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## HR Practices, Middle Managers and Organizational Change

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### Abstract

The importance of Middle Managers (MMs) to organizational change initiatives is well-entrenched in the literature. However, little is known about the contingencies, in particular the role of HR practices, which impact on MMs' contributions to change. This study, with India as the backdrop, examines the role of HRM and its impact on MMs involved in change initiatives. Findings are based on two in-depth case studies of organizations in India. The paper concludes that importance accorded to the HR function, the coherence of HR practices with change objectives and devolution of HR responsibilities to MMs have a significant influence on MMs involved in change. In addition, the study also argues that MMs are better supported if HR practices are tempered to suit the Indian context.

**Key Words:** HR practices, India, Middle Managers, Organizational Change

**HR Practices and Middle Managers' Contributions to Organizational Change:  
Evidence from India**

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**Abstract**

The importance of Middle Managers (MMs) to organizational change initiatives is well-entrenched in the literature. However, little is known about the contingencies, in particular the role of HR practices, which impact on MMs' contributions to change. Moreover, existing literature's slant towards OECD nations has raised questions about the transferability of findings across contexts. This study, with India as the backdrop, examines the role of HRM and its impact on MMs involved in change initiatives. Findings are based on two in-depth case studies of organizations in India. The paper concludes that importance accorded to the HR function, the coherence of HR practices with change objectives and devolution of HR responsibilities to MMs have a significant influence on MMs involved in change. In addition to the variegated picture of HR policies and practices in supporting MMs the study also argues that MMs are better supported if HR practices are tempered to suit the Indian context.

Key words: HR practices, India, Middle Managers, Organizational Change

# HR Practices, Middle Managers and Organizational Change

## Extended Abstract<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Introduction

There have been an increasing number of studies that highlight the strategic contribution of middle-level managers (MLMs) (for a detailed review see Wooldridge et al., 2008). Though the positive contributions of MLMs are well established in literature, the conditions that affect their contribution are less understood (Conway and Monks, 2011). There are three dimensions of any HR intervention to support MLMs' contribution to organizational change, around which there is debate amongst academic commentators (Hope-Hailey et al., 2005; Kamoche, 1994; Paauwe and Boselie, 2003; Truss et al., 2002; Purcell and Hutchison, 2007; Currie and Procter, 2001). Considering these three dimensions of HR intervention this study addresses the following question: How might HR practices support MLMs role in organizational change? The empirical setting – India -- provides the basis for this paper's second contribution to literature. Despite its emergence as an important global player, there is, in general, a dearth of empirical studies that focus on the actors, process and outcomes of organizational change initiatives in India (Bhatnagar et al, 2010; Ghoshal et al, 2000; Saini and Bhatnagar, 2005).

### 2. Literature Review

On the one hand, commentators argue the HR function, rather than being reactive and administrative, is now a proactive function that has a critical role to play in the success of the organization (Boxall and Purcell, 2000), including organizational change (Storey, 1992; Ulrich, 1997), specifically supporting the strategic contribution of MLMs (Krausert, 2014). On the other hand, studies suggest the status of HR function, in comparison to other functions, is that of a 'poor

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<sup>1</sup> Please contact the authors for a full version of the paper

cousin' (Wright, 2008: 1067), with executive management doubting its value adding capabilities (Wright et al., 2001). This is all the more prominent in emerging economies where it has been reported executive management views HR as a poor strategic partner (de Guzman et al, 2011).

### ***India – The Changing Context***

In India, studies have indicated a low degree of integration of HRM with the business strategy and little devolvement of HRM responsibilities to line managers. In summary, the limited number of studies of HRM set in India challenge some of the key arguments derived from studies set in Anglo-American contexts about the strategic visibility of the HR function, alignment of HR practices with change, and devolution of HR practices. More pertinently in relation to our specific research concern, there is a dearth of studies focused upon how HR practices impact MLMs' strategic contribution. The next section of the manuscript sets research design of this study.

### **3. Research Design**

In line with the concern for context, a case study approach was employed (Eisenhardt, 1989). Within semi-structured interviews, averaging 60 minutes, respondents' view of the changes in the external environment and their organizations, the response of organizations, the role of MLMs in these initiatives were elicited.

### **4. Discussion and Conclusion**

Interactions with executive managers in Alpha and Beta indicate a common narrative that encompasses the following: changing external environment in India, structural changes in organizations as a response, associated HR challenges and the importance of MLMs in anchoring these changes. However, this narrative diverges in Alpha and Beta when it comes to the role and impact of HR practices on change and its influence upon MLMs' strategic contribution. Though some studies on MLMs have indicated the importance of HR practices like training and

development (Currie and Procter, 2005) this study argues that the impact on MLMs will be more significant if organizations can focus on a bundle of HR practices and importantly on the alignment of these practices with the change strategy (Wright, 1998). This study supports assertions that Indian organizations need to modify global HR practices to fit with the national cultural and economic context (Bjorkman and Budhwar, 2007). The paper concludes that importance accorded to the HR function, the coherence of HR practices with change objectives and devolution of HR responsibilities to MMs have a significant influence on MMs involved in change.

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