The Contribution of Healthcare Middle Managers as Change Agents in the Era of Covid-19: Critical Review

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Abstract. This paper critically investigates the contribution of effective Healthcare Middle Management as change agents based on recent studies, and argues that management change in a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic can be well-handled by Healthcare Middle Managers, who are critical components in the stability and success of organizational transformation in a turbulent economy. With the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations around the world have struggled to adapt effectively to change, and healthcare organizations have especially suffered through subjective responses. However, these methods have been proven ineffective by recent studies. This paper critically discusses the recent literature on the contribution of Healthcare Middle Managers as change agents in organizational change during cases of crisis and uncertainty. The results have shown that supporting Middle Managers in Healthcare is crucial for creating a sense of change to other immediate and relevant parties within the organization, while minimizing unnecessary costs and losses. Consequently, this paper contributes to clarifying the problem of not engaging the Middle Managers sufficiently with Healthcare owners and directors, and addresses the problem of disregarding Middle Managers as change agents. Thereby, the paper develops management knowledge, and it creates an opportunity for researchers to test this study on quantitative and qualitative methods in any population.

Keywords: Change agents · COVID-19 · HealthCare

1 Introduction

Over the past few decades, healthcare organizations have been facing increasing global competition, unstable customer expectations and dramatic socioeconomic changes. Therefore, they addressed these pressures either by implementing an organizational change successfully or ultimately declaring bankruptcy. However, nowadays things are
increasingly indeterminate (Belasen and Belasen 2020). Within the COVID-19 pandemic, an economic depression has been sinking and deteriorating many industries both domestically and internationally. This situation has reflected pre-existing gaps that have become exacerbated by the economic crisis as well as the healthcare crisis (Susann and Mats 2020; Kieran et al. 2020).

Amongst all the solutions in responding to COVID-19, this paper focuses on empowering Healthcare Middle Managers as change agents. Change management is one of the most effective and proven methods that an organization can use to achieve innovation, adaptation, and balance with the surrounding environment during times of transformation, with the ultimate mission of ensuring an organization’s efficacy and survival (Hartviksen et al. 2020; Basuk 2020; Olsen and Solstad 2020). This paper seeks to highlight the significant role of Middle Managers in organizational change as they have a unique role in achieving change management success (Udod et al. 2020). Moreover, most existing studies focus on the directors and employees, disregarding Middle Management altogether despite being one of the important parts of the organization. The majority of these studies misunderstand the importance of the Middle Managers, despite being responsible for administration teams, nurses, and physicians, and more.

With the right choices and resources, Healthcare organizations have the opportunity to build the ideal competitive environment to handle the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. Middle Managers are key components to the success of the change of the organization, can face systemic obstacles that might otherwise lead to organization failure, and take all, necessary procedures to address the current situation (Alegbeleye and Kaufman 2020).

The role of Healthcare’ Middle Managers has been proven as necessary in organizational change, which can be described as an intentional process by the organization to move from its current state to a future desired state (Kahm and Ingelsson 2020; Starc et al. 2020). These Middle Managers are most familiar with resistance to change within the organization and how to address it. The resistance to change happens when individuals refuse to adhere to changes to the appropriate degree by maintaining the status quo, either because it is incompatible their own interests or will burden them with additional responsibilities (Peeters et al. 2020; Lanz and Sussman 2020).

This paper is organized as follows: Sect. 2 Literature Review and The Conceptions of Organizational Change, Middle Management & Potential Concerns, Expansion the Bottleneck, and Recent Studies. Finally, Sect. 3 concludes the paper.

2 Literature Review

This chapter demonstrates the recent studies that are related to Healthcare Middle Managers acting as change agents. The following details are a set of vital points about the importance of managing change successfully in light of the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, discussing recent studies in this regard based on their results, and closing with important conclusions for this research paper.

2.1 The Conceptions of Organizational Change

Change is an inevitable reality that can drastically interfere with the life of organizations in the current circumstances. Unless there are mechanism in place for change management, the organization will not be able to continue. Organizational change takes different
forms according to the field in which it occurs and the elements that affect it. Organizational development is also considered one of the forms of change aimed at the growth of the organization and the improvement of its performance (Khodaparasti et al. 2020; Galy 2020). In general, change is the transformation from one state to another and a change in organizations or organizational change means a transformation, movement or modification from one state to another (Ellis et al. 2020; King et al. 2020).

In all cases, change is a phenomenon that is difficult to avoid, and it is up to organizations to be ready to adapt regardless of their technical readiness and whether the change is planned or unplanned. Organizational change could be referred to as a process of introducing improvement or development to the organization so that it is different from its current situation and so that it can better achieve its goals (Austin et al. 2020; Guerrero et al. 2020). Other research clarified organizational change as an introduction of modifications to the objectives and policies of the administration, or in any element of work. This can include but is not limited to: the suitability of the organizational conditions; the management work methods and activities with new changes and conditions in the surrounding climate, with the purpose of creating consistency and compatibility between the organization and its environmental conditions (Susann and Mats 2020; Kieran et al. 2020); the development of new administrative situations, organizational methods, and aspects of activities that make the organization a precedent over other organizations. Thus, it provides an organization with a comparative advantage that enables it to obtain greater gains and returns (Lanz and Sussman 2020).

2.2 Middle Management

Most literature is all about senior management and employees in fact, ignoring a very important class that mediates between these two groups and is considered a key link between them: the Middle Managers (Susann and Mats 2020; Kieran et al. 2020). These managers include a variety of titles and roles but at the same time they share many common duties (Basuki 2020; Olsen and Solstad 2020). Middle Management can hold highly specific disciplines within an organization; for example, an accounting manager who supervises a group of lower-ranking accountants and sends reports to the business owner. It can also be more extensive, such as a manager who oversees all departments and reports to his boss (Buick et al. 2018; Mustafa et al. 2019).

The main responsibility of Middle Managers is to keep the organization running, moving forward and making profit so that top management members can focus on bigger decisions about budgets, goals, and vision (Kahm and Ingelsson 2020; Øygarden et al. 2020). Maintaining worker productivity is a major responsibility for Middle Managers, and the top management often sets productivity standards. Maintaining employee satisfaction is another duty - this means that Middle Management must deal with disaffected workers in order to solve problems, while rewarding hard workers to maintain motivation among them (Olsen and Solstad 2020). The Middle Manager must also help the new employees as they should understand their job responsibilities. The manager also has to understand all the jobs below in rank, what is expected of those positions, and how to report appropriately to top management. Thus, communication between ranks is often the main responsibility of Middle Management Members (Hartviksen et al. 2020; Basuki 2020).
2.3 Middle Management and Potential Concerns

The middle administrations in the various organizations did not receive their rights for study and investigation, especially in the field of public administration. Even the studies that dealt with this level of management, they dealt with aspects of management in terms of its concept, patterns and theories, but not in terms of its categories as higher, middle and lower (executive) management, (Basuki 2020; Olsen and Solstad 2020).

On the other hand, very few studies have indicated the need of a Middle Management leadership. Middle Management managers’ level can take a lead in changing corporate world if they believe their core value is emotional, not functional. The middle administrations are considered a major passage through which all the upward and downward communications pass, and the procedures involved in these communications related to the administrative process in the organization (Hartviksen et al. 2020). Middle Management is the backbone that all organizations have relied upon. The distinction in this level of management depends on the extent of its proximity to the theater of the lower levels in the organization, which make it obvious for all work processes, areas of improvement, shortcomings and development, (Kahm and Ingelsson 2020; Øygarden et al. 2020).

Many of this generation believe that they are qualified to carry out their tasks independently without supervision, driven by their sense of responsibility and their awareness of the goals they want to reach, (Berraies 2020). Companies that seek to attract those with a startup background and try to retain this segment will have no choice but to restructure the company accordingly, and specifically change the hierarchical management style (Susann and Mats 2020; Kieran et al. 2020). However, large companies may have to start by abandoning Middle Management altogether (what is meant here by Middle Management: Managers who do not report directly to the chief executive officer, and who are at least one level above the supervisor) (Berraies 2020). Modern machines are qualified to perform the main tasks of the company’s administrative people much easier than ever before, which may prompt officials to emulate the experience of simulations’ companies and other companies that dispensed with middle management and received great attention from the media (Susann and Mats 2020; Kieran et al. 2020).

The bad news for middle management is that sooner or later, they will have to prove to employers that the importance of Middle Management goes beyond just the responsibilities of the traditional job. On the positive side, one should not rely on the stereotype drawn about both the Middle Management and the current generation, as the Middle Management will play a pivotal role in shaping the future of companies (Basuki, 2020; Olsen and Solstad 2020). The managers are very caring. Ironically, the next generation’s rejection of the hierarchical system stems from the most influential hierarchy, the family. The so-called “caring parents” and “internet followers” gave millennials an unprecedented level of self-esteem, but it also made them avoid emotional attachment with authority figures as well as friends and colleagues, and even admiration for strangers from near or far (Susann and Mats 2020; Kieran et al. 2020).

Firms should not misinterpret this desire as blind hatred of the hierarchy. In fact, it is one of the most important reasons for the young generation’s need for middle management supervision. This generation grew up in an age of speed, text messaging, and email, so expect emotional reactions. They are motivated by compliments more than luring them with a promotion or a salary, which is what they are used to through their
use of social media. Without a middle management that satisfies their aspirations, the younger generation will turn to higher management, and this may explain why executives receive many requests to be met by trainees, and this in turn will have negative effects on everyone (Buick et al. 2018; Mustafa et al. 2019).

2.4 Middle Management and Expansion of the Bottleneck

Are Middle Managers a bottleneck or a super turbocharger in the organization? Middle Management is frequently referred to as the informational valve of the company. Therefore, it could be an imposed bottleneck or a wonderful resource for efficient innovation management. Middle Management arguably frequently works as an innovational bottleneck, taking the control of the thoughts that get passed along in each track. There are certainly various reasons for why Middle Management can be a bottleneck for innovation in an organization. Their incapability could inspire the frontline to contribute their insights or as a two-sided fence for information stream (Susann and Mats 2020; Kieran et al. 2020). If Middle Management is seen as a must-have bottleneck, then let it be an enlarged bottleneck, not one that stands in the way of communication.

This administration has an effective role in the work, and the great service it provides, as it bears the greatest burden in it starting "from the line of initiation to the stage of production with the continuation and development of it and increasing its quantity". By knowing that, many studies on management, administrative laws, regulations are intended for middle management (Berraies 2020). Time management, inventory management, change management, and strategy management are concerned as middle departments with the regularity of work and the safety of the production process. The middle management contains the basic functions of work, which are planning, organizing, coordinating, directing, controlling, motivating, and making decisions. The theories and processes were developed for administrations; considered as a continuous history of administration starting from the scientific school to the interactive school (Susann and Mats 2020; Kieran et al. 2020).

2.5 Recent Studies

The real problem facing healthcare centers in general and hospitals in particular is an administrative problem more than a problem of capabilities and resources. This interest in the issue of health management has grown in many developed countries, especially America. And it became taught by universities as an administrative discipline, just like other administrative disciplines, and it has become a recognized profession that is endowed with great importance, just like other professions such as medicine, engineering and law (Susann and Mats 2020; Kieran et al. 2020). The following are recent studies that clarified how Middle Managers are a vital component in managing changes and dealing with its complexities.

Yahaya (2020) according to few explorations about Middle Managers experiences in the decision-making process throughout the adoption of an organizational change in the home care industry. The study focused on non-profit Healthcare organizations (Homecare) using purposive sample. The results are classified based on some intangible categories such as stress and fear, task or people-oriented leadership behavior, employee
exceptions (exclusions), and job frustration (unsatisfied). The finding highlights the need to recognize and engage the role of Middle Managers in decision making processes during the organizational change by their superiors. As the change is unavoidable, understanding the know-how of Middle Managers is essential for leaders in home care organizations undergoing organizational reformation because of the top-down management constitution in these organizations.

Belasen and Belasen (2016) both focused in their paper about the role of managers in organizations. They argued that Middle Managers are a fundamental resource for Healthcare organizations and evaluated the benefits of counting on them in leadership development and succession planning programs. The paper used governmental sources such as reports and provided surveys to classify the Middle Managers’ roles, competencies, and strategic value in Healthcare organizations. The paper found that whenever the Middle Managers are away from taking responsibilities and engagement in the managing process of change, this leads to decrease of productivity, decrease of morale, rising turnover costs, high levels of stress and inadequate attention to sequence preparation, internal encouragement, changes and leadership development. The paper contributed in clarifying the important of immersing Middle Managers to a drastic change that could lead to long-term retention, and extrinsic settlement.

Hartviksen et al. (2020) clarified critically the Healthcare Middle Managers’ development of the capability and competence for leadership on quality improvement in nursing homes. The study relied on a hermeneutic viewpoint with data gathered using the method of focus groups, individual interviews and observations with participative. The analysis followed qualitative interpretive approach. The findings showed how Middle Managers in Healthcare organizations managing complexity in a conflicting practice.

Austin et al. (2020) analyzed a qualitative case study about the important of readiness in successful change. They examined this study in Healthcare organizations to highlight the roles of middle management in managing the frontline providers of Healthcare in change execution. Specific factors used such as discrepancy, valiencence, appropriateness, efficacy, trust in management and fairness. The data benefited from documents, observation method through meeting and semi-structured interviews for the frontline Healthcare providers and some Middle Managers involved in the change. The findings highlighted similarities and divergence in readiness for change of frontline Healthcare providers by Middle Managers. It presents the readiness factors prior to the implementation of change by Middle Managers throughout all levels of the organization.

Susann and Mats (2020) highlights rich understanding, insights and new conceptualization about three angles of Middle Managerial Roles. The finding showed that Middle Managers have a better possibility of doing the work without suspicion, disloyalty and conflict. Moreover, the responsiveness level of these managers’ influences reinforced when they immersed in changes. The main outcomes found that parties in middle and below have a sense of change and harmony even if there is an absence of leadership styles by the top management.

Kieran et al. (2020) discussed the enabling of Middle Managers Role as the master key of organizational plans during the strategic change. The Middle Managers were performing with situations and other parties in sense making. The study analysis is qualitative and emphasized on a group of 42 Middle Managers of three organizations. This
study identifies the key performance foundation of Middle Managers sense making as official and commonly discussed opportunities between seniors and Middle Managers. These opportunities allow a form of sense making connected with a number of positive organizational outputs. These comprise Middle Managers sense giving across the organization, the successful performance of strategic change, constructive perceptions of change outputs and organizational supportive climate among Middle Managers and their well-being.

Harris and Ogbonna (2020) explored and analyzed Middle Managers’ responses or acts on what will happen if all the work essentially changed by economic pressures such as a recession crisis. The findings propose that Middle Managers responded to the recession in a differentiated mode, with the early responses being mainly positive. Responses became depressing over time, as Middle Managers believed that their seniors are manipulated with the events to introduce changes that threaten Middle Managers’ livelihoods.

Kahm and Ingelsson (2020) the paper provided some supportive factors that the Middle Managers of the front-line health care claimed that they required from their own superiors to play their roles and responsibilities in relation to their employees and coworkers while applying the lean principles and practices. The study is qualitative and focused on a designed web-survey distributed in a Swedish healthcare organization after two years of introducing Lean, with the objective of investigating the Middle Managers’ views on their role, conditions and aptitude to produce change according to Lean. The results demonstrate that to there were the beginnings of improvement of work using Lean by first line Middle Managers. Moreover, a readiness of Middle Managers toward generating a culture where issues and mistakes are viewed as improvement, and for encouragement that newly changed work procedures for creating stability, commitment and inspiration in relation to their employees (Co-workers).

Ellis et al. (2020) this study aimed to examine Middle Managers’ attitudes in the direction of an obligatory accreditation program in Danish Healthcare Quality Program. The researchers used a nationwide cross-sectional online survey for all Middle Managers and other managers in the 31 public hospitals in Denmark. The study followed a regression model that results 49% with 533 of 1095 managers participating. On the whole, managers’ perceptions of accreditation were constructive, focusing on input findings about some of the strengths of accreditation. The Danish Healthcare Quality Program was found most practical for standardizing processes, improving patient safety, and clarifying responsibility in the organization. However, managers with superior years of experience in their position had more constructive attitudes in managing change and operations.

Øygarden et al. (2020) study to fill gaps when their impact of organizational change on two outputs related to hospital service quality and when the role of Middle Manager change-oriented leadership style in relation to the same outputs. Additionally, the researchers aim to identify how Middle Managers’ participation in decision-making impacted by organizational change and change-oriented leadership, in addition to how it arbitrates the relationships between these two hospital service quality variables, performance obstacles and job satisfaction. The study adopted a cross-sectional survey with data from Norwegian hospital physicians. The findings present insights relevant
to present and continuing developments in the healthcare ground and to the query of how hospitals may treat rapid changes in ways that could contribute confidently towards outcomes related to service quality. The organizational change linked to performance impediments positively through participation in decision-making directly and indirectly.

3 Conclusion

The Middle Management level consists of branch managers and department managers. They are accountable to the top management for the functioning of their department and devotes more time to organizational and directive tasks. In a small organization, there is only one layer of Middle Management, but in large companies, there may be senior and junior Middle Management levels. The Middle Managers’ roles could be summarized as follows: Implementation of the organization’s plans according to the policies and directives of the top management. They also make plans for the sub-units of the organization, and participate in the recruitment and training of lower level management.

Middle Management is often misunderstood, though it must be said that they have not helped improve their image on the whole. Also, the accusation that they often lack a touch of humanity is not entirely true. Although this accusation is largely justified when the matter is considered carefully. Their career promotion is usually based on their excellent job performance, while other skills are ignored. No wonder that when asked to lead the middle management, they often adopt a less subtle approach by giving orders and control.

According to the previous details and the results concluded from recent studies, the importance of the role of middle management managers in taking responsibility for organizational change as change agents is due to their sensitive position in all medical institutions. They are the core link between all parties, starting from the top management to the last concerned party in the structure of the institution. The study shows the extent of the contribution of middle management managers in the change process due to their extensive background, and experience in creating a supportive environment and taking control of matters. They significantly reduce costs and minimize devastating losses caused by sudden changes. So why not use them as change agents in the current pandemic that the world is facing right now? The importance of an empowered management role for the institution is like good health to the human body, both of which mean smooth and efficient performance of all parts. Good management highlights priorities and service gestures according to change needs, uses limited resources, maximum possible efficiency, and raises the quality of service. Above all, it reflects the importance of the health management for good health services and vice versa.

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