events (about 17) and ‘corridor conversations’ were recorded as field notes. In addition key documents were collected such as reports, presentations and press coverage. Regular meetings with the Dean (the senior manager and change leader) and his faculty management group (15 middle managers) took place initially weekly, and then fortnightly. The lead author attended 51 faculty management group (FMG) meetings over the two years. All the minutes and documents were collected and the meetings were audio recorded and extensive field notes taken. In addition 64 other meetings were formally attended. These included meetings chaired by members of FMG, such as School meetings and cross faculty meetings, and more ad-hoc meetings that were either chaired by the Dean or run at the Dean’s request. These meetings were observed and recorded in a similar way to the FMG meeting. These were attended on a more occasional basis to observe FMG members and their teams in interaction.

We used the interview data primarily, and supplemented this with other data such as the meetings, events and informal conversations, to develop detailed narrative accounts (Langley 1999; Van Maanen 1979) of each middle manager’s experience of the change process. We then analysed the data in more depth to explore each manager’s identity before and after the change period. We went on to look for evidence of individual identity work during the change process and used existing literature to sensitise us to typical types of activity that might be associated with our area of interest (Maitlis and Lawrence 2007). For example, we looked for incidents or issues which generated a sense of anxiety or strong emotion (Alvesson and Willmott

2002) and where there was evidence of people striving to reconcile a contradiction or conflict between their self-view and the demands of the change process (Alvesson 2010; Watson 2008). For example,

'I've never felt so out of my depth... I feel suddenly that my competence has been almost like pulled out from under me... I just felt I was disappearing.' (Manager 1)

For each of these identity instances we considered the nature of identity regulation that had elicited this response and whether the regulation was identity restricting or enabling.

From the 15 middle manager narratives we established three groups based on their identity at the end of the change period i.e. managers whose identity seemed to be enabled or enhanced, those whose identity appeared to have been restricted or diminished, and those where there was little evidence of either (neutral). We then looked for patterns within these groups to explain the different outcomes and to develop a set of contingencies or conditions under which a change is identity enhancing or restricting. This is the stage we are at currently. Early findings suggest that these patterns are not along obvious lines, for example, people in the restricted identity group include someone who was from the Architecture side of the merger (the side less impacted by the change), who had a high level of respect for the change leader and a long-standing, working relationship with him, and who was promoted to a more senior role as part of the change. Early findings suggest that contingencies have a temporal dimension, for example, the absolute level of autonomy a middle manager has is not as important as whether the perceived level of autonomy increases or decreases over time, and a relational dimension, for example, perception of how the level of autonomy compares with peers that the middle manager might benchmark his or herself against. Our findings will be developed into a conceptual process model which will include both the contingencies and the temporal and relational dimensions.

Findings

This is an example of some of the early findings which suggest that middle manager identity work during strategic organisational change is influenced or triggered by these particular types of identity regulation:

Managing Incongruous Tasks: due to the volume of change and limited resources managers undertook tasks which they felt were beneath them and that they should have been able to delegate or manage. This caused anxiety, frustration and self-doubt in their ability as middle managers i.e. is the volume of workload too high or is it my inability to manage my work effectively?

Loss of Existing Identity Practices: implementing new practices required managers to let go of practices which were strongly associated with their existing middle manager identity. In some cases this was related to changes in the physical workplace, for example, being moved to a location that was away from her team prevented a manager from having regular informal contact with the team, and also her ability to impression manage by being visible in the office and busy. As a result she worried that her team thought she was doing nothing even though she worked long hours.

Managing dual identities: implementing change challenged managers to maintain a dual identity which was often conflicting e.g. as a member of a faculty management team (change implementer) and as a champion of their own team (change recipient).

For example, presenting or spinning the changes in a way which was palatable to their own team whilst privately criticising aspects of the change.

Changes in levels of autonomy: increases in levels of autonomy were identity enabling and a close fit with middle managers sense of themselves as strategic leaders and decision makers. Decreases in autonomy, for example, loss of sign off budget authority, was identity restricting and provoked a strong negative response even amongst people who, in many other aspects, had more prestigious or important job roles.

Changes in levels of accountability: increased monitoring which often accompanies strategic change implementation triggered identity work, particularly failure to meet deadlines, and especially failure that was likely to be observed by peers such as at management meetings.

Experiencing New Situations: unfamiliar situations took managers out of their comfort or competence zone and caused them to question their own performance. New situations such as taking on a significant cross-faculty research role for the first time caused uncertainty in how to behave and in understanding the new rules of the game.

How we intend to develop the paper further

This research is based on existing data analysis of identity issues for Art & Design managers and course leaders which focusses on identity work, identity regulation and identity struggle. However, we want to reposition the work as a middle manager paper which means re-analysing the data and focussing only on managers but from both Art & Design and Architecture. We will also be extending the literature on middle managers, developing the framing more closely around the nexus between middle managers, identity work and strategic change, and articulating the contribution more clearly. The BAM reviewer feedback was very helpful in identifying additional literature and in suggesting ideas for the framing of the paper.

Developmental questions for the session: As lead author I am interested in any feedback. However, whilst I'm wedded to a framing around strategic organisational change and middle managers, I'm not wedded to an identity lens or to the specific concept of identity struggle. I would like to share the type of empirical data I have and see what others think about the theoretical lens.

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