

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

The middle manager: Friend or foe of employee involvement

Journal Item

How to cite:

Fenton-O'Creevy, Mark (1996). The middle manager: Friend or foe of employee involvement. Journal of Applied Management Studies, 5(1) pp. 47-52.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© [not recorded]



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

Middle manager: Friend or foe of employee involvement.

Mark Fenton-O'Creevy

[Journal of Applied Management Studies](#). Jun96, Vol. 5 Issue 1, p47. 16p.

ABSTRACT Middle management resistance has been frequently identified as a significant barrier to the success of employee involvement practices. This paper reviews evidence from the literature and from 12 case studies on the role played by middle managers in employee involvement initiatives. There is evidence that middle management resistance often acts as a significant impediment to employee involvement. However, there is also evidence that this resistance is often a symptom of inconsistency between organisational systems and the goals of employee involvement and of inadequate training and support for middle managers. Employee involvement initiatives should pay attention to aligning organisational systems with the goals of employee involvement and treat middle managers as the targets as well as the implementers of employee involvement.

Introduction

There has been significant and increasing interest in companies in a number of management practices that can be grouped under the heading of employee involvement (Millward et al., 1992). Here 'employee involvement' is taken to mean practices which aim to increase employees' influence over decisions about how their work is organised and carried out. Common examples include 'quality circles', 'job enrichment', and 'self-managing work groups'. The benefits of employee involvement are well documented. Implemented well they can improve job satisfaction and commitment among employees (Miller & Monge, 1986). They can contribute to more effective use of employees' tacit knowledge and, by making more flexible work organisation possible, improve productivity and quality (Guzzo et al., 1985). However, these benefits elude many companies. The research literature abounds with examples of companies that have seen employee involvement efforts founder or deliver negligible benefits (Guzzo et al., 1985; Lawler, 1986; Cotton, 1993). Some writers (eg. Bushe, 1983; Hill, 1989) have suggested that negative middle management attitudes have been a significant barrier to the success of employee involvement initiatives in many organisations. This paper reviews evidence from a literature review carried out by the author for the Employment Department (Fenton-O'Creevy & Nicholson, 1994) and from case study research carried out by the author on the actual role played by middle managers in employee involvement initiatives. The paper also draws on this evidence to understand the underlying causes of middle management resistance to employee involvement and how it might be avoided.

Outcomes of Employee Involvement

A review by Locke & Schweiger (1979) of 47 studies found that around 60% of studies they examined revealed positive effects of employee involvement initiatives on job satisfaction, but little consistency in results concerning effects on productivity. A broader review by Guzzo et al. (1985) examined 207 studies employing psychologically based methods of improving productivity. They found that 87% of the studies reported improvements in at least one measure of productivity. In a later extension of this study they used meta-analysis to examine the effect of psychologically based interventions across 98 studies. They concluded that the different interventions did produce improvements in productivity overall.

The overall pattern of findings suggests employee involvement programs, usually, do produce improvements in employee satisfaction and that many initiatives have a positive impact on productivity and other output measures such as quality and customer service (Fenton-O'Creevy &

Nicholson, 1994). However, the results across individual studies are very mixed. While some individual studies showed evidence of significant improvements in output measures, in others organisations failed to achieve any significant benefit.

Middle Management Resistance

Popular writers on management have frequently laid the blame for failures of employee involvement on middle management[1] resistance to the involvement and empowerment of their subordinates. Tom Nash writing in the Chief Executive (1986) has claimed:

The greatest obstacle to employee involvement is stubborn resistance to change by middle and junior management.

For some, this resistance to the coming of the new order is the last gasp of a dying breed. Tom Peters, in his recent book Liberation Management (1992), writes:

Middle management as we have known it ... is dead. Therefore middle managers as we have known them are cooked geese.

There is some research evidence that supports this view. Although not all employee involvement efforts meet significant resistance from middle managers, it is a frequently observed phenomenon. Often this resistance does not take a strongly active form, such as refusal to carry out top management instructions, but finds more subtle expression (Fenton-O'Creevy & Nicholson, 1994).

A frequent means of increasing employee involvement is the use of quality circles. In one study (Bradley & Hill, 1987) the researchers observed managers restricting the issues considered to minor aspects of working arrangements, or deflecting attention to issues that did not reflect on the manager's area of competence. For example, they observed a production operations manager exerting pressure on a quality circle leader to focus on problems whose roots lay outside the department, such as maintenance. Others were seen to restrict the access of circles to key information. In the main company studied three quarters of long standing quality circle members felt managers withheld information from them, a finding also supported by archival data. Middle managers were preempting suggestions before they reached top management or frustrated their implementation.

Many of these problems intensified over time. In their early stages quality circles reveal many small scale problems and solutions such as simple changes to equipment and products or improvements in 'housekeeping'. As they exhaust these improvements and gain confidence they begin to seek out problems which impinge on managers or other parts of the organisation.

Another researcher, (Brennan, 1991), although noting that many middle managers were supportive of quality circles, found a 'highly vocal' group of middle managers putting considerable effort into 'rubbishing' the value of quality circles to peers and subordinates. These managers were particularly unhappy that quality circles could work on departmental problems without their cooperation. They were dismissive of the idea that the circles could add value to any problem that managers had considered already.

Connors & Romberg (1991) observed middle management and supervisors controlling access to activities such as quality circles and task forces and using them to confer favour or exert discipline. They also noted that middle managers and supervisors tended to focus their efforts on 'highly visible' activities such as producing complex and elaborate charts, rather than on facilitating the involvement of subordinates.

While much research has concentrated on quality circles (perhaps reflecting their prevalence in the last decade), examples of resistance are not confined to this form of employee involvement. Baloff & Doherty (1989) observed middle managers and first line supervisors acting to coerce participants in a job redesign programme to come up with the managers' preferred solutions. Supervisory resistance and lack of management support were among the most frequently cited barriers to the success of self managed work teams in a survey of senior managers (Verespej, 1990). Gleeson et al. (1988) carried out a survey of attitudes to a range of forms of employee involvement. They found middle managers to be significantly less positive in their attitudes than senior managers. In a study of self managing work teams Buchanan & Preston (1991) found supervisors reluctant to relinquish tight control of the teams. The supervisors felt they were still held firmly accountable for achieving short term targets and hence needed to exercise direct control to protect their own interests.

There is also evidence that resistance from junior and middle managers is common in wider forms of organisational change. Nilakant (1991) found middle managers resistant to playing an active role in the market driven changes their companies were engaged in. A common theme in these organisations was a perception of powerlessness amongst middle managers. Guth & MacMillan (1986), researching interventions in organisational decision making process by middle managers, found that middle managers frequently acted to block decisions which threatened their own self-interest even where those decisions had major implications for their organisations. They concluded that significant divergence between middle management self interest and the demands of strategy will often lead to ineffective strategy implementation.

Research by the author also offers some support for the claim that middle management resistance is a barrier to effective employee involvement.

The author carried out interviews in 12 organisations, which claimed to be making substantial efforts to benefit from employee involvement programmes, between 1991 and 1993. Interviews were carried out with key managers in each organisation and with a small cross section of employees.

The goal of the interviews was to establish how ideas of employee involvement, empowerment and participative management were being used in practice by these organisations, and what barriers to successful implementation they had experienced or were experiencing. The organisations were:

- A large central government department (Department X)
- The UK manufacturing subsidiary of a large multinational (Alpha Manufacturing)
- A major UK chain of car and commercial vehicle dealerships (Beta Motors)
- A division of an aerospace manufacturer (Gamma Aerospace)

The UK exploration division of a major multi-national oil company (Delta Oil)

- The UK head office of an international automotive component manufacturer (Epsilon Automotive)
- A central government controlled organisation preparing for privatisation (Kappa services)
- A group of motorway service stations (Lambda Service Stations)
- The mortgage division of a financial services company (Omega financial services)
- A manufacturer of artificial human joints (Phi Orthopaedics)

- A manufacturer of surgical sutures (Sigma medical)
- A European sister company of Sigma Medical (Theta Medical)

The interviews were semi-structured and focused around a series of key topics:

- The drivers for change
- The key people involved in initiating change
- The methods used for creating employee involvement and which groups of employees were affected
- The barriers to increasing employee involvement
- Perceived outcomes of the process
- The impact of the process on employees and their perceptions of it

The most consistently described barrier to increased employee involvement was the difficulty of changing managerial style at supervisory or middle management levels. These managers, [aced with disappearing career ladders, perceived erosion of their status and authority and uncertainty about continuing job security. They often showed considerable cynicism about the changes and reluctance to pay more than lip service to new ways of managing.

In Beta, a large chain of car dealerships, attempts to involve employees in the design of quality processes met with considerable resistance from dealership managers. A key issue, identified by a company working group set up to consider the problem, was the lack of any link to performance measurement or pay systems. In this sales based organisation, the lack of this link was taken by managers as a signal that employee involvement in quality was not an organisational priority.

In Alpha, a large manufacturing company, a greenfield start-up succeeded in gaining considerable support for self-managing work teams among the supervisors and managers. All employees, supervisors and middle managers were recruited in part on their ability to work in this way. However a later attempt to transfer these working methods to three brownfield sites was less successful. In particular the move to single status for all employees met considerable resistance from managers. Most resented the loss of their canteen and car parking privileges and the requirement that all employees wear a common uniform. At two of the sites a combination of resistance from unions and managers to new working methods was one factor in a decision to transfer production elsewhere. At the third site new working practices were adopted, but at the cost of a substantial initial performance reduction before benefits of new working methods were seen. Managerial resistance was overcome to a large extent by exchange of managers with the greenfield site and by offering some managers early retirement.

Two sister companies (Sigma and Theta Medical), which manufacture surgical products both undertook the same core work restructuring programme; switching from batch processing to continuous flow manufacture in small product based work teams. However, there were major differences in attitudes of managers to the changes between the two companies. At the first many managers and supervisors were cynical about the ability of employees to take greater control over the way their work was carried out. A previous attempt to introduce quality circles had failed, largely due to resistance from middle managers and supervisors. However at the sister plant, while some supervisors and managers had proved resistant in the early stages, active involvement of supervisors

and managers in the planning process and a considerable investment in training addressed many of their concerns about lack of competence and loss of authority.

In the two public sector organisations studied (Department X and Kappa Services) there was considerable suspicion among middle level managers that efforts to increase employee involvement were part of a government strategy to reduce management numbers. Both organisations also reported concerns about lack of people management skills in their management ranks. They saw lack of middle management 'buy in' to new working practices and lack of competence in interpersonal skills as the major barriers to successful employee involvement. Both had made some attempt to tackle the problem with training, but typical training inputs were two or three days per manager and were not being made available in a systematic fashion to all managers.

In the oil drilling operations of Delta, a major offshore oil exploration company, there was significant resistance from engineers (who had traditionally held considerable authority) to the devolution of authority to supervisors and work teams. This was a particular problem since the oil rig specific knowledge held by the engineers was vital to the effective running of the rig. The solution arrived at was to put the most resistant into technical or advisory roles with little responsibility for man management. At Epsilon, an automotive components manufacturing company, a programme to generate and use employee suggestions for the improvement of work processes ended after 3 months. Despite a number of successful outcomes the programme did not become a normal part of working practice. This was to a large extent due to resistance from junior and middle level managers who felt bypassed and threatened. Many voiced the fear that the programme implied senior management felt they had not been doing their jobs properly. This fear was confirmed to some extent by one senior manager expressing the view that a benefit of the programme was to 'expose' the less effective managers.

In another manufacturing company, Gamma Aerospace, poor industrial relations and a low trust climate overshadowed the changes in working practice. Many managers saw the switch to team working and more direct communication with employees as irrelevant at best and at worst as part of a continuing process of shedding jobs.

Phi, a manufacturer of artificial hip and knee joints, experienced initial resistance from managers and supervisors to working in new ways. However a feature of the changes was increased business responsibility for managers and supervisors (to the extent that the supervisors were left for an extended period to virtually manage the plant alone while the management team supervised transfer of production from a German subsidiary). This greater business involvement alongside substantial training and development efforts meant delegation of work management to the production teams became increasingly necessary.

If we seek a culprit for organisational failure to progress smoothly towards greater employee involvement need we look any further than middle management? Should our response be to decide with Tom Peters that middle management's goose is cooked and begin wholesale clearouts of the hidebound, blinkered, inward looking managers in the middle layers of our organisations?

Or, is it possible that the problem of middle management resistance to these changes is a symptom of a deeper problem?

[The Changing Role of Middle Management](#)

The first writers on administrative science emphasised formal functions of management. Henri Fayol (1949), for example, described the role of the manager as to 'plan, organise, coordinate and control'.

Since then, observational analysis of 'managerial work' (Mintzberg, 1975; Stewart, 1988; Hales, 1993) has shown how far what managers actually do departs from this model. Managerial work is characterised by task fragmentation, unscheduled demands, episodic face-to-face communication, networking, use of informal information and extemporaneous thought and action. These writers stress the low incidence of uninterrupted reflective time in the working day of middle managers. They also note the highly political nature of these roles; managers often getting things done by gathering information and influencing people outside the formal reporting lines of the hierarchy (Kotter, 1982).

Several authors have described difficulties and problems peculiar to the middle management role. Kay (1974) describes middle managers as beset by problems of uncertain authority. An AMA survey (Breen, 1983) of 1,557 middle managers in the US found that many felt a high degree of frustration with their level of decision making authority. A high proportion were critical of the level of communication and trust between themselves and top management and frustration with their opportunities to achieve personal lifetime goals. Open comments in the survey were often preoccupied with issues of 'voice' (expression of opinion) and careers.

A detailed research analysis of the themes of powerlessness and frustration among middle managers has been provided by Scase & Goffee (1989), who interviewed 323 managers within six large UK organisations from both the public and private sectors. They describe a frequently encountered profile of 'the reluctant manager' as having more energy for home than work life, high levels of stress in their work roles, feelings of psychological and emotional detachment from work and concern about career failure and the threat of redundancy. Many managers were keenly aware of their lack of skills in people management and few had received significant levels of management training.

What then lies at the roots of these problems? There are several issues:

Career Plateauing. Given the pyramidal nature of organisations, in the absence of organisational expansion, many middle managers find their upward career paths blocked. There is evidence (Scase & Goffee, 1989) that for some this leads to lowered job satisfaction and a withdrawal from psychological and emotional engagement with work.

Organisational De-layering. There is some evidence (e.g. Dopson & Stewart, 1990) that the role of the middle manager is not in such a sharp decline as many popular writings suggest. However, many 'organisations are restructuring to take out layers of middle management. This decreases job security, changes the nature of their work and intensifies the problems of career plateauing.

Decentralising. In many organisations moves to bring operations closer to the customer/client base have involved a shift from functional to product-based divisions, the creation of strategic business units and profit-centres, and out sourced functions (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1991). The effect of these changes is to erode the expert and hierarchical power base of the functional manager, and require increased interdisciplinary knowledge and general managerial skills for coordination and planning. For many managers the resultant less tightly bounded roles often lead to longer working hours (Kanter, 1989).

Intensification of the Competitive Environment. Dopson & Stewart (1990) found in their study of middle managers' roles that the majority had experienced an increase in environmental turbulence. In the last two decades markets for the products of UK firms have become increasingly competitive. Japanese firms have set new standards for productivity and there has been growing and major pressure from the growth of manufacturing in low wage economies. Increasing need for speed of

response requires greater levels of integration and lateral coordination in the middle layers of organisations.

Intrapreneurship. Some writers (eg. Kanter, 1982; Burgelman, 1983) have focused on the developing role, in some organisations, of middle managers as sources of innovation, and the conditions required to foster change. Middle managers have been exhorted to be the champions of innovation and change. There is also an increasing focus on the role middle managers play as instigators of strategic policy as well as being the implementors. These developments require an increasingly broad view of organisational goals from managers and risk taking behaviour not traditionally associated with the middle management role.

Total Quality and Customer Care/Focus Programs. In the BIM survey of middle managers, Wheatley (1992) showed that a high proportion of middle managers see these programmes as having a major impact on their roles. A survey by Devlin & Partners (1989) found that many middle managers felt threatened by these initiatives.

Information Technology. The role of middle management has traditionally involved a large component of processing and communicating information (Drucker, 1988). One impact of the rise of information technology is increasingly to make this role redundant. Conversely, the rise of IT has also created new middle management roles in the operation of these information systems.

Supervisor and first line manager roles are also changing. An IRS survey (1990) of 40 large UK organisations found the majority of organisations had recently changed the supervisor position or expected to in the near future, in most cases to a more 'managerial' position. The extent to which these changes were supported by systematic training was highly variable. Studies by the IDS (IDS 1987, 1991) support these findings, noting many cases where the introduction of new technology reduces the need for close supervision. In some companies studied, the introduction of teamworking meant a new emphasis on supervisors taking a facilitating rather than 'command and control' role. In other companies supervisors were being given greater responsibility for managing budgets. All the studies noted that for some supervisors, particularly those with long tenure, the demands of the new roles proved too demanding. Commonly these changes have been accompanied by reductions in supervisory numbers, or the removal altogether of supervisory or management layers.

Changes of this kind have clear implications for the training and selection of supervisors. It is no surprise that in some organisations supervisors and managers who have been accustomed to the more traditional role have found the transition difficult.

There is no doubt that middle management and supervisor roles are changing on multiple dimensions. At the same time some popular management writing has suggested that the number and importance of middle managers is in dramatic decline. The evidence does not support this position (Dopson & Stewart, 1990; Henkoff, 1990). However, it does seem as if many organisations are operating with fewer managers and wider spans of control, and that the job demands of managerial work are changing quite radically in ways that undermine traditional authority and require new skills.

The new demands on middle managers are challenging. Flattened structures, new technology, networked information systems, more complex and uncertain markets are eroding the two traditional power bases of management: legitimate authority based upon hierarchical position, and expert power based upon functional credentials. For managers who have spent much of their working life with one organisation, or who perceive themselves as lacking in authority, influence and

discretion these developments are often a source of anxiety and seen as a threat to their individual interests.

We need to examine the reasons for middle management resistance to employee involvement in the context of these pressures.

The Roots of Middle Management Resistance to Employee Involvement

As we can see below, research as indicated here suggests that the reasons for middle management resistance to employee involvement fall into three main categories:

1. Protection of self interest.
2. Lack of competence to facilitate employee involvement.
3. Mixed signals from top management and the organisation.

Protection of Self Interest. Middle managers and supervisors see their interests threatened by employee involvement in a number of ways. A frequent concern of supervisors and middle managers is that they will suffer a loss of control, and that their perceived low levels of authority and status will be significantly eroded (Abbott, 1987; Manz et al., 1990; Brennen, 1991). From our discussion in the previous section this comes as no surprise. There is ample evidence that many supervisors and middle managers feel relatively powerless with insufficient access to what Kanter calls 'power tools': information, control of resources and influence in the organisation. Power is perceived by middle managers as a scarce resource. Employee involvement alters the distribution across the workforce of control and influence over tasks and decisions. In the absence of any increase in the ability of middle managers and supervisors to control resources, access information or exert influence they will perceive power as a fixed commodity, and its redistribution as a zero-sum game. Any increase in the power of their subordinates can only be diminishing their own. Under this threat they may act often with some ingenuity and subtlety to block employee involvement efforts.

There are other ways in which they may see their interests threatened. Some fear that employee suggestions, arising from quality circles or suggestion schemes, will reflect badly on them. They fear that if employees make suggestions which lead to genuine improvements, senior management will blame them for not having come up with the ideas themselves already. Moreover, many middle managers have reached their positions through technical skill, so change which diminishes the value of their expertise is likely to be perceived as threatening to their career.

Where forms of employee involvement have been 'tacked on' to the organisation as, for example, in the setting up of quality circles outside normal working arrangements, middle managers may see them as simply increasing their workload at no benefit to themselves (Bushe, 1983; Brennan, 1991).

Kanter (1979); Bushe (1983) and Brennan (1991) and found that resistance to increased employee involvement is often concentrated among plateaued managers, who have become aware that they are unlikely to progress any further up the organisational hierarchy. Kanter (1979) argues that those who have little hope of upward mobility have a greater tendency to be authoritarian and rule minded. On the principle that mobility brings power, and in the absence of upward mobility, plateaued managers may see tight control and reliance on rules as their only source of power. Additionally, those who resent their situation and feel passed over by senior management may be predisposed to resist initiatives from senior management.

Where employee involvement efforts are accompanied by delayering and flattening of the hierarchy, the problem of career plateauing is intensified. Middle managers, often highly motivated by career opportunities, see the prospects diminishing for regular promotion. In many cases their job security is under threat.

Lack of Competence. Many middle managers and supervisors perceive themselves as lacking in interpersonal management skills (Scase & Goffee, 1989). In many organisations (particularly in the UK) levels of nontechnical training are very low. The introduction of employee involvement programmes is often accompanied by, at best, cursory training for the managers expected to implement them. Several studies (e.g. Gleeson et al., 1988; Buchanan & Preston, 1991) have found the levels of nontechnical training offered to supervisors and middle managers engaged in employee involvement programmes, to be negligible in the majority of cases.

When faced with demands to manage in a new way, to substitute facilitation for control, coaching and development for detailed specification of subordinates' jobs, asking questions for giving orders, many managers feel deskilled. Those who have reached their position from a technical background fear obsolescence of their old skills and anxiety about their ability to acquire new skills. This is compounded by the uncertainty surrounding the process and outcomes of initiatives.

Mixed Signals. In many cases, (Bushe, 1983; Connors & Romberg, 1991) supervisors and middle managers remain unconvinced of top management commitment to employee involvement. Often they believe that this is 'just another fad' which will last only a short while. This impression may be reinforced by dissension among the top management teams concerning the value of employee involvement or how it should be carried out. Often the people expected to implement employee involvement initiatives, see themselves as placed in a double bind. They are required to set up new ways of working but their own performance is still measured in the same narrow fashion or by unchanged output criteria. It is unusual for reward systems for supervisors and middle managers to be aligned with the goals of an employee involvement programme. New ways of working and managing require time to learn and the opportunity to make mistakes. If managers continue to be measured only on short term 'hard' performance measures they have little incentive to abandon old ways of managing. On the contrary under pressure to manage organisational changes as well as hold to unchanged short term targets many fall back on a command and control style of management.

[Avoiding Resistance to Employee Involvement](#)

So far we have painted a grim picture for the prospects of gaining middle management commitment to employee involvement. Some studies, however, illustrate ways in which commitment may be obtained and a more positive role be developed for supervisors and middle managers.

Kanter has developed her ideas of power and powerlessness in organisations further (Kanter, 1979, 1982, 1989). Perhaps the most important concept is what she has called 'the circulation of power'. Kanter suggests that to be effective, middle managers need access to three sources of organisational power: access to information; control over resources; and influence (particularly lateral influence, through a well-established peer network). Based on her studies of firms with 'excellent' records of successful innovation, Kanter (1982) recommends the following methods of fostering conditions in which middle managers can play an 'intrapreneurial' role.

Multiple Reporting Relationships and Overlapping Territories. These require managers to form their own ideas about appropriate action and to build support for their ideas by 'selling them' to affected parties.

Free Flow of Information. Maximises the chances of managers seeing new opportunities for the organisation and enables them to see a 'bigger picture'.

Multiple Centres of Power with a Degree of Budgetary Flexibility. This ensures that there are multiple opportunities for managers to get access to the resources they need to implement new ideas by enlisting support from people in the organisation who control these resources.

A High Proportion of Managers with Loosely Defined Responsibilities or Ambiguous Assignments. These are the people most likely to be able to seize new or innovative opportunities for the organisation.

Frequent and smooth cross functional contact with the emphasis on lateral relationships as the sources of resources and support--the emphasis here is on building peer support across functions for new ideas rather than just pushing them upwards.

A Reward System That Encourages Investment in People and Innovative Projects. The reward system must allow and encourage a degree of risk. If rewards are based only on short term performance, short term performance is all the organisation will get.

Some studies have examined empirically the behaviour of middle managers and supervisors in successful employee involvement programmes (Manz & Sims, 1987; Courtright et al., 1989). This research suggests effective management skills and behaviours appropriate to employee involvement take time to develop. These skills need reinforcing not only by training but by the reward and performance measurement systems and by behaviour of senior management. Important management skills for employee involvement include:

- drawing out contributions by asking questions rather than giving answers or instructions;
- appropriate praise and effective feedback;
- setting high expectations;
- setting meaningful goals;
- providing access to information;
- managing the interface with the organisation to provide freedom from bureaucratic restraint;
- clearly communicating the limits to discretion;
- awareness of individual needs and differences.

Discussion

The most consistent theme of the research evidence we have reviewed in this paper has been of middle management and supervisor resistance to the implementation of employee involvement. Without closer scrutiny we might regard this conclusion as a damning indictment of middle managers and supervisors as the principal culprits for the failure of employee involvement in many organisations.

However, resistance to employee involvement among middle managers and supervisors is not universal. Closer examination of reports of such resistance and its causes suggests that negative attitudes to the implementation of employee involvement among these groups are often symptoms of wider organisational failings rather than being the root problem.

In many of the organisations studied by the author, support for a more participative management style was patchy or inconsistent amongst senior managers. This led to cynicism and a reluctance to take any risks in changing their own behaviour amongst employees and middle managers. In others it was clear that performance measurement and reward systems still continued to reinforce old patterns of behaviour. Only few organisations had paid serious attention to providing access to the resources, information and influence that their managers needed to successfully implement employee involvement initiatives. And for many organisations the levels of resource input into training and development for managers and supervisors were derisory.

If the wider organisation systems fail to support the goals of employee involvement, if middle managers and supervisors lack trust in the commitment of top management to these goals, if they are left to see employee involvement as a zero sum game in which they will be the losers, then they are likely to respond to the implicit organisational message that nothing has really changed, rather than to the rhetoric of organisational transformation.

Avoiding resistance to employee involvement from middle managers and supervisors then becomes a question of proper attention to aligning organisational systems and processes with the goals of employee involvement. Key systems include, performance reward and measurement, career structures, vertical and lateral communication, resource and budget control, information systems and management development and training.

The implication of Kanter's work on 'the circulation of power' (1979, 1982, 1989) is that middle managers and supervisors should be the targets as well as the agents of employee involvement initiatives. Managers who experience the benefits of employee involvement first hand and see their own influence in the organisation increasing are more ready to empower their own subordinates.

In their discussion of organisational change, Katz & Kahn (1978) note that 'Enduring systems are over determined, in that they have more than one mechanism to produce stability. For example they select personnel to fill role requirements, train them to fill specific roles and socialise them with sanctions and rewards...' (p. 714).

In this context, they point out, strategies to cause change, which act only on individuals or groups, often fail. The larger system nullifies local changes. '... Individual or group change applies only to specific points in organisational space and is likely to be vitiated by enduring systemic properties rather than to change them'.

Particular sources of resistance to organisational change are likely to be: mutually reinforcing habits and behaviours of individuals and groups, specialist groups who see a threat to their expertise, groups who see a threat to the existing established power relationships, and groups who see a threat to their access to resources or rewards.

Implications for Practice

Earlier we identified key sources of managerial and supervisory resistance to employee involvement.

1. Protection of self interest.
 - 2. Lack of competence to facilitate employee involvement.
 - 3. Mixed signals from top management and the organisation.

How can these be addressed? The key threat to managers' self interest we have identified is the fear they will lose power and control. This suggests that:

... power should not be conceived as a scarce resource or zero-sum.

If managers and supervisors are not to see employee involvement as a threat to their already limited control and authority, they too need access to greater power. This requires, in Kanter's sense, that power circulates. Managers and supervisors need access to information, control over resources and mechanisms for exerting influence, both vertically and laterally. There need to be integrating mechanisms across functions and departments. Perhaps, paradoxically, if managers and supervisors are not to be authoritarian they need greater authority.

As we have seen many managers feel they lack the competence to effectively implement employee involvement practices. If this is not to become another source of resistance efforts must be made to:

... develop managers' competence in the skills of managing employee involvement

Learning new roles takes time and support. They need opportunities to experience success with these new skills, active role models, positive feedback on their performance and relative freedom from anxieties about job security. Above all the development of these competencies takes time and support.

As we have seen (e.g. Guth & MacMillan, 1986), middle managers will often act to sabotage organisational strategies that cut across their own interests. We know that commitment to organisations is both provisional and calculative (Nicholson & Arnold, 1989; Morris et al., 1993). All too often efforts to increase employee involvement pay scant attention to the mechanisms that align middle management and supervisory interests with top management goals.

Signals from top management and organisation systems need to consistently reinforce the goals of employee involvement. Key systems are rewards, performance measurement and career development. Lawler (1986) has suggested, for example, that career issues for middle managers and supervisors in the 'flat' organisational structures often associated with employee involvement, may be met by focusing on learning and growth. Linear career progression may be replaced by a focus on the acquisition of new areas of skill and responsibility, supported by skill based pay. The key point here is that messages from top management and from organisation systems and structures need to be mutually reinforcing and aligned with the goals of employee involvement.

Individual training, persuasion and participation in decision making may play an important role in influencing perceptions. However, the impact of change efforts at the individual level will quickly fade if not supported by attention to the organisational career and reward systems.

The implication of these arguments is that middle managers should be given considerable attention in employee involvement initiatives: via recognition, reward, resources and responsibility. But, this cannot be done in isolation. Other systems and structures will need adjustment at the least, and often, radical reform.

Acknowledgement

The author gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the UK Employment Department and Kinsley Lord Management Consultants, for the research on which this paper draws. However, responsibility for the opinions expressed in this paper is the author's alone.

Notes

The term middle management is most often used to refer to managers below the level of the organisation's strategic apex but not including first line supervisors without a managerial career path

within the organisation. In this paper I do not make a strong distinction between first line supervisors and middle managers. The themes of changing roles and resistance to employee involvement have much in common for both groups in the literature reviewed.

References

Abbott, M. L. (1987) Looking closely at quality circles: implications for intervention, *Clinical Sociology Review*, 5, pp. 119-131.

Baloff, N. & Doherty, E. M. (1989) Potential pitfalls in employee participation, *Organizational Dynamics*, 17, pp. 51-62.

Bartlett, C. A. & Ghoshal, S. (1991) Global strategic management: impact on the new frontiers of strategy research, *Strategic Management Journal*, 12, pp. 5-16.

Bradley, K. & Hill, S. (1987) Quality circles and managerial interests, *Industrial Relations*, 26(1), pp. 68-82.

Breen, G. E. (1983) *Middle Management in the '80s* (New York, American Management Association).

Brennan, M. (1991) Mismanagement and quality circles: how middle managers influence direct participation, *Employee Relations*, 5, pp. 22-32.

Buchanan, D. & Preston, D. (1991) Life in the cell: supervision and teamwork in a 'manufacturing systems engineering' environment, *Human Resource Management Journal*, 2, pp. 55-76.

Burgelman, R. A. (1983) A process model of internal corporate venturing in a diversified major performance, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 28, pp. 223-244.

Bushe, G. R. (1983) *Overcoming Managerial Resistance to Worker Problem-Solving Groups: a comparative study of four manufacturing plants*, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation.

Cotton, J. L. (1993) *Employee Involvement* (London, Sage).

Courtright, J. A., Fairhurst, G. T. & Rogers, L. E. (1989) Interaction patterns in organisation and mechanistic systems, *Academy of Management Journal*, 32, pp. 773-802.

Devlin & Partners (1989) *The Effectiveness of Quality Improvement Programmes in British Business* (London, Devlin & Partners).

Dopson, S. & Stewart, R. (1990) What is happening to middle management, *British Journal of Management*, 1, pp. 3-16.

Drucker, P. F. (1988) The coming of the new organisation, *Harvard Business Review*, 66, p. 1.

Fenton-O'Creevy, M. & Nicholson, N. (1994) *Middle Managers: their contribution to employee involvement*, Employment Department: Research Series 28.

Gleeson, J., McPhee, J. & Spatz, L. (1988) Training needs of supervisors and middle managers, *Work & People*, 13(3), pp. 32-36.

Guth, W. D. & MacMillan, I. C. (1986) Strategy implementation versus middle management self-interest, *Strategic Management Journal*, 7, pp. 313-327.

Guzzo, R. A., Jette, R. D. & Katzell, R. A. (1985). The effects of psychologically based intervention programs on worker productivity: a meta analysis, *Personnel Psychology*, 38, pp. 275-291.

- Hales, C. P. (1993) *Managing Through Organisation* (London, Routledge).
- Henkoff, R. (1990) Cost cutting: how to do it right, *Fortune*, 9 April.
- Hill, F. M. (1989) What British management can reasonably expect from a quality circle programme, *International Journal of Quality and Reliability Management*, 6(3), pp. 59-75.
- IDS. (1987) *Supervisors of Manual Workers*, IDS Study 386 (London, Incomes Data Services Ltd).
- IDS. (1991) *Supervisors*, IDS Study 479 (London, Incomes Data Services Ltd).
- IRS. (1990) From Overseer to First-Line Manager: the changing role of the supervisor, *focus*, IRS Employment Trends 476.
- Kanter, R. M. (1982) Dilemmas of managing participation, *Organizational Dynamics*, 11, pp. 5-27.
- Kanter, R. M. (1989) The new managerial work, *Harvard Business Review*, Nov-Dec, pp. 85-92.
- Kanter, R. M. (1979) Power failure in management circuits, *Harvard Business Review*, 57, pp. 65-75.
- Katz, D. & Kahn, R. L. (1966 & 1978) *The Social Psychology of Organizations* (New York, Wiley).
- Kay, E. (1974) *The Crisis in Middle Management* (New York, Amacom).
- Kotter (1982) *The General Managers* (New York, The Free Press).
- Lawler, E. E. (1986) *High-Involvement Management* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass).
- Locke, E. A. & Schweiger, D. M. (1979) Participation in decision making: one more look, in: L. L. Cummings & B. M. Staw (Eds) *Research in Organisational Behaviour*, 1, pp. 256-339 (Greenwich, CT, JAI).
- Manz, C. C. & Sims, H. P. (1987) Leading workers to lead themselves: the external leadership of self-managing work teams, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 32, pp. 106-128.
- Manz, C. C., Keating, D. E. & Donnelion, A. (1990) Preparing for an organizational change to employee self-management: the managerial transition, *Organizational Dynamics*, 19, pp. 15-26.
- Miller, K. I. & Monge, P. R. (1986) Participation, satisfaction, and productivity: a meta-analytic review, *Academy of Management Journal*, 29, pp. 727-753.
- Millward, N., Stevens, M., Smart, D. & Hawes, W. R. (1992) *Workplace Industrial Relations in Transition* (Aldershot, Dartmouth).
- Mintzberg, H. (1975) The manager's job: folklore and fact, *Harvard Business Review*, 53, pp. 49-61.
- Morris, T., Lydka, H. & Fenton-O'Creevy, M. (1993) Can commitment be managed?, *Human Resource Management Journal*, April.
- Tom Nash (1986) *Chief Executive*.
- Nicholson, N. (1993) Purgatory or place of safety? The managerial plateau and organisational age grading, *Human Relations*, 46(12).
- Nicholson, N. and Arnold, J. (1989) Graduate early experience in a multi-national corporation, *Personnel Review*, 18(4), pp. 3-14.

Nilakant, V. (1991) Dynamics of middle managerial roles, *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 6, pp. 17-24.

Peters, T. (1992) *Liberation Management* (New York, Knopf).

Scase, R. & Goffee, R. (1989) *Reluctant managers: Their work and lifestyles* (London, Unwin Hyman).

Stewart, R. (1988) *Managers and their Jobs* (London, Macmillan).

Verspej, M. A. (1990) When you put the team in charge, *Industry Week*, 239, pp. 29-32.

Wheatley, M. (1992) *The Future of Middle Management* (Corby, British Institute of Management).

~~~~~

By MARK FENTON-O'CREEVY