THE UNHERALDED MIDDLE

DO MIDDLE MANAGERS GET IN THE WAY OF CHANGE?
Middle managers are regularly described as averse to change because they are seen to emphasize stability, command and control. In fact, one business strategy to reduce costs and become more nimble with change has been to cut middle positions.¹,²

But, in multiple industries where such cuts have occurred, lower morale, higher turnover and lower productivity have been reported.³ And, there are multiple studies of organizations where middle managers are clearly essential to successful innovation and change.

EFFECTIVENESS IN THE MIDDLE BOOSTS OUTCOMES WITH CHANGE.
• At a large telecom company, 80% of middle manager-initiated projects succeeded, generating $300 million in annual profits. This is in contrast to senior executive-initiated projects of which 80% failed.⁴
• In a healthcare organization, high ratings of effective leadership in CEOs were associated with better outcomes with change. But, the impact of CEOs was boosted significantly when associated with high leadership effectiveness ratings in frontline managers.⁵

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE FOSTERS EFFECTIVE INNOVATION FROM THE MIDDLE.
• A study of five companies showed that the percent of effective middle management actions that were innovative ranged from 33% to 71%. The difference in level of innovation across the companies depended on the extent and ways the prevailing organizational cultures were aligned with and supported the managers.⁶

WHY IS THE PREVAILING ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE A KEY FACTOR?
Middle managers can generate innovative ideas because of their proximity to work processes and the customer. But, they have to keep day-to-day work going while simultaneously driving change. This requires building participation and collaboration not only with and between employees but also with other managers--while staying aligned with top executives.

So, role and task complexity in the middle--acting as subordinate, superior and equal--is significant. Without a prevailing organizational culture devoted to transparency, participation, collaboration and learning from taking risks, it is hard for even the best managers to stay afloat at their best level of skills.

IT TAKES A COLLECTIVE.
Evolving an organizational culture for successful innovation and change takes a collective approach involving all levels of leadership.⁷ In my practice, I help top executives and middle managers develop strategies to manage role, relationship and process complexity--a systematic approach will allow their true leadership capabilities to emerge.
REFERENCES

2. Hamel, Gary *First, Let's Fire All the Managers* Harvard Business Review, September 2011