

Summary: Managing nicely in the middle⁵

In the past years, all eyes were on the financial services industry. The reason why is the industry's dynamic nature because of continuous changes and the financial crises. What's most interesting is how middle management, the link between the strategic top and the work floor (and from there directly to the customers), acts in this new context. The research carried out is about what middle managers (can) do to be of benefit for the interaction between customers and employees. This described interaction is the essence of service provision and is, therefore, the primary focus area for the middle manager. This focus area is subject to (continuous) change due to changing customer needs, the employees' motivation and triggers from the environment of the organization.

Service providing is about connecting people

In order to be able to make a good description of the action repertoire of middle managers, it is important to understand the context in which this action takes place. Agreement about the fact that service delivery is mainly linked to the people who provide the service and the people who receive the service (literature review Tettero, 1994; Fitzsimmons, 2013). The most important characteristics of service provision are that it concerns an economic activity in which value is exchanged between customers and employees and that the middle manager has a crucial role in handling the (tensions between the) interests of customers, employees and the service provider. The exchange and creation of value depends on the people involved and therefore everyone's perspective on the aspects and perception of the service provided is relevant to this research. However, in most descriptions of the nature of services, the emphasis is mainly on the supply side (in terms of resources or results). The customer is often left out of consideration. In this research, therefore, an addition is made to the literature by including the customer perspective as part of the research.

Several researchers emphasize the variety and complexity of services by using terms such as heterogeneous, abstract and difficult to observe. According to Jansen (2010), this provides a situation in which managers have less control and in some instances, effective management becomes virtually impossible. The choices and possibilities for managers will be the subject of this research. The effective behavior of the (middle) manager in the service sector is not described in previous research and will, therefore, be the focus for this research. Providing insight into the actions of the middle manager is an addition to the available descriptions of service providers. Services can be characterized in different ways. In this research, the classification of Kwakman (2007) is used. The type of service he describes as 'solutions' (with a high level of standardization) is examined. This will reduce the diversity of services (and thus the complexity of the middle managers' context), which is in line with the research question that focuses on the actions of the middle manager.

Middle management leads the service delivery

The literature review also considered the definition of the middle manager. A wide range of definitions for middle managers is available. Huy (2001) is cited most and used a description from a structural perspective. He defines as middle managers as any managers two levels below the CEO and one level above line workers and professionals. However, Huy assumes an organization with many management layers, which means that the middle manager cannot be unequivocally determined at very large organizations (with more than five echelons) and at very small organizations (with fewer than two echelons). This research therefore uses a bottom-up definition that fits Elfferich (2008): he supervises the service delivery/execution. The manager is one layer above the employees who execute the work. The middle manager, therefore, functions at the busy node of business processes, at the intersection between strategy and execution, where they do an increasingly complex job.

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The literature review also discussed the available literature on control space and self-managing teams. This concluded that employees need a certain amount of control space (the set of control options) in relation to the control requirements to become and stay motivated for their work (Karasek, 1979, Schoemaker, 2003). Additionally, it can be concluded that the middle manager has an important role in shaping the relationship between control space and control requirements for his employees. The employee's perception plays an important role. The perception is in line with individual signification, where the essence of the service (the meaningful interaction between customer and employee) is seen as the starting point and not as a result of an organizational method. A far-reaching form of control space for employees is the self-managing team. The literature review shows that the middle manager in a self-managing team is not always superfluous in all cases, but that he must use a different style of management. For this, it is important that he can let go and give confidence to the team (Lelieveld and Vink, 2000). In particular, giving feedback, ask questions and motivate the employees. It can be concluded that the middle manager as manager has an important task in the introduction of self-managing teams.

Important role of middle managers in change and development

Because the middle manager works in an organization, and organizations are constantly changing (Weick, 2000), the actions performed by the middle manager are placed in a change perspective. A good understanding of what change is, is thus required for this research. De Caluwé and Vermaak (2006) speak of a great diversity in interpretations and definitions of the concept of change. This research sees it as a given that the middle managers have assumptions about change in a change process. This research is about how these assumptions convert into actual actions in times of change. For this research, the middle managers' assumptions on change are used to give meaning to the actions and to analyze them. To complement the research, question a relatively unambiguous operationalization worked along so that the participants in the research did not have to know all the available literature. For this reason, the choice was made to use the colours of change of De Caluwé and Vermaak (1999), mainly because of the availability of a validated test to determine the change preference.

In the literature review on giving direction to change and development, the available literature on middle managers and change is discussed. It can be concluded that in changes and in influencing people, the middle manager has an important role. There is agreement among the researchers that the managers and, more concretely, 'the behavior of managers' have a major influence on the effect of a change. This applies in particular to middle managers, because the middle managers occupy a central place in the organization; they are the link between top management and the employees or the primary process. They fulfil the crucial role of the translator of strategy and policy to this primary process. The functioning of the middle manager is seen in the context of (bringing about) changes. Based on continuous change, a situation in which the change is in progress. The perspective of planned change is chosen in order to provide insight into the action repertoire of middle managers. This perspective is particularly important because it is precisely in this planned change that the role of leadership is explicitly discussed (Stoker, 2006). An important part of planned change are the interventions done during a change. For an intervention, this study follows the definition as described by De Caluwé and Vermaak (1999): one (or a series of) planned change activities aimed at helping to increase the effectiveness of the organization (De Caluwé and Vermaak, 2006, free to Cummings and Worley, 1993). This means that interventions are part of the action repertoire of the middle manager, but not limited, as explained below.

Signification, motivation and action repertoire of middle managers

The literature also shows that the effectiveness of change is influenced by the signification at the middle level of the organization. The concept of signification in the context of organizations is elaborated mainly by Weick (1979, 1995). Following Weick (1979, 1995) reality regards as a construction process in which people produce a reality together. A social process, in which people

create meaning in the interaction with others. Subsequently, that action has an effect on the way in which they value the world and construct a (new) reality. Accordingly, signification is created from individual and collective reflection, by entering into a dialogue between different parties involved. This view is important for understanding and describing the actions of managers, where interaction between people is crucial. In this research, reality is not seen as objective data, but it is visible from the outside and can be studied. A construction that takes on meaning in social processes. Argyris (1985), amongst others, links the subjectivity of signification to the selective perception of actors. Argyris indicates that the gap that exists between the theory of speech (which people pronounce) and the theory of use (what people do) can be reduced.

To define a range of actions of the middle manager, the term 'action repertoire' is included in the research question. It is a term that is not common in the available studies. Moen et al. (2000) and Smid, Van Hout and Burger (2005) use the term in their research, but do not come to an (unambiguous) definition. The definition used in this research is: 'an action repertoire is the totality of actions, interventions and behaviors that middle managers use in different situations'.

Based on the literature research, it is also concluded that the motivation of the middle managers is important (Damen, 2007, Elshout, 2006, Stoker and Kolk, 2003). To be able to do something is not enough for a middle manager. The definition of the action repertoire is therefore linked to the motives and motivation of the middle managers. A connection that matches Ajzen (2005) and Burger et al. (2010) who both emphasize the importance of this link between action and motivation. This research is in line with the theory developed by McClelland in 1987 about human motivation. Researchers (Damen, 2007; Kaats and Opheij, 2008) have made a distinction between arguments, convictions and motives. The subdivision of McClelland (1987) is used for describing the motives. He distinguishes performance motivation from power motivation and an affiliation motivation. This is chosen, because it gives the opportunity to take a broad look at the motivation of the middle managers, but also because it makes structuring possible. In this research, the link between the motivation and the signification (of customers, employees and middle managers) in the actions of the middle manager is made.

Furthermore, the literature review concludes that there is no agreement among the researchers about the action repertoire of the middle managers. This is partly because many of the researchers focus on higher management and less attention is paid to the middle manager (Rainey and Watson, 1996). Another option may be that (as with Luthans, 1988) no distinction is made between senior managers and middle managers. From these studies of management as a whole, it emerges that managers do many things in a day (Mintzberg, 1973) and that managers spend most of their time on interpersonal communication with others (Mintzberg, 1973, Luthans, Hodgetts and Rosenkrantz, 1988). In this communication, the main focus is internal, on the employees. From studies, in which a distinction is made between senior management and middle management, it appears that middle managers have the emphasis on coaching, team development and customer orientation. It also concluded that it is difficult to describe, for example, what coaching means in concrete terms. In the little research that exists, Van der Weide and Wilderom (2004) studied the actions of middle managers in their natural environment. Specifically, in situations of consultation, it appears that 'giving direction', 'providing positive feedback' and 'verifying' are the most common behaviors of middle managers. For this research, the outcomes of Van der Weide and Wilderom can be used to reflect on the results of the analysis of the observed actions of the middle managers. Because they used a pre-coded set of actions in their research, which does not fit with the descriptive and explorative nature of this research, the results of Van der Weide and Wilderom are too limited to answer the complete research question.

Research on the actions of middle managers

The available literature review shows that actual actions in combination with the perspective of the customers have not been fundamentally investigated so far. These actions of the middle manager are central to this research. On the one hand, seen from the middle manager himself, but on the other

hand also seen from the employees and the customers' perspective. The central research question is: 'What is the action repertoire of middle managers to add value to the interaction between customers and employees?'. To answer the research question, a multi case study (Yin, 1994) is carried out in the period 2013-2016. A group of (in total fourteen) middle managers is observed and interviewed during this period. The middle managers themselves are also described as 196 'critical incidents'. In addition, meetings took place with customers and employees to give meaning to the actions of the middle managers (Weick, 1979). To describe the action repertoire of middle managers and to answer the research question, four analyses are carried out:

1. A description of the motivation of middle managers and their intended actions.
2. A description of the observed actions of middle managers in situations of consultation based on observations.
3. A description of the actions of middle managers in key moments indicated by the middle managers themselves.
4. A description of the signification of the actions of the middle managers by customers, employees and the middle manager himself.

The results of the research contribute to giving insight into what middle management is, in particular by involving customers and employees and by adding action as a perspective. It describes what a middle manager does and how customers, employees and middle managers themselves give meaning to that. This can be a supplement to the available studies that focus on the competencies and leadership styles.

The action repertoire

The action repertoire of the middle manager is explained below and consists of four meta codes and 30 main codes. It offers a classification of the middle manager's actions, a taxonomy for what the middle manager does. In picture 1 the action repertoire is shown in its entirety.

In the **action orientation**, it is central that the middle manager carries out an activity to realize a result or performance. The action can start in several ways. If a middle manager has an idea or would like to start an action, he will *take initiative* to start the activity. The activity may also have already been started by another middle manager or employee, in which case the middle manager *takes over* the action of his colleague. From that moment on the middle manager is the person responsible for the action and the one who carries it out. The middle manager also carries out actions, when the reason is unclear or unimportant because it concerns what the middle manager ultimately does himself, which is defining for this main code. He is *doing it himself* and self-handling the action, because he or others think he should do that. For example, because the middle manager has the most expertise or because it is part of his job or simply because he enjoys it. A special form of self-handling is *reporting*, in which the middle manager provides information about his own performance, performance of his team or department. Reporting is on the one hand about providing insight into performance, but is often combined with the justification of those performances and the (negative) deviation from the expectation or standard.

The **content orientation** is subdivided into eight main codes. In the content or substantive orientation, the middle manager focuses on the primary process of the service provider. The production process and the content of the service are central to this. This includes the final service that is delivered to the customer, such as the output of the service process. Part of the substantive orientation is delving into the content. He does this partly by registering facts and content by himself; he is *observing* what takes place in the process or how the service has been given shape to the customer. Based on these observations and other available factual data, the middle managers form an overview of the situation. They are *assessing* the situation. In this context, middle managers identify deviations from agreements or their own expectations and standards. These signals are (partly) communicated to others (middle managers send a signal), but it can also be for personal use. Middle managers form their own opinion

about the substantive issue, in which they have an opinion about in a situation. This way, the middle managers *substantiate* a position or opinion on the subject matter. They also use the knowledge and information they have, to question a colleague's substantive opinion and *to challenge* it in terms of content. In the cases where the middle managers do not have (or think they do not have) enough information, they will *request* it from colleagues or experts. In other cases, middle managers (from their background and experience, or because they have the first access to facts and information) will be the ones who *inform* others about a substantive part of the service process.

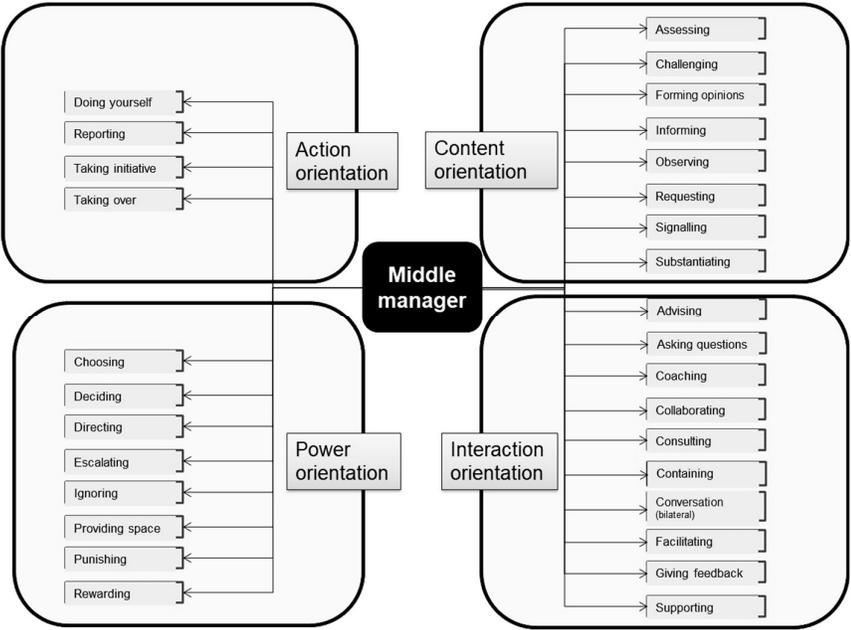
The third meta code is the **interaction orientation**, in which the middle manager carries out actions together with others. This can be employees, but also other middle managers, chain partners (colleagues from supplying or declining teams) and the senior manager. When *advising*, the middle manager is the one who gives a colleague a tip or suggestion and the colleague is the one who ultimately makes the decision. This also includes unsolicited advice, which is given at the initiative of the middle manager, so without prior request or invitation from the colleague, with the intention to help. A middle manager is also helping a colleague by *coaching*. Here too, the choice whether or not to do something with the contribution of the middle manager exists, but mutual expectation and roles are clear. Coaching always takes place in a contact between a middle manager and the person being coached. When coaching, the middle manager gives verbal input to the colleague, while in *facilitating* the middle manager actively takes care of the conditions in which a colleague can do his work. The middle manager is therefore creating conditions and allows colleagues to do the things they are responsible for. In the implementation itself, the middle manager can *support* the colleague by, for example, encouraging or stimulating. In this case, the colleague does the work and is responsible, but the middle manager (sometimes by simply being present) gives support. Helping a colleague can also take the form *giving feedback*, for example on the behavior or performance of a colleague. Both positive and negative feedback falls under this main code, so giving compliments is also giving feedback.

If the middle manager suspects that aspects that are outside of the sphere of influence may bother a colleague (usually employee), the middle manager can actively ensure obstacles are removed or prevented. The main code *containing* is used to describe this. *Containing* requires an active involvement of the middle manager, which may not always be visible to the colleague. In this context, *asking questions* is also a meaningful act of the middle manager. With this, the middle manager researches new situations or circumstances. This main code refers to the questions that pertain to the perception of others (the views of other people, including the emotions and distortions that come with it). The substantive questions cover the main code *requesting* as part of the substantive orientation. The interaction orientation reflects also in conversations with others. These can be face-to-face meetings, a (video) call or a conference call. The action consists of conducting *consulting with a group* or a *bilateral conversation* with a colleague. Planning, preparation and the actual conversation are part of these main codes. The final main code within the interaction orientation is joint work on a task or activity. The middle manager and at least one colleague or employee are collaborating (or *working together*) to realize a result. The middle manager also actively participates in the work and shares responsibility for this activity.

Power orientation has been named as the fourth and last meta code. As indicated earlier, in the choice of the name of the meta codes, a neutral formulation of the coding was sought. This also applies to the power orientation, although the Dutch society interpretes it negatively (abuse, personal interest, etc.) (see Mulder, 2004). The position in the organization forms the most important source of power for the middle manager, and secondly a certain amount of personal power (based on his knowledge and expertise). In this research, power orientation is described as the opportunity the middle manager has to exert influence; to move something or someone in a direction indicated by the middle manager. The middle manager has to possibility to exert influence, because he has the ability to *reward* certain behavior or performance. The middle manager does this not only by payment, but also

by giving attention and compliments. On the other hand, there is the possibility to *punish*, to indicate to others that something is not going as the middle manager wants. From the position that the middle manager in the organization has and the mandate that goes with it, the middle manager can *make decisions* that form a final judgement and thus stand for him, his colleagues and the team. In situations where a final decision is not yet under discussion and where there is room for any changes to the direction that the middle manager wants to enter, the middle manager will *choose* what the middle manager prefers. He selects an option or makes a proposal, but this is not yet an established decision.

Because the middle manager has the ability to influence, he can also (partly) relinquish this power. In the case of *directing*, the middle manager is directing the result of an ongoing activity, without actually carrying out the activity itself. He influences the outcomes indirectly, by steering the process, the content or the people involved in the activity. Although they work under his direction, he does not interfere with all the details of the activity, as others are given the opportunity to make choices and make decisions. By *providing space* for others, the middle manager gives them the opportunity to not only make choices in the implementation phase, but also make their own decisions on the (intended) result of an activity. In this, the middle manager determines in advance the space within which the others may take these decisions by setting frameworks. As long as the others operate within these frameworks, the middle manager will allow this and he will deliberately step back and refrain from his ability to influence. In it, he can also go so far as to choose consciously not to use his influence at all and to *ignore* a signal or action. That, too, is an act in itself, because consciously ignoring affects those who see the middle manager ignore something. It is visible to the environment. This also applies to the situations in which the middle manager acts by *escalating*. It is an act whereby the middle manager presents or transfers the case to someone who has more power than himself. This choice is also visible to the middle manager's environment and therefore has significance impact on the people he works with.



Picture 1: The action repertoire consisting of 30 main codes and four meta codes

The action repertoire above is described based on the four meta codes and the 30 main codes consisting. Picture 1 provides an overview of the four meta codes and the associated 30 main codes in a context. There is some overlap in the 30 main codes, but they are separated from each other by the link to the meta code. For example, *requesting* is linked to the content orientation to indicate that the

emphasis is on the content of the question. Also *questioning* is placed with the interaction orientation to indicate that the emphasis is on working with others and the interpersonal contact.

In addition to the results in the form of 30 main codes and four meta codes, the analyzes of the intended actions, the observed actions and the key moments also led to other relevant conclusions. These conclusions are described below.

Convictions and motives aimed at employees and performance are most important for middle managers

This research focuses on the motivation of middle managers for their actions. A distinction is made between arguments, convictions and motives (based on the studies by McClelland, 1987 and Damen, 2007). In this study, the motivation of the middle managers is described based on this tripartition. In the questionnaire and the interview, middle managers use arguments only to a limited extent when describing their motivation to act. A limited part of these arguments can be traced back to 'hard' evidence. If the middle managers put arguments forward (for example 'a customer would like simple and transparent products'), this can not be substantiated with facts. The most frequently mentioned convictions and motives of middle managers are focused on the employees and on the performances that have to be delivered. Middle managers make a link between these two topics. They are convinced that the quality of the employees leads to attaining the intended performance of the team and the organization. Middle managers are convinced that their added value lies in ensuring the proper functioning of their employees and that with this they allow their team to perform well. The combination of focus on both employees and performance confirms the complex position of middle managers appointed by other researchers (Stoker, 2000; Land, 2003; Gastelaars, 2013). It requires middle managers in certain situations to consider the achievement of a performance and the attention and focus on an employee. The conclusion based on the results of this analysis is that personal motivation (consisting of convictions and motives) is essential for the actions of middle managers. Both the convictions and motives are emphasized by middle managers and are mentioned most often in the destination document and in the interviews with the middle managers.

The middle manager is not driven by power, but by performance

In describing the motives of the middle managers, the subdivision as drawn up by McClelland (1987) has been used. He distinguishes power motivation, performance motivation and affiliation motivation. Power motivation is about influencing and having authority. The middle managers in the questionnaires and interviews do not often mention both aspects. Some middle managers mention influencing, but in these instances influencing is focusing on delivering a performance instead of obtaining a status or position. Delivering performance happens 'together with the team' and 'with support'. The answers and reactions of the middle managers combine the affiliation motivation and performance motivation somewhat. The affiliation motivation is expressed in the discussions with middle managers in the pursuit of harmony, especially with the team. Middle managers do not necessarily want to be part of the team, but they do find support for their decisions and acceptance by the team, motivating and important. This creates an image of a middle manager, who connects with his employees, but where the affiliation with a collective is not a major motive in the functioning of these middle managers. It is striking that middle managers do not mention the affiliation with other middle managers. When they talk about 'support' or 'together', then the main focus is on the employees and hardly on the Management Team (MT) and fellow middle managers. The main motivation that emerges from this part of the research is the need to achieve something, to produce a result. Based on this research, it is concluded that the middle manager is not driven by power, to a small extent by affiliation motivation, but to a large extent by the performance.

The company context is considered a given by the middle manager

In the research, middle managers were asked to indicate what change they currently perceive as the most important and where the focus of their actions is on. It is striking that the middle manager mainly focuses on the team and the team performance. Although the middle managers have a preference for

blue interventions (from the definition of De Caluwé and Vermaak, 2006), the change goals and change outcomes are not focused on the blue aspects of the organization. The context in which the team and the middle manager operate (think of processes, IT and product development) is left out of consideration in the description of the interventions. The Bank's and the Insurer's products and services were also hardly discussed or formulated as a change target in the questionnaire. This is unusual, because in other studies the importance of the middle manager in innovation is emphasized (Knallenberg, 2007). Particularly from the interviews, it became clear that the changes do not focus very much on the design and management of the organization. Middle managers look for opportunities to make it work within the frameworks they are given, rather than setting up or designing (new) frameworks. In this way, they only seem to recognize to a limited extent their added value during strategic, innovation and change processes that have been concluded in other studies (Balogun, 2003; Bitsch and Yakura, 2007; Floyd and Woolridge, 1997; Kallenberg, 2007; Kanter et al., 1992; Mantere, 2008).

Middle managers prefer to talk about a desirable and constructive action

As part of the research, the middle managers were asked to indicate which actions they intend to continue to do or to do more (the desired action). They were also asked which actions they intend to say appreciatively goodbyes to or to get rid of once and for all (the unwanted actions). It is striking that the middle managers emphasize the desired action. The middle managers like to talk about what they want to do, rather than about what they are no longer willing to do. Just like accepting the context in which they work, they prefer to focus on the positive aspects of their actions when describing their own actions. In the description of the action, Moen et al. (2000) make a useful distinction in their research between a constructive, a passive and an aggressive action repertoire. Middle managers with a constructive action repertoire can discover opportunities in most situations. Moen and Ansems indicate that a passive action repertoire aiming at self-protection and at creating security and safety for the middle manager himself. Moreover, the aggressive action repertoire focuses on self-favouring the middle manager. The more the middle manager feels insecure in his environment, the sooner he has the tendency to seek safety in a passive or even aggressive action repertoire. Looking at the distinction of Moen et al. (2000), the emphasis of middle managers in this research is on constructive action and aggressive actions are not mentioned at all.

Middle managers do more substantive actions than they appoint in advance

As a second step, the research describes the actions based on the observations that are carried out in consultation moments with middle managers. A distinction is made between consultations of middle managers with their employees (also called team consultation) and of middle managers together with other middle managers and their senior manager (also known as the MT). In the observations, it became clear that the actions that middle managers intend to do are actually done in the consultations. Every action that is intended is also observed. In that respect, the middle managers implement their intentions. At the same time, the middle managers had also decided not to do a number of actions anymore. Based on the two differences between intended and observed actions, it can be concluded from this research that the middle managers do not have a proper insight into their entire action repertoire. As mentioned earlier, Argyris (1991, 1996) has made the distinction between theory of speech and theory of use. The observation that there is a discrepancy between intended and perceived actions is not surprising in itself. More interesting is where the differences have become visible. It is also apparent that the discrepancy lies mainly with the substantive actions. Several substantive actions have been observed in the consultations had not been appointed by the middle managers in their intended actions. These are: Challenging, Signaling and Observing. These actions are less prominent for a middle manager, because this research indicated in an early stage that the middle managers believe that the employees are the ones who deliver the performance and need to have the knowledge. In particular, the substantive actions seem to contain tacit knowledge; implicit knowledge of the middle managers about their way of acting. This research contributes to making (part of) this information explicit and visible, so that other (and starting) middle managers can learn from it.

The role of middle managers in meetings/consultation influences their actions

In the observations of middle managers in consultation, there were two types of consultations, in which the middle managers had a different role. First of all, consultations with employees (hereinafter referred to as team consultation), in which the middle managers are a chairman and in some cases an employee is the chairman and the middle manager participant. Secondly, in addition to consultations with employees, the middle managers are also observed in consultation with each other and with their senior manager (hereinafter referred to as MT). In the MT, the middle manager is a participant in the consultation. In the different types of consultation, the necessary overlap is found in how the middle managers act. Differences are also found between the team meetings and the MT. In the team meetings, for example, Taking over, Coaching, Containing, Facilitating, Directing and Providing space are actions that were observed. These are mainly actions in the Interaction orientation and Power orientation, where the middle manager has a role as chairman or supervisor. In these instances, equality in role with regard to employees is less obvious. In the MT meetings, however, Reporting and Choosing are observed. Here the middle manager is in a role that is more equal or even subordinate to the higher manager. Thus, the role of the middle manager in the meeting and consultations influences the perceived actions of the middle manager. The consultations are seen as a form of context for the middle manager's actions. Another form of the context, which results in a difference in roles of the middle manager is the organizational context (in this research the Bank and the Insurer) in which the middle manager works. Here, too, differences in actions by the middle manager are found. From the observations in consultation, it can be concluded that the position and the role of the middle managers in consultation influence the actions that a middle manager performs. In different contexts, middle managers carry out other operations.

The consultation time is mainly spent on how middle managers can act within the given context; customers are rarely an explicit topic of conversation

Although the set-up and interpretation of the observed consultations was not the primary focus of the observations, they did reveal red threads that are of importance for the middle manager's actions. At both the Bank and the Insurer, the consultations that are mainly focused on internal performance and the KPIs (key performance indicators) were in fact focused on processes and employees. Also in consultations, the context (such as systems, procedures and policies) is regarded as a given, as fixed. Particularly in the team consultations, middle managers stay away from these topics 'because that's the way it is' and they want to avoid a 'complaining session'. During the MT meetings, managers are more critical on the context, but also here (with few exceptions) the consultation is mainly focused on getting the process working 'within the framework'. The customer is mentioned indirectly (by the customer satisfaction of a larger population). In the conversations, the middle managers confirm that they face difficulties in taking the customer's perspective into discussions. In part, this links to the market conditions where risk management and 'being in control' are the most important themes. The middle managers indicate that it is not desirable that the customer is less in the picture. Only they cannot easily withstand the internal pressure 'in the moment'. The work and time pressure they experience in doing so hinders them from changing this pattern. Based on the observations and the discussion with the middle manager, the conclusion is justified that middle managers mainly pay attention to the operational process 'working in the given context' and that the customer is hardly explicitly involved in the consultations.

Middle managers mainly act vertically and not horizontally

The middle managers were asked to provide case histories, the so-called key moments. The method used is based on the critical incident method as described by Flanagan (1954). The term key moment is defined for the participants as 'a moment was significant for you in the past period; what are you proud of or often think of, or that left you puzzled, that you think about often or that kept you busy for a

long time. It has been a key moment for you as a middle manager'. The key moments were delivered in a prescribed format in which a Situation Description was asked, the Task that the middle manager had in this situation, the Action that the middle manager had taken and finally the Result. It is striking that in the 196 key moments mainly situations are described that relate to employees of their own team. In some instances, the higher manager is involved in the key moments, but this is mainly the case if the middle manager himself cannot come to a decision or solution. The higher manager then forms the escalation level for the middle manager and is involved in the course of the key moment. Only a few situations are described in which the other middle managers play a significant role. In the key moments when this is the case, a business appointment is made about the work. For example, because a middle manager replaces his colleague during work. Or because it concerns a chain partner with which a substantive cooperation is sought. In the analysis of the intended action, the middle managers indicate that they want to make more use of 'green interventions'. This refers to relying more on learning and developing as a way of implementing change (De Caluwé and Vermaak, 2006). This is not (yet) expressed in the key moments. Learning from other managers, through soundboarding or co-creation, is not seen in the description of key moments. Based on these outcomes, it can be concluded that the middle managers mainly act vertically. This means dealing with employees and their senior manager.

The middle manager is responsible for the current operations and is not an innovator

In most key moments middle managers indicate that they are responsible (or feel responsible) for the current operations. Solving bottlenecks or issues in these operations is their most important task. In many key moments the middle manager gives himself the task to provide peace and clarity and states that he 'has to be there for his people'. This is in line with earlier findings that middle managers are focused on (the functioning of) employees who deliver the performance. In the key moments there is no room for mistakes (because they might not dare to report these) and 'open ends'. Where this seems to happen, the middle manager often describes the results in terms such as 'agreements have been made' or 'the process is being modified'. The effect on the customer seems to be a useful consequence, rather than a guideline in the actions of the middle manager in the key moment. In the key moments, virtually no tasks describe that relate to the renewal of the processes, products or other parts of the context in which the employees and middle managers operate. The tasks mainly come from the person with ultimate responsibility, the creator of the conditions and the executor. As in the previous sub-research, it becomes clear that the middle managers take the context as a given and are not only to a limited extent active in influencing this context.

In the transition to self-managing teams, the middle manager uses his power

A striking outcome from the analysis of key moments is that the middle managers of the Insurer act more from the power orientation than middle managers of the Bank. This is striking because the Insurer is in a transition to make teams more self-managing, which the Bank is not doing this so far. Aligned with the terminology of Van Amelsvoort et al. (2003), the Insurer wants a self-managing team that works independently and where the aim is to put more responsibility and power on the employees. The deployment of the power orientation seems to be in contradiction with available research by Stewart and Manz (1995), but actually is an additional layer of this theory. Stewart and Manz indicate that in the development of self-managing teams the manager has an important task, namely being able to let go and give confidence to the team. In the terminology of this research that would be seen as transferring power to the employees. On a deeper level in the meta code, it becomes clear that the middle managers at the Insurer *give more space* and *decide* more than the middle managers of the Bank. Giving space is in line with letting go and giving confidence, as described by Stewart and Mantz. It is also in line with previous research by Lelieveld (2000), which describes that managers of self-managing teams delegate more tasks and thus manage more at a distance. It also becomes clear that in the perspective of Lelieveld, a manager still manages. When looking at the underlying key moments, it emerges that the middle manager at the Insurer is used by the team to 'break through' if the team cannot manage a task herself. The middle manager is at the escalation level for the team and is actually deployed because of his power and mandate. The moment at which this happens is later in the

decision-making process of the key moment than is the case with the Bank and is preceded in the key moments by actions from other meta codes. The outcome of this part of the study confirms the results of research of Lelieveld (2000). A nuance on the results of Stoker from 1999 indicates that the middle manager 'will increasingly take on a coaching role in which he will become less directive'. This research shows that the middle manager in self-managing teams indeed get a more coaching role, but that he is not less directive in absolute terms. He is directive at a later stage, so it is only after the team has first been able and willing to manage. This adds a time element. If they cannot figure it out, the middle manager is ultimately the one who is directive and decides; he then uses his power.

Employees want attention and space from middle managers

The workshop with customers, middle managers and employees shows that for employees it is very important to enjoy their work. In addition, employees attach great importance to working with and for customers. Employees indicate that the service provider should never be satisfied with the service and in any case must provide satisfied customers as a kind of lower limit. With this minimal customer satisfaction, pricing and speed of the process play a less important role according to employees. According to them, customers choose primarily for the employees. Partly because of this, the employees recognize empathizing with the customer and employee as valuable actions of the middle manager. Where the focus should not only be on the current problems or situations, but a look into the future and how to move and grow towards this future is also important. Employees' opinion is that the middle manager also adds value by encouraging them to grow. If a middle manager acts in the action orientation, the employee is especially appreciative of the result and it is important that the problem is solved. The employees indicate that they find it important that the middle managers (continue to) communicate. In the interaction orientation, employees indicate that they experience equality and find this desirable. Employees experience the power orientation as a natural part of the middle manager's actions, as long as this is clear and well communicated and the control space for the employee is explicit. The middle manager must pay attention to the person and the work of the employees. Kampen (2011) speaks of being '(emotionally) available and responsive', but the employees also talk about the rationale. Middle managers must 'understand the content of the work'. In doing so, they must not take over the work too quickly or 'interfere' with it. The employees indicate that knowledge and participation are of benefit to them, but that these actions should actually be used as little as possible. After all, the employees must do the work as independently as possible. In the content orientation, besides the attention experienced by employees, also gives significance through the clarity it provides for them. This clarity also links to the space and power that they receive from middle managers. The more space the better, but with a clear demarcation and with an available middle manager in the background. When looking at the common thread in these findings, the conclusion can be drawn that the employees in the actions of the middle managers want to get attention and space. Then, according to them, a middle manager is of benefit and they experience the work as enjoyable.

Customers expect strength from middle managers if they have to deal with them

In the discussion of the key moments, customers indicate that they assume that they are primarily dealing with the employee. However, they also expect the middle manager to be available if the customer and the employee cannot find a solution. In this context, content orientation (case knowledge) of the middle manager is of importance to customers. Customers also name the perception by the middle managers, because in the eyes of customers that legitimizes the middle manager as a discussion partner. Customers indicate that they assume that middle managers make the customer's voice heard in internal discussions. In this, the middle manager can go a step further according to the customers. The call from customers is that middle managers, as part of the interaction orientation, should stimulate cooperation and set a good example in working together. The customers also indicate that middle managers can question customers. Customers (like employees) also indicate that the service provider is never satisfied. The service provider should be satisfied when customer satisfaction is high. However, the customers indicate that the service providers should not put too much emphasis on the customer satisfaction (score) and also have their own interest. On the other hand customers do

expect that the service provider will surprise them repeatedly. Customers experience the key moments as a slow, stuck and a complicated process. They see the acting of the middle manager in the action orientation as meaningful, when it can solve key moments.

In doing so, customers also see the action orientation and the self-handling of files as the right example. Customers do not mind it when the middle manager uses the customer as a crowbar, if the middle manager then dares to adjust things and change them according to his own insights. In the power orientation, customers see taking decisions as most valuable. In addition, the customers indicate that middle managers need to be transparent in order to be of significance. When discussing giving space, the customers show their worry about the lack of decisiveness and speed. Customers choose the service provider because of the good experiences they have, whereby contact with the employee is mentioned. This was mentioned by researchers as 'the customer's appreciation for the relationship' (Verhoef, 2012). Speed, thinking along and working in a customer-oriented way are also mentioned. Customers also indicate that it is partly custom. Clients indicate that the benefit of the middle manager lies in the focus on the customer. Preferably, customers want the employee to be given the space and authority to be able to act independently in the customer contact. When they are taken over by the middle manager, the customers state that they want to see or notice this trade as little as possible. They want to be able to arrange it with the employee. In their eyes, taking over can only take place if 'there is a crisis'; if necessary, the middle manager must be available as an escalation and use his mandate to keep the speed up and make decisions. Based on these findings, the conclusion can be drawn that customers expect strength from middle managers if they have to deal with them. That order is important for customers. They indicate that they would like to see the middle manager as little as possible, because contact with the middle manager indicates something went wrong in the cooperation between the customer and the employee. If the middle manager appears on the scene, he must be able to make decisions and speed things up. In addition, the customers also indicated that they (similar to the employees) occasionally find some attention from the middle manager a pleasant surprise.

Acting towards employees is the most meaningful for middle managers

The middle managers also indicated which actions were meaningful for them. It is striking that the red thread for the middle managers lies in the human factor of their work. Middle managers indicate that working with people and especially working with employees is the most important thing for them in their job. The middle managers also mention helping customers, but in their work, this is a derivative of good employees. Because, according to the middle managers, customers mainly choose the service provider because of the personal service and the connection with the employee. The employee is the most important factor in customer satisfaction. The added value of his own actions is seen by the middle managers, among other things, in directing and using power. He does this in the interest of both the customer and the organization. At the interface between customer interest and business interest, the middle manager is also doing pre-work by working together and being in meetings, actions from the interaction orientation. These operations are also mainly linked to 'working with people' by the middle managers. The emphasis is on vertical action, just as with the key moments. In this case, partly, namely the interaction with the employees. In addition, a link with the team seems to be a red thread in the link to the team of employees. As long as that team performs well and 'the team develops', the middle manager does the right things according to himself.

Work pressure is the main obstacle for middle managers when deploying their action repertoire

Middle managers indicate that they have a lot of repertoire to (be able to) act valuable, but that it does require an effort to use this. When, in the final interview, the middle managers were asked what 'helps and hinders' them in their actions, it was indicated by all middle managers that the work pressure they experience prevents them from making their own decisions in their action repertoire. Other terms used were 'workload' and 'delusions of the day'. These are times when the middle manager has (the feeling that he) lost control and is 'lived'. They also indicate that if they experience space and get freedom, this is helpful. For middle managers it is especially difficult to make clear choices and say no. They indicate

that this is particularly difficult because a clear framework (of standards) is lacking for them. In the discussion of the personal profiles, the middle managers are often looking for the standard 'when is it right?' Middle managers indicate that they are being asked too much, where 'many people do not really know what they ask for'. The middle managers conclude from this that 'nobody has a clear overview of what a middle manager does'. By several authors (Gastelaars, 2013; Land, 2003; Osterman, 2008; Stoker, 2000; Van der Weide and Wilderom, 2004) it has already been mentioned that middle managers are in an intermediate position in which a lot of work comes to them. Osterman also indicated that by reducing the number of management layers, the workload and the stress level would increase (Osterman, 2008). In the final interview, the middle managers indicate that they are busy and commit to more than they realize, while they really want to do well. Participation in the research is a good illustration of this. The intentions of the middle managers are good, but they should have made a better consideration about what they put themselves into. It did cost them a lot of time, more than expected. Middle managers indicate that they are often too friendly, overestimate themselves, not make choices and please others.

Middle managers are ambivalent about power

Despite the limited preference for power in the intended action, acting from the power orientation also forms part of the action repertoire of the middle managers. Based on three analyzes, an action repertoire has been described in which eight actions are described within the meta code called power orientation. In the final interview, an overview of the action repertoire for each middle manager is given, which also made clear how often he (in this case) acted within the power orientation. In the final interviews, most attention was paid to the power orientation. This resulted in many defensive reactions from the middle managers, especially the name of the main code. 'I am not the one to use power' and 'I want to avoid using power as much as possible, I think it shows weakness', were only a few of the first reactions to this meta code. In the discussions during the workshops, it becomes clear that a positive sense of power by customers is important for the middle manager, because customers indicate that acting from power orientation is an important part of the actions of the middle manager. They expect that a middle manager will take decisions and directs. Employees are most critical of the power orientation. In case of actions that concern them, they expect good substantiation; use of power must be explained and power should not be used without reason. In the workshop with customers and employees, the middle managers indicate that they prefer to use their power as late as possible. Their preference is linked to support and acceptance within the organization. In the explanation of the main codes that fall under the meta code, the closing interview also shows that power used by the middle managers is an accepted act 'if it is used for the benefit of the team or the customers'. Thus, power is allowed and acceptable for middle managers, if this condition is met. Actions such as giving space, making decisions and directing are examples of this. This is in line with Winter (1991), who indicates that a responsibility disposition has a favourable effect on the power motivation, because the middle managers then uses power in a 'moral and responsible manner'. Mulder (2004) mentions that, in this light, power (behaviour) often goes against prevailing norms and values. Therefore, the use of power is acceptable to middle managers, if it is used for the collective, not for himself. Based on these moments, it can be concluded that middle managers are ambivalent in speaking about and using power. This is in line with the 'taboo of power' discussed by Mulder (2004). Power has a negative sound in the eyes of many middle managers, because it is linked to 'self-favouring' or 'being clumsy', whilst at the same time the action repertoire of middle managers consists partly of the use of power.

Managing nicely in the middle

During this research, the middle manager's right to exist or (even further) the end of the middle manager was frequently discussed. The simplest thing is to state that the middle manager's right to exist was not part of this research. However, I hope that this research and the results are helpful in a well-argued discussion about the benefits of the middle managers; how it can be ensured that they deliver added value. Therefore, it is advisable to involve not only internal, but also external stakeholders such as customers, but possibly also suppliers. If it turns out that there is no added value

(in the actions) of the middle manager or that he is not necessary, then there is no place for that middle manager. In this case, the middle manager should leave, or should not be recruited. The contribution of this research lies in being able to conduct a careful discussion about what a middle manager does and what helps / hinders him to do so. The action repertoire provides language to explicate actions and added value with each other. The discussion about the added value of actions is therefore usable in teams with and teams without a middle manager. For teams with a middle manager, the middle manager knows that he is there because he is valuable and because it was consciously chosen that a middle manager is needed. In those cases, he has added value and the position of the middle manager is being nicely in the middle.