



The Role of Middle Managers in Strategy Execution: A Case of Mutare Urban Authority

¹Leonidas Ngendakumana (Mr.), ²Christian K. Mataruka (Mr) & ³Harris Chapeyama (Mr.)

¹Economics Lecturer at Africa University, Mutare- Zimbabwe

²Programs Manager (International Institute for Development Facilitation)

³Principal Lecturer of Applied Sciences at Mutare Polytechnic College

Abstract

This paper explores the role of middle managers in executing organizational strategies in the local government sector. The study adopted both the quantitative and qualitative research methods and followed multiple case study strategy using an Urban Authority in Zimbabwe, Mutare Urban Authority (MUA.) Using structured individual interview cum questionnaire the author solicited information from 76 middle managers from three different departments which were randomly selected. The middle managers were randomly selected representing diverse characteristics of the target group of 354 middle managers in MUA. The findings suggested that socio political and economic environment posed militating factors which included sustainable political environment mainly in top management which divided the urban council with boardrooms and conference rooms being turned into “battle fields”. However middle managers had knowledge and skills which enabled them to interpret, communicate and translate organizational strategic goals into actions in their value adding roles as champions, synthesizes, facilitators, planners trainers, supervisors, monitors integrates and team builders. Middle managers argue that continuous dialogue and interaction with senior management increases the alignment of their tactical initiatives with top management conception of organizational strategy. It was evident that communication and the viability of resources are key processes impacting on the middle managers effective implementation of organizational strategies in MUA. In the same vein performance management systems and law were found to be the key tools. Some disconfirming evidence also emerge from the study, suggesting that some middle managers play a value subtracting role, characterized by disruptive behavior and being bogged down in routine duties. This was result of the political climate which resulted in poor mobilization of resources, mainly revenue collection. Corruptive tendencies weakened the middle managers. The following recommendations were made. (i) Managerial posts in M.U.A should be held by Non-Partisan officers for effective strategy execution. (ii) Channels of communication should be open for effective interdepartmental cohesion. (iii) Middle manager need to be involved in strategic formulation as well. (iv) There should an insight to different roles of middle managers and their influence in strategic generations and implementation versus the role of senior management

Key words: Value Adding Role, Strategy Execution, Mutare Urban Authority, Behavioral Paradigm, Local Government Authority

1.0 Introduction

Strategy execution is part of the broader strategic management process that involves putting strategies into actions. This part of strategic management process ‘strategic execution or implementation’ is the most challenging in many organizations including local authorities. This is because there is lack of explicitly guidance towards the implementation of the strategy unlike the strategy formulation (Anderson, Toombs and Humphery, 2007). A lot of resources in terms of time and money are committed into drawing up of plans while little is done to clarify and prepare those who will implement or execute the strategies (Currie and Procter, 2005). In the normal practice the strategies, when implemented turns to be quite different from the original plan (Graetz 2002).

A research on implementation of projects in local government environment confirms that there is a challenge in executions of strategies. A study which was carried in some selected municipalities in South Africa on strategies for indigent policy formulation and implementation showed that the obstacles in respect of the implementations of the policy includes the process of identifying the poor and verifying the applications (Arntz, Bekker and Botes, 2008). As a result this caused dissatisfaction among the community members and frustration among the municipal officials responsible for implementation of the policy.

Strategy execution is considered as a complex adaptive system. Execution happens at organizational level. It is emergent and that the social processes that form part of the system contributes to its complexity. Ultimately the formulated strategies from the top have to be translated to the lower levels in order to ensure unified understanding and united dedication to the implementation.

2.0 Objectives of the Study

- (i) To investigate and find out factors militating against strategy executors (middle manager), which are contributing to ineffective and inefficient attainment of corporate goals and objectives
- (ii) To establish the explicit value-adding role of middle managers which are considered critical in the strategy execution of an organization?

3.0 Significance of the Study

This research will enable the management of Mutare Urban Authority to reflect on and address issues critical to execution of organizational strategies. Undertaking the research will help in assessing and describing the status quo of the urban authority as far as strategy execution is concerned. It will also bring a contribution to the existing literature on the attainment of strategic goals.

4.0 Literature Review

4.1. The Role of Managers in the Public and Private Sectors

The successful implementation of strategies is vital for any organization, whether public or private. As Aaltonen and Ikavalko (2002:415) point out, in most cases organizations assume that anyone can execute a strategy, yet people are not exactly sure of what strategy execution or implementation includes, or where it begins and ends. Despite many views on this, the author concurs with Aaltonen and Ikavalko (2002:415) that there are limited numbers of explicit conceptual models of strategy implementation.

Currie (2006:8) asserts that discussion on the role of middle managers that emerged from the management literature are based on private sector organizations, with little attention being paid to the particular conditions of the public sector. Others like Morgan et al (1996: 360) share the same view by stating “as middle managers and former middle managers actually do, especially within the public sector”. As a result, contemporary management literature is dominated by studies with proposals about how private sector companies can create value for shareholders through executing their strategies. As Thompson (2001; 78) observes, the critical factors to understand public sector organizations ‘objectives include ‘stakeholders, potentially conflicting objectives, mix of quantitative (financial) and qualitative objectives and efficient use of resources’. Other writers, such as Pollute (2003) and Jarrar and Schiuma (2007), also highlight important similarities and differences between the public and private sector in relation to the roles managers play in these respective organizations.

4.2 Value Adding Role of Middle Managers

It has been hypothesized in some studies that, unlike private and most non-profit organizations middle managers in PSOs like local authorities have multiple goals, imposed upon them by the numerous stakeholders. They are thus required to satisfy such goals by reconciling and translating these goals into a plan of action. However, this argument has not been tested and as Boyne (2002: 109) argues. If public and private agencies operate in equally complex environments and must satisfy multiple stakeholders, it follows that each type of organisation must pursue a variety of goals.

In view of the above information, Morgan et al (1996:363) consider local authority organizations and cite an example of practical steps necessary to complete a local road-improvement project. They argue that the middle managers must try to reconcile the interest of local residents in roles control, safety, access and landscaping with the needs of the community at large in building effective and cost efficient road projects. The middle managers do not have shareholders, profit sharing scheme, the profit and loss statement or competition to tell them exactly how they are doing (Morgan et al., 1996: 363). This means that they must sense how they are doing by being in tune with myriad patterns of community influence and concerns.

In their study to understand the work of middle managers based on who they are interacting with and the purpose of that interaction, Thompson et al.(2008: 63) argue that middle managers work with top managers, peers and employees to either share information and communicate or influence others’ perceptions and actions.

Morgan et al (1996:360), using local government organizations specifically, reveals four value-adding roles of middle managers in local government organizations that are consistent with the above roles and accountabilities. These are to interpret and represent their work unit’s interest, lend or secure assistance, develop organizational relationships and leverage other’s time (Morgan et al, 1996: 360).

5.0 Research Methodology

5.1 Research Design

The researchers used the **case study design**, mainly because the main objective was to examine the existing situation without controlling behavioral events and without influencing or manipulating the process (Yin, 2003). Thomas (2011) offers the following definition of case study: "Case studies are analyses of persons, events, decisions, periods, projects, policies, institutions, or other systems that are studied holistically by one or more methods. The case that is the *subject* of the inquiry will be an instance of a class of phenomena that provides an analytical frame — an *object* — within which the study is conducted and which the case illuminates and explicates."

The authors chose the multiple case studies approach for more credibility and convincing findings despite the time consuming aspect attached to it. The multiple case study design was performed in this study in order to gain more information and to increase the validity of this research. Hence more detailed and valid conclusions on strategic execution by middle management could be drawn from the findings.

5.2 Population

For the purpose of this study, the population comprised of all departments and section heads within Mutare Urban Authority (MUA), who was responsible for the service delivery. According to MUA’s Human Resource Department the population is made up of 354 middle managers. The eligibility in this study was that the participant had to be:

- (a) Full time employees of MUC on substantive positions for not less than a year
- (b) One in charge of a department or section with subordinates who report directly to him/her
- (c) One who is suitably qualified to hold the position of department or section head.

5.3 Sample and Sample Size

The researchers decided to have 21.32% of the population as a sample. This means that a total of 76 middle managers comprised the sample. These were proportionately drawn from the three areas shown in Table 4.1 below.

Table 5.1: Sample Size and Composition

	DEPARTMENT	CASES SAMPLE SIZE
1	Housing	24
2	Health	46
3	Education	6
	CROSS CASE SAMPLE SIZE	76

Source: Computed from raw data

5.4 Data Collection Method

The researchers used a structured questionnaire and an unstructured interview guide. When using the unstructured interview guide the researcher emphasized on follow up questions. This allowed for probing of views and opinions where it was desirable for respondents to expand on their answers. The structured questionnaire was meant to generate quantitative data which was used to test the claim that majority of the middle managers did not follow the crafted short and long term strategies. The structured questionnaire was administered to 50% of the sample. Unstructured interview guide was also used to solicit information from 50% of the respondents.

5.5 Data Analysis Plan

Inferential statistical analysis was carried out after the collected data was coded and entered into the computer using the MS Excel 2007 software package. Thereafter the Statistical Packages for Social Scientists (SPSS) version 18.0 was used for data analysis. The data was predominantly non-parametric. Frequencies occurrences of respondents' responses on factors that militated against the efforts of middle managers in strategy execution were computed. Thus the Chi-Square tests were used to test for the significance of the differences in the perceptions of the respondents. The Chi-Square tests were done for each department. That is for all those who participated in the study. The inferential statistics analysis was meant to validate facts given by the respondents.

Table 5.2 Data Analysis Plan

Collected Data From Cases		
Data Presented In Frequency Tables		
Hypothesis Testing (statistical approach) And Answer Research Questions (descriptive approach) For Case One --Housing	Hypothesis Testing (statistical approach) And Answer Research Questions (descriptive approach) For Case Two --Health	Hypothesis Testing (statistical approach) And Answer Research Questions (descriptive approach) For Case Three---Education
Overall Hypothesis Testing and descriptive analysis		
Answering Research Questions		

6.0 Data Presentation and Analysis

Case 1Housing Department

Respondents from this department were 24 middle managers who headed different sections within the department. The middle managers from this department expressed their feelings on their roles in the execution of the local authorities' strategies.

The responses given indicated the following:

What were the factors which were militating against strategy executers (middle manager), which contributed to ineffective and inefficient attainment of corporate goals and objectives?

The culture in the organization was good as 75% of the respondents indicated that they were able to effectively interpret and represent their subordinates' interest to senior and top management.

Middle managers' efforts were being frustrated by policies, laws and strategies which were adapted by top management. This was expressed by 92% against 8%. The 92% expressed that there was need for paradigm –shift in terms of the strategies especially. However information extracted through interviews indicated that external factors mainly socio-political as well as economic factors contributed greatly. In this area those with Masters' Degrees expressed that there was need for strong policy analysis during formulation using both the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) and the PEESTLED (Political, Economic, Ethics, Social, Technological, Legal, Environmental and Demographic) approaches. Majority concurred that technological backwardness and poor financial and other resources mobilisation are major setbacks which are greatly affecting service delivery in their department.

50% against 33% indicated that there were no barriers between strategic and operational level in terms of communication. They indicated that they had good communication skills as well that the organizational climate was good. However it was clear that the 33% who expressed their negative feelings and the 17% who were neutral had these feelings enshrined on their political and not on technocratic basis.

The middle managers expressed the dissatisfaction in their strategy execution as they lamented on the rigidity of the system. However majority expressed that the needs of the clientele are fast changing with the advent of the globalization

characterized by stiff competition which has resulted in the dominance of obsolescence mainly in the technological field. The middle managers indicated that the rigidity enshrined in strategic plans that they cannot be changed in accordance with the change of needs of the clientele. This characteristic has naturally denied the middle managers to define and justify new programs for review and adjustment. One middle manager indicated that it was not the problem of top management or the strategic level but rather the product of the laws and bi-laws of the country. Eighty-eight percent (88%) concurred that the greatest challenges were in the evaluation of programs which in most cases lacked objectivity. Majority lamented that the political sphere seemed to have the biggest influence with divided top management.

How can middle managers explicitly add value in the strategy execution of their organizations?

Majority of the respondents indicated that there was no good platform for discussing and sharing information pertaining challenges being faced by their departments. This was expressed by 71% of the respondent. The main reason cited was bureaucracy and division of the top management. There is no pre-execution orientation for operational personnel. This has been exacerbated by financial constraints. 71% of the respondents indicated that the pre execution orientation workshops were critical in directing and redirecting operatives. This was supported by 92% who indicated that there was need for organizational development interventions which included sensitivity training, transaction analysis, team building and survey feedback. These are critical for all those involved in execution of strategic plans would be able to understand and translate goals and objectives of organization especially in relation to inter departmental activities synergies. 75% of the respondents indicated that needs of stakeholders are not being considered mainly due to socio political, social economic climate within the organisation. 87% of the respondent said the execution of strategic plans presented to them has grossly been affected by leadership style of most top management members which has been worsened by lack of commitment by council workers who are poorly remunerated and at the time of the study workers had not received their salaries and allowances.

Case 2.-Health Department

The information gathered from the respondent from the health department was summarized. Those who expressed neutrality on an item were ignored. However those who strongly agreed and those who agreed were combined as agreed and the same applied for those who strongly disagreed and disagreed as disagreed.

What were the factors which were militating against strategy executers (middle manager), which contributed to ineffective and inefficient attainment of corporate goals and objectives?

Despite the facts that the middle managers were able to represent their subordinates interests to senior management service delivery in the city was greatly affected by top managements policies and strategies which were greatly influenced political divisions in it. The middle managers agreed that they had all the prerequisites to take their organization to greater heights through their capability to coordinate, mediate and negotiate with nearly all stakeholders both in the operational and top management levels

Majority of the middle managers efforts were being frustrated by restrictions imposed on them by top management in the form of being given the opportunity to define new programs, their reports which they produced were not taken seriously as no recommendations from their departments were considered. This led to the middle managers being denied the chance to be innovative as they work with their subordinates in trying to meet organizational goals. One factor militating against the efforts of the middle managers was the absence to majority of the opportunity to openly discuss challenges which were being faced in their department. This greatly affected the efficiency of executing the strategic plans. The few who were given the platform were those who showed strong political inclination to the top management left for the majority of the middle managers being seen as radicals which resulted in them being denied freedom of expression.

How can middle managers explicitly add value in the strategy execution of their organization?

Great suspicion with which view of most middle managers were taken disempowered them. The middle managers did not have the much needed awareness campaigns with main stakeholders on a wide range of health issues except where top management felt great threat of outbreak of epidemics. It was evident that the top management had a responsive behavior where they would allow the middle managers to put measures in place to prevent outbreak of disease after realizing that the outbreak would have affected some communities in Zimbabwe mainly Harare.

Case 3- Education Department

What are the factors which are militating against strategy executers (middle manager), which are contributing to ineffective and inefficient attainment of corporate goals and objectives?

It has been clear that the middle managers were able to interpret and represent their subordinates to senior management as expressed by the majority. A close look at what the respondents say it might not be the prevailing organizational culture but their academic and professional background. This is in tandem with what Lenmark (2004) talks about the quality of those in management. Lenmark talks about the influence of middle managers as those who have the capability to influence the behavior of the subordinates. According to his behavioral paradigm the middle managers were able to represent the subordinates interests as they had developed capabilities of being good facilitators, team builders and motivators which led them to be good enhances of their subordinates work related needs and subsequently productivity. One of the theories which the author felt the middle managers in the local authority were able to capitalize on was the systems paradigm (abid).

They were able to enhance interrelationship among their subordinates and between them and the senior management as they had good skills in terms of coordination and communication (Lenmark, 2004).

The middle managers expressed that they had good mediating and negotiating skills which enabled them to effectively interpret the crafted goals and objectives. This meant that there was no problem in understanding the

organizational goals. This meant that the middle managers were suitably qualified with superior knowledge as authenticated by their qualification as displayed in table 10 as well as level of maturity shown in table 9 based on their ages and years of experience.

How can middle managers explicitly add value in the strategy execution of their organizations?

The respondents indicated that one factor which affected their execution of the strategic plans was the overall leadership style of top management. Majority of the respondents indicated that the leadership style adopted by most senior managers was emotionally driven rather than that based on rationality. Most senior managers were heavily influenced by the socio political climate of the local authority. Those interviewed indicated that there was high selectivity based on the middle managers political inclination with two major political battle field as lamented by most respondents majority of them were denied the critical opportunities to be involved in the critical crafting stages of the strategic plan. The situation hindered rational evaluation of programs. The most affected areas were those where interdepartmental interventions were required. This was critical where two or more such departments were headed by members from opposing party members. The situation hindered exploitation of the rising opportunities as the situation resulted in loss of critical information. This greatly affected approval of activities and allocation of resources. The department of housing and health were greatly affected.

6.2 Hypothesis testing results

The table below shows the summarized Chi-Square analysis results for the hypothesis for each Case and the Overall analysis

Department	Computed X ²	Critical X ² at $\alpha=0.05$
Housing	24.9891	28.9000
Health	19.6540	28.9000
Education	9.7260	28.9000
Overall	20.6782	28.9000

6.3 Discussion of the Hypothesis Testing by Case

Case 1- Housing Department

A look at the claim which states that all the middle managers had the same perception on factors which militate against their efforts in the execution of strategic plans the collected data was subjected to statistical treatment. The chi-square tool was used. The X² coefficient was 24.7891 (see appendix 2 for detailed calculations) however the critical x² at 95% level of confidence i.e. $\alpha = 0,05$) happened to be 28.9000 which is far greater than the computed x². The condition led to the another to fail to reject the claim that the middle managers in the department of housing had the same perception on the factors which militate against their efforts in strategy execution as well as ways they could meaningfully execute the crafted strategic plans as they try to achieve their organizational goals and objectives. This meant that there has been no enough evidence to support the claim that the middle managers have different perception although different feelings existed among the respondents in the study.

Case 2- Health Department

The chi-square analysis gave coefficient of 19.6540 (see appendix.) Comparing to the computed chi-square(x²) and the critical x²) values of 28.9000 when $\alpha = 0, 05$ the author failed to reject the claim stated above. This gave the impression that the middle managers in the department of health had the same perception with those in the department of housing.

Case 3- Education Department

The chi-square analysis gave a coefficient of 9.7260 which was far lower than the critical x² value of 28.9000 when $\alpha = 0, 05$. The implication of this and as confirmed by the respondents was that: The middle managers in this department had the same sentiments as those in the other two cases. The respondents indicated that the city council had weak strategic plans for the department as the management of the department has been shifted to the Ministries of Primary and Secondary Education and Higher and technology development. The respondents indicated that there was a very poor link in terms of strategy formulation and implementation. However majority of the respondents disagreed with the questionnaire –cum-interview items

7.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

7.1 Conclusion

Using the information on the table to verify the claim that the middle managers in the three departments has the same perception on the factors which militated against their efforts in strategy execution as well as ways they could meaningfully execute the crafted strategic plans in order for them to achieve their organizational goals, the data was subjected to chi-square treatment .A coefficient of 20.6782 was obtained. The coefficient was compared to the critical chi-square of 28.9000. It has become clear that the author failed to reject the claim as the computed chi-square was lower than the critical chi-square. This meant that the middle managers in the three departments had the same perception of the conditions in the departments and subsequently in the entire local authority. The question under spotlight is now which factors were militating against the efforts of the middle managers which hindered them to effectively and efficiently execute the crafted strategic plans

7.2 Recommendations

On the basis of the main findings of the study, the following recommendations are made that maybe of value to MUA in terms of effective and efficient execution of organizational strategies by middle managers

- The political climate in MUA should be conducive for strategy execution. This can be done by ensuring that all levels of management should be composed of managers without political inclination. This would mean that policies, rules and regulations in place should emphasize the need to have critical management posts to be held by persons (civil servants) who dissociate themselves in the politics. This could also be cascaded down to the employees
- There should be constant dialogue that facilitates feedback and advice on a continuous basis between the top management and the department and section heads (middle managers) and the rest of the employees with regards to implementation of the council strategies
- Although strategic planning is a prerogative of senior/Top management, the strategy execution requires effective feedback and feed forward on Top-Down and Down –Top communication and questioning strategy in order to facilitate understanding and effective efficient and execution of strategies. The MUA should therefore devise ways of involving all middle managers in strategy formulation processes. This could increase the likelihood that their tactical initiatives will be in line with the top management concept of corporate strategy. This may further address tension or gap between the agenda setting and leadership of top managers and observed roles of middle managers.
- There should be great need for a comprehensive and constantly reviewed staff development programs which would enhance the acquisition of knowledge and skills on the latest technologies and ever changing needs of clientele community. This would be a form of capacity building which would improve efficiency in conversion of inputs into outputs.
- The greater part of middle managers should be their responsibility mainly the recruitment of human resources. In addition governments laid down procedures should be followed and disparities which existed would be reduced.

References

- Aaltonen, P. and Ikavalko. (2002), Implementing strategies successfully. *Integrated Manufacturing system*, **13**(6), 415-418
- Anderson, Toombs L.A., Hamphery J.H. "Strategic implementation as a core competency: The 5P's model" *Journal of Management Research* (1) April 2007 pp3-17
- Arntz, Bekker. & Botes, L. (2008). Strategies for Indigent Policy Formulation and Implementation in Urban Settlement in South Africa. *Journal of public Administration*, 38 (2), June, 102-116
- Boyne, G.A. (2002). Public and Private Management: What is the difference? *Journal of Management Studies*, **39**(1), 97-122
- Currie, G. (2006) Reluctant but resourceful middle managers: the case of nurses in the NHS. *Journal of Nursing Management*, **14**, 5-12
- Currie G and Procter S.J., "The Antecedents of middle Managers' Strategic Contribution: The Case of a Professional Bureaucracy" *Journal of Management studies* vol 42, issue 7 pp 1325-1356, Nov. 2005
- Graetz, F. (2002). Strategic Thinking versus Strategic Planning: Towards Understanding the Complementarities. *Management Decision*, 40(5), 456-462
- Jarrar & Schiuma. (2007). Measuring Performance in the Public Sector: Challenge and Trends. *Journal of Measuring Business Excellence*, **11**(4), 4-8
- Lermak, D. J., 2004. Leading Students through the Management Theory Jungle by Following the Path of Seminal Theorists-a Paradigmatic Approach and Management Decision, **42**(10),
- Morgan, D., Bancn, R., Cameron, C.D. & Deis, R. 1996. The Middle Managers do in Local Government: Stewardship of the Public Trust and the Limits of Reinventing Government, *Public Administration Review*, **56** (4)
- Politt, C., (2001) "Clarifying Convergence: Striking Similarities and Durable Differences in Public Management Reform", *Public Management Review*, 4.1, pp471-492
- Thomas G. (2011), A Typology for the Case Study in Social Science Following a Review of Definition, Discourse and Structure. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 17, 6, 511-521
- Yin, R. K (2003), *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (3rd ed) Thousand, Oaks, C.A: Sage