The roles of middle managers: A paradoxical approach

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Summary

As organizational environments become more complex, it is now common for companies to simultaneously deal with competing demands (exploration-exploitation, stability-change, individual-collective, collaboration-control, etc.). Although choosing among competing tensions might seem convincing in the short term, Lewis (2000) argues that long-term sustainability requires organizations to consider these conflicting demands through a paradoxical lens. Despite the lack of conceptual clarity in this field, Smith and Lewis (2011) recently defined paradoxes as "contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time". As early theories were based on the notion that there is one best way, contemporary organizations must from now on deal with complexity, ambiguity and plurality. However, although a paradoxical approach may be beneficial on the long run, companies have to be aware that the juxtaposition of coexisting opposites intensifies experiences of tensions, challenging actors' cognitive limits and demanding creative sensemaking. In particular, while middle managers are traditionally seen as mediators between the strategic sphere and the operating core (Balogun, 2003), it is not uncommon to see these actors faced with conflicting demands. The ambivalence of the place they occupy within the organization leads us to consider the paradoxical nature of their roles.

Through an empirical study of 21 middle managers, this article seeks to identify the different roles of these actors and the potential tensions they induce. As middle managers’ roles are analyzed through an emergent perspective, we consider that these actors are capable of transcending and transfiguring their prescribed roles in order to adapt their behavior to the context in which they evolve. In line with Mantere (2008), our discussion of managers’ roles is not limited to roles expectations, but also accounts for roles enactment, which involves agency and context. Through the combination of documentary analysis, direct observation and 21 semi-structured interviews, this paper consists in identifying what are the paradoxes that middle managers face on a daily basis and how they manage to reconcile the extreme limits of these organizational paradoxes. More precisely, the paradoxes faced by middle managers are analyzed based on the four categories of paradoxes (performing, belonging, learning and organizing) proposed by Smith and Lewis (2011). To sum up, the aim of this paper is twofold. Firstly, to examine how paradoxes present at the organizational level are reflected in middle managers’ roles. Secondly, to highlight how middle managers take advantage of their roles ambiguity to actively respond to these tensions.

Keywords: Middle managers, paradoxes, dualities, roles

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INTRODUCTION

Due to increased globalization, shorter product life cycle and intense competition, organizational environments become more complex and uncertain. According to W. K. Smith and Tushman (2005), today’s firms are pressed to be both big and small, efficient and effective, and to operate in multiple time frames as well as to be prospectors and analyzers (Gavetti & Levinthal, 2000). Confronted with these evolutions, it is now common for companies to simultaneously deal with competing demands such as exploration versus exploitation (W. K. Smith & Tushman, 2005), stability versus change (Farjoun, 2010; Stoltzfus, Stohl, & Seibold, 2011) or collaboration versus control (Sundaramurthy & Lewis, 2003). Although thinking in a dichotomous way and opting for an “either-or” orientation might seem convincing in the short term, Lewis (2000) argues that long-term sustainability requires organizations to consider these tensions through a paradoxical lens.

Due to the ambivalence of the place they occupy in the organization, middle managers seem more particularly concerned by this paradoxical situation. Even if the last ten years have seen an increasing research interest in the role of middle managers in contemporary organizations (Balogun, 2003; Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Huy, 2002; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011), there is still little research examining what are the paradoxes that middle managers face on a daily basis and how they manage to reconcile the extreme limits of these organizational paradoxes.

Since the late 1980s, the paradoxical approach has been central to a great deal of research and continues to gain in importance. In this respect, Smith and Lewis (2011) underline that the number of articles adopting a paradox perspective grows at an average rate of ten percent per year. As a case in point, Stoltzfus et al. (2011) recently argue that 1) paradox is inevitable; 2) paradox arises and is experienced at multiple levels – individual (Leonardi, 2009), dyadic (Argyris, 1988), group or project team (Stohl & Cheney, 2001; Stryker, 1988), organizational (Barge, Lee, Maddux, Nabring, & Townsend, 2008; Cameron & Quinn, 1988) and 3) engagement rather than avoidance with paradox is associated with organizational effectiveness (Cameron & Quinn, 1988; Poole & Van de Ven, 1989).
We suggest that paradoxes are henceforth present across the organization and that all managers, especially middle managers, must learn to deal with ambiguity and paradoxes through a new mindset; one that combines contradictions rather than separating them.

Drawing on a case study, this contribution attempts to answer the call to address the management of paradoxes at middle managers’ level. Empirically, 21 semi-structured interviews were conducted between June and September 2011, with an average duration of 45 minutes. Adopting an either/or orientation, this case illustrates how organizational paradoxes create new challenges for middle managers.

The short paper is organized as follows: we first review the literature on paradox and related concepts such as duality and dilemma. We then approach the roles of middle managers through the Competing Value Framework which defines organizations as inherently contradictory entities (Quinn, 1988). In the third main section, we describe our methodology and present our results. Finally, in the last section the key contributions are summarized and discussed.

DUALITIES, DILEMMAS AND PARADOXES

Dualities, dilemmas and paradoxes have all been identified as central elements that contribute to analyze organizational tensions. Although there are subtle differences between these concepts, they all belong to the emerging “paradox theory”. In this analysis, we rely upon distinctions identified by Ehnert (2009) and Smith and Lewis (2011).

In the Greeks etymological sense of the word, “para” meaning “contrary” and “doxa” “the accepted opinion”, paradoxes involve the simultaneous presence of contradictory and mutually exclusive elements (Putnam, 1986; Stohl & Cheney, 2001) and which there is no choice. Lately, Smith and Lewis (2011) proposed to define paradoxes as “contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time”. In addition, to support the fact that “paradoxes denotes elements that are oppositional to one another yet are also synergistic and interrelated within a larger system”, Smith and Lewis (2011) illustrated this concept by the Taoist symbol of yin yang. By recognizing the ongoing persistence of underlying tensions, paradoxes point to the need for adaptive organizations and flexible improvising routines (Clegg, Cunha, & Cunha, 2002; Smith & Lewis, 2011).
As duality is concerned, this notion is used to describe an opposition or contrast between two concepts. In this sense, Evans and Doz (1991) suggested to define dualities as “complementary oppositions”. As a case in point, stability and change could be considered as a duality due to the fact that they are interdependent, both contradictory and complementary (Farjoun, 2010). According to Ehnert (2009), paradoxes and dualities differentiate in the sense that paradox is a broader notion allowing more than one contradictory couple creating tensions (tableau 1).

In contrast, a dilemma denotes a tension such that each competing alternative poses clear advantages and disadvantages (McGrath, 1982). According to Ehnert (2009), dilemmas are characterized firstly by a situation where a choice actually has to be made, and secondly, the choice has to be made between equally desirable or undesirable alternatives. In this line, the difference between paradoxes and dilemmas is that in a paradox, contradictions operate simultaneously (Cameron, 1986) and no choice need be made. For Smith and Lewis (2011), dilemmas and paradoxes may however overlap when a longer time horizon shows how any choice between two options is temporary. According to them, the contradictions may resurface over time, suggesting their interrelatedness and paradoxical nature.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tableau 1: Definition and comparison of communalities and differences between paradox, duality and dilemma</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Paradox</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similar elements</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Differentiating elements</td>
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Source: (Ehnert, 2009)

1 According to Farjoun (2010), “duality resembles dualism in that it retains the idea of two essential elements, but it views them as interdependent, rather than separate and opposed”.

5
In an environment where the amount of work as well as the time pressures increase, there is likely to be conflicting demands that need to be resolved simultaneously. In this context, Smith, Binns, and Tushman (2010) argue an “either/or” approach to tensions is inadequate and, therefore, they suggest that success over time is rooted in adopting this kind of “both/and” approach. In other words, it came time for leaders and their teams to evolve from a traditional approach of management based on capabilities such as “making hard choices”, to a paradoxical approach of management that combines and optimizes rather than splits apart. To sum up, management of dualities, and more generally of paradoxes, is now key for organizations to succeed in the long run.

AN EMPHASIS ON MIDDLE MANAGERS

In this study, we address the paradoxical nature of middle managers’ daily work. The decision to focus on middle managers rests on the ambiguity surrounding their roles. Ambiguity (lat. ambiguitas, multiple meanings) is defined as “the situation where an actor is confronted with more than one possible meaning” (Ehnert, 2009). At a time when middle managers’ jobs have become more generalist with increased responsibilities, it is not uncommon for middle managers to not know exactly what is expected of them. In this respect, Balogun (2003) suggests that as organizations become flatter due to downsizing and re-engineering, the roles of middle managers are changing as responsibilities is delegated downwards. Being at the same time supervised and supervisor, they constantly face incompatible demands. To satisfy these conflicting demands, middle managers are forced to interpret the directives coming from their direction, to adapt them to the operational constraints of their employees, and to make arrangements and compromises. As a result of which, these mediators between the strategic sphere and the operating core (Balogun, 2003) are now evolving in a complex world where managing paradoxes is an integral part of their everyday work.

Seeking to determine which specific opposing forces middle managers have to deal with, Smith and Lewis’s framework was used. The later (tableau 2) classifies paradoxes in four categories: learning paradoxes (knowledge), belonging paradoxes (identity/interpersonal relationship), organizing paradoxes (processes), and performing paradoxes (goals). Smith and Lewis (2011) define each of these paradoxes as follows. (1) Learning paradoxes surface as dynamic systems change, renew, and innovate. These efforts involve building upon, as well as destroying, the past to create the future (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2008). (2) Belonging paradoxes
are driven by complexity and plurality. These tensions arise between the individual and the collective, as individuals (Brewer, 1991; Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006) and groups (K. K. Smith & Berg, 1987) seek both homogeneity and distinction. (3) Organizing paradoxes surface as complex systems create competing designs and processes to achieve a desired outcome. Smith and Lewis (2011) noted, as examples, the tensions between collaboration and competition, empowerment and direction, or routine and change. (4) Performing paradoxes stem from the plurality of stakeholders and result in competing strategies and goals. Tensions surface between the differing, and often conflicting, demands of varied internal and external stakeholders (Donaldson & Preston, 1995).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizational paradoxes</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>Efforts to adjust, renew, and innovate foster tensions between building upon and destroying the past to create the future.</td>
<td>March (1991), Senge (1990), Weick and Quinn (1999), Tushman and O'Reilly (1996)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizing</td>
<td>Structuring and leading foster collaboration and competition, empowerment and direction, and control and flexibility</td>
<td>Adler, Goltoftas, and Levine (1999), Lüscher and Lewis (2008)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Smith & Lewis (2011)

Although this framework has mainly been used at the organizational level, Smith and Lewis (2011) suggest that it can be used at different levels: at the level of the individual (Leonardi, 2009; Lewis & Seibold, 1996), dyad (Argyris, 1988), group (K. K. Smith & Berg, 1987), project (van Marrewijk, Clegg, Pitsis, & Veenswijk, 2008), and organization (Cameron & Quinn, 1988). According to these authors, paradoxical tensions may even be simultaneously nested in different groups of actors. In this line, this paper aims to examine how paradoxes present at the organizational level are reflected in middle managers daily work. Empirically, the purpose of this paper is to examine how each category of organizational paradoxes comes in a range of dualities middle managers have to cope with.
THE COMPETING VALUE FRAMEWORK (CVF)

To approach the paradoxical nature of middle managers’ roles, we used the Competing Value Framework developed by Quinn (1988). As this framework puts the emphasis on the contradictions faced by organizations and managers, we found it suitable to analyze the potential tensions middle managers roles induce. In fact, one particular interest of Quinn’s framework is to recognize the inherently paradoxical nature of effective management. Developed and extended to explain the various managerial roles required for personal effectiveness in complex organizational environments (Quinn, 1988), the Competing Value Framework consists of two dimensions: 1) a flexibility-stability dimension; and 2) an external-internal focus dimension. When these dimensions are juxtaposed, they form four quadrants, each representing a distinct set of organizational and individual factors (figure 1).

Figure 1: Description of each of the competing value framework’s eight roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Middle managers’ roles</th>
<th>INTERNAL FOCUS</th>
<th>EXTERNAL FOCUS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>FLEXIBILITY</strong></td>
<td>Mentor</td>
<td>Innovator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Understands self and others</td>
<td>- Is creative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Listens actively</td>
<td>- Encourages and facilitates change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Facilitates development</td>
<td>- Embraces change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitator</td>
<td>- Expresses opinions</td>
<td>Broker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Seeks consensus</td>
<td>- Develops, scans and maintains networks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Negotiates compromises</td>
<td>- Acquires needed resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>QUADRANT 1 (Relating People)</strong></td>
<td>- Is politically astute</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>QUADRANT 3 (Leading Change)</strong></th>
</tr>
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</table>

| **STABILITY**         | Monitor                         | Director         |
|                       | - Collects and distributes information | - Completes tasks and is work focused |
|                       | - Monitors performance | - Motivates behavior |
|                       | - Provides a sense of stability | - Seeks closure |

| Coordinator            | - Maintains structure | Producer |
|                       | - Does scheduling coordination and problem-solving | - Sets goals |
|                       | - Sees rules and standards are met | - Clarifies roles |
|                       | **QUADRANT 2 (Managing Processes)** | - Establishes clear expectations |

|                       | **QUADRANT 4 (Producing Results)** |

Source: Adapted from Quinn (1988)

Based on cohesion and morale, the quadrant (1) considers individuals as cooperating members of a common system. The two managerial roles associated with this model are Mentor and Facilitator. In this perspective, managers are sensitive to the needs of their employees (Mentor) and aim to build cohesion among employees (Facilitator). Regarding the quadrant (2), the emphasis is put on stability and control. Seeking to keep track of activities,
the roles of managers are twofold. Firstly, to maintain workflow and organize staff efforts (Coordinator). Secondly, to control facts, reports and rules respect (Monitor). The quadrant (3) insists on the ability for organization to anticipate changes and survive in a turbulent environment. Under these circumstances, it seems necessary for managers to act as a Broker as well as an Innovator. Put another way, managers are responsible for linking the organization externally and focusing on networking (Broker) as well as dealing with risk and uncertainty in order to envision needed changes (Innovator). As the quadrant (4) is concerned, it stresses planning and goal setting, productivity and accomplishment. Fundamental to this part are the roles of Producer and Director. As Producer, managers are task and work focused and as Director, they provide direction for others and clarify expectations.

Overall, Quinn (1988) argues that effective managers are expected to play all of these roles and to simultaneously consider and balance the competing demands. In his words, “effective managers demonstrate ‘behavioral complexity’ – the ability to both conceive and perform multiple and contradictory roles” (Denison, Hooijberg, & Quinn, 1995). To sum up, the value of this framework is in considering these eight roles as both mutually exclusive and collective exhaustive.

In general terms, the purpose of this paper is to reconcile the Competing Value Framework with the theory of paradox. In particular, the case study is intended to highlight how the four categories of organizational paradoxes come in a range of dualities that middle managers deal with through their eight roles.

METHODS

The case

In order to address the paradoxes faced by middle managers, we conducted a case-study in a global company, renamed Incabas. Renowned for its expertise in cable systems, this organization is present worldwide and employs more than 23 000 people. To cope with the changing environment, this group recently decided to move from a subsidiaries structure to a transnational structure. In this regard, Johnson, Scholes, Whittington, and Fréry (2011) emphasize that the success of such a structure depends on the ability to build simultaneously global skills and local reactivity. In other words, the company has to find the right interplay
between local and global. To achieve this difficult balance, the group regularly undertakes organizational change projects. As a case in point, the latest concerns the implementation of a global IT system. As change projects tend to follow one another or even overlap, it seems fair to say that organizational actors are now evolving in a context of continuous change. As a matter of fact, Weick and Quinn (1999) suggest a shift in vocabulary from “change” to “changing” in order to underpin the dynamic and change-full character of organizational life. In this line, Tsoukas and Chia (2002) consider now change as the normal condition of organizations.

The sample

With the aim to identify the tensions faced by middle managers in a changing and challenging organizational context, we analyzed the work of 21 middle managers across 5 Belgian divisions of the group. In this way, the tensions identified are not limited to a specific division but generalized to the case study.

As middle managers are concerned, it seems worth noting that in the literature there is no definition that has unanimous support. However, a common definition is based on their central position within the organization. Wooldridge and Floyd (1990) position these actors "two or three levels below the Chief Executive Officer," without specifying the lower bound. This one has been specified by Dutton and Ashford (1993) for whom middle managers refer to "managers located hierarchically below the top managers and above the first level of supervision" and by Thakur (1998) who describes middle managers “at a level below the vice president and two levels above the first line managers.” Huy (2002) defines in turn middle managers as "any manager located two levels below the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and a level above the ground and operational workers. In this research, we decided to define middle managers as the actors (1) located below the site manager and above operational managers and (2) having a team under their responsibilities. Moreover, it should be noted that among middle managers filling these two criteria, we conducted a selection so that the five divisions and the different departments (finance, sales, production, maintenance, etc.) are represented.
**Data collection**

We relied on 21 semi-structured interviews with middle managers as the main source of data, with the observation and documentation data (webpages, intranet, flowcharts and job descriptions) serving as important triangulation sources (Miles & Huberman, 2003). Interviewees were solicited by email and phone after the first author spent 6 months gaining the confidence of leaders and managers. Interviews ranged from 31 to 128 minutes were recorded and fully transcribed. These data were obtained as part of a larger project undertaken by the first author between June 2011 and April 2013.

**Data Analysis**

The qualitative analysis involved over 100 hours of reading and re-reading the transcripts with the help of the Nvivo software. We began the analysis by identifying how middle managers are playing their roles on a daily basis. Concretely, this first step in the analysis consisted for each author in reading through the transcripts to develop an understanding of middle managers work and link theoretical roles with empirical findings (Appendix A). Next we engaged in axial coding, wherein we searched for categories of tensions middle managers have to deal with on a daily basis. In this regard, it should be noted that the researcher has not specifically addressed the issue of tensions. In fact, as middle managers were asked to describe what they do every day, they have implicitly or explicitly explained the tensions they daily faced. This step was initially done independently, but then the researchers met and compared their interpretations to ensure the reliability of the analysis. Finally, these tensions were compared with the four categories proposed by Smith and Lewis (2011). The final data structure is illustrated in figure 2, which summarizes the higher-order themes on which we built our framework of paradoxes middle managers have to cope with. Although presented as sequential these phases were interwoven and cyclical.
FINDINGS

The findings highlighted that organizational paradoxes come in seven dualities middle managers have to cope with on a daily basis (figure 2).

Figure 2: Middle managers’ eight roles to manage dualities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Middle managers’ roles</th>
<th>INTERNAL FOCUS</th>
<th>EXTERNAL FOCUS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>FLEXIBILITY</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Belonging paradoxes</strong></td>
<td><strong>Learning paradoxes</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Senior managers / Operational employees</td>
<td>- Stability/ Change</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Individual/ Collective</td>
<td>Innovator</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mentor</td>
<td>- Is creative</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Seeks consensus</td>
<td>- In professionally mature</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Negotiates compromises</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>STABILITY</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organizing paradoxes</strong></td>
<td><strong>Performing paradoxes</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Control/ Empowerment</td>
<td>- Short term/ Long term</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Planning/ Improvisation</td>
<td>- Outside/ Inside</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitor</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Collects and distributes information</td>
<td>- Completes tasks and is work focused</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Monitors performance</td>
<td>- Motivates behavior</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Provides a sense of stability</td>
<td>- Seeks closure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coordinator</td>
<td>Producer</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Maintains structure</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Sees rules and standards are met</td>
<td>- Establishes clear expectations</td>
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Source: Adapted from Quinn et al. (1988) and Smith & Lewis (2011)

The belonging paradoxes

The findings show that middle managers should definitively be described by the term “organizational intermediaries”. Since they interact directly with actors at different levels of the organization, it is difficult for them to develop a sense of belonging toward one specific group of actors.

More specifically, as middle managers are located at the heart of the organization, they are responsible to tie the corporate strategy to day-to-day activities. According to Wooldridge, Schmid, and Floyd (2008), “the distinguishing feature of middle management is not where they sit in the organization chart. What makes them unique is their access to top management coupled with their knowledge of operations”. As in-between actors, they must translate the
discourse of senior managers into actions at the operational level. This involves a lot of activities such as interpreting the strategy, leveraging the information, taking into account employees’ needs and seeking consensus (Balogun, 2003; Balogun & Johnson, 2004). As a result of which, middle managers are likely to feel torn between the demands of their senior managers and their employees’ difficulties.

«I act as a transmission belt but therefore I also act as a buffer. As I am in the middle of the organization, I frequently hear on one side “If I tell you that it is possible, it is” and on the other side “No, it is not possible”. I am in between and this is tiring»

«It happens that I make the link between my direction and my employees. I would say it happens at least once a month. For example, I select a few elements presented during the monthly meeting that I provide to my team: What is the situation, what can we do, what are the conclusions, etc.»

While middle managers must face tensions between levels, it is also their responsibility to manage different profiles within their employees’ team. In reality, they must ensure that everyone stands for the organizational strategy even if the underlying reasons are different. To do this, they need to understand each of their team members and regularly switch between an individual approach and a collective management.

«Each day, I am coaching. As you may know I work with people who all have a different character. People react differently to a situation, that is why a need to adapt my management to each of my employees. I sometimes also have to manage conflicts and disagreements between employees»

«I think we should get to feel the way people work, understand their psychology and what they want to do or do not»

The organizing paradoxes

Data analysis suggests that the very process of organizing is paradoxical. At Incabas, a duality that middle managers face on a daily basis consists in controlling their team while empowering them. They are increasingly led up to find the right balance between supervising and animating. Mollering (2005) refers to this paradox through the trust/control duality. On the basis of an assumption of embedded agency, Mollering (2005) suggests that trust and control each assume the existence of the other, refer to each other and create each other, but remain irreducible to each other. In this perspective, middle managers are asked to give some freedom to their team while ensuring the achievement of organizational objectives.

«I've never seen the control in a negative way. There are many people who believe that it is negative but for me the aim of controlling is to make an assessment in order to develop tools to help employees grow»

«I do not like the term “supervision” because team members are sufficiently capable of working independently with autonomy. But actually they can work independently but I need to ensure that priorities are set and goals achieved»
In addition, the analysis of data emphasizes the increased number of unforeseen events that middle managers must manage on a daily basis. Therefore, it is now their duty to use as well the planning as the management of real-time operations. In this perspective, Clegg et al. (2002) advocate that there is the need to plan in order to ensure efficiency and consistency but that managers must also remain open in order to ensure the flexibility necessary to survive when the environment change. In their opinion, “improvisation can occur when pre-existing plans and resources are adapted to unexpected circumstances via action, in a synthesis between the two opposite poles of planning and action.” (Clegg et al., 2002)

“There is no typical day. A typical day is that you never know what will fall. I often have to solve problems such as a supply problem or an industrial problem. It is always this kind of thing”

The performing paradoxes

As middle managers are in contact with a plurality of actors, performing paradoxes arise from competing goals and conflicting demands.

Conflicting demands may, for example, rest on the duality short term/long term. In this regard, the interviews highlighted that it is often for middle managers to decide on the short run while having the long-term vision in mind. To put it another way, they have to apply the long-term strategy to the short-term constraints.

“I have to make decisions every day. Depending on the contingencies and constraints, we must decide between alternatives. I have to validate the guidelines in line with the long-term goals”

“Time constraints are forcing us to decide on the short run. Because the command is out, I cannot wait. The timing pushes to decide”

Tensions may also result from a contradiction between internal constraints and demands that market and stakeholders impose on the organization. In the words of Clegg et al. (2002), “multiple stakeholders, employees with different background and aspirations, being present in several markets, these are all pressures fostering contradiction.” According to Lüscher and Lewis (2008), such pressures are likely to gain in importance as mixed messages (Putnam, 1986) are sent to middle managers.

“I am an arbiter between customers, sales representatives and operational workers. I play an arbitration role as I have to take into account as well customers’ needs as organizational constraints in terms of production, shipping and delivery, etc. It is difficult to find the optimum point. We can never fully satisfy both stakeholders. We have to find a balance between the two parties.”

“Decisions are always based on a search for balance between what we can win and what we risk. You must weigh the pros and cons.”
The learning paradoxes

While managers are now moving in a changing environment, they must constantly adapt their work to new constraints. Just like a tightrope artist, they must find the right balance between stability and change. Whereas stability and change have long been considered as incompatible and mutually exclusive, Farjoun (2010) constructed an alternative conceptualization in which these two concepts are interdependent, contradictory but also mutually enabling. In response, middle managers must be able to manage simultaneously the day-to-day business and the change project.

« When a change project is implemented, we must continue to do the business-as-usual. It is necessary to manage both. We cannot stop our daily work. It is like that everywhere. Sometimes, external stakeholders tend to forget that we need to do our daily work to survive. There will be confusion ... It is always difficult to deal with two different areas »

In this respect, the data analysis revealed that striking a balance between stability and change may bring about further tensions. Firstly, it appears that the management of continuous change makes it even more difficult for middle managers to know which group they belong to. In addition to know whether they are more attached to their direction or their employees, they must now position themselves toward the change team. As a case in point, interviews highlighted that it seems complicated for middle managers to simultaneously meet demands from the project leader and their direct supervisor. Pressured by these conflicting demands, they do not know anymore where putting priorities: should they primarily be considered as managers or as change agents?

« Top managers should be aware of the time required to prepare the implementation of the new IT system and let us work quietly without putting pressures on other missions. [...] The problem is that our top managers do not have this project in their objectives. They do not encourage us to devote time to the change project. »

Furthermore, as middle managers are considered as mediators between the strategic sphere and the operational core, they are in charge of interpreting and translating the change intent into implications for themselves and for their teams. In other words, they are both change recipient and change implementer.

« Before we can help others to change, we should be able to change ourselves. The best way to show others that the change goes well is to show that we accept it and put it into practice. »

Finally, the lack of time for the roles of keeping the business going and implementing the needed changes creates a workload overhead. As a consequence, middle managers are constantly under time pressures.

« Change in itself is not problematic. Personally, I am in favor of change because it is part of life. What is difficult is to have the availability to be able to do it properly », « I wonder how it will go because it is clearly a situation of overload »
The integrator role

To conclude the analysis, it is important to specify that middle managers should manage dualities through an integrative approach. According to Quinn (1988), this framework should be considered as an explication of a very dynamic process involving managers moving from one quadrant to another very quickly. In other words, that means that each quadrant should not be treated in isolation but that the focus should be on interrelatedness. To illustrate, consider two dualities: individual versus collective (belonging) and short term versus long term (performing). According to Quinn (1988), if managers overemphasize collective management, it may engender excessive discussion, unproductive participation and difficulties to take a decision on the short run. Similarly, too much emphasis on speed may produce tyrannical directives and a loss of collaboration. This example shows that the management of these two dualities can be done separately but requires a compromise between these two emphasizes. In this line, Quinn (1988) argues that the most common mistake is not so much to be focused on one of two quadrants but it is the ignoring that there are other quadrants that tend to be simultaneously paradoxical.

In line with the study of T. Vilkinas and Cartan (2006), our data analysis has shown that an integrative role is the key to the successful fulfillment of all the roles. Located centrally in the model and called the “integrator”, this role is described as the behavioral control room for the other eight operational roles (T. Vilkinas & Cartan, 2001). In other words, it helps middle managers to move from one role to another in response to paradoxical situations (figure 3).

According to T. Vilkinas and Cartan (2006), this role has two parts: (1) critical observer; and (2) reflective learner. Firstly, the purpose of the “critical observer” is to decipher which of the operational roles is required at any particular time in response to any environmental stimuli (T. Vilkinas & Cartan, 2006). In the case of Incabas, data analysis highlighted that middle managers assess their environment and adjust their roles based on information they previously gathered and processed. In other words, information processing is central to middle managers’ daily work. It ensures a “fit” between context and behavior (Appendix B). Secondly, the purpose of the “reflective learner” is to reflect on past and current usage of the operational roles and to learn from those experiences (T. Vilkinas & Cartan, 2006). In this respect, data analysis put forward that middle managers are now involved in the process of building their roles. Far from the time when their roles were carefully defined, middle managers are now moving without really knowing what is expected from them. It is then their responsibility to
take advantage of this uncertainty to "adapt" their roles to the wide variety of situations encountered.

« I created my job description over time. There was a document at the beginning but I adapted and supplemented it according to the situations encountered. Things happen. The organization changes, the job is what you make it »

« My job description was not finished when I arrived, I helped to complete it but it is not yet finalized. It may seem paradoxical »

Figure 3: Middle managers’ nine roles to manage dualities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Middle managers’ roles</th>
<th>INTERNAL FOCUS</th>
<th>EXTERNAL FOCUS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>FLEXIBILITY</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging paradoxes</td>
<td>- Senior managers / Operational employees - Individual / Collective</td>
<td>Learning paradoxes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentor</td>
<td>- Understands self and others - Listens actively - Facilitates development</td>
<td>- Stability / Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitator</td>
<td>- Expresses opinions - Seeks consensus - Negotiates compromises</td>
<td>Innovator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Is creative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Encourages and facilitates change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Envisions change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Broker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Develops, scours and maintains networks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Acquires needed resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Is politically astute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Integrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Gathers and processes information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Ensures a fit between content and behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Reflects and analyzes his/ her previous personal experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>STABILITY</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizing paradoxes</td>
<td>- Control / Empowerment - Planning / Improvisation</td>
<td>Performing paradoxes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitor</td>
<td>- Collects and distributes information - Monitors performance - Provides a sense of stability</td>
<td>- Short term / Long term - Outside / Inside</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordinator</td>
<td>- Maintains structure - Does scheduling coordination and problem-solving - Sees rules and standards are met</td>
<td>Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Completes tasks and is work focused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Motivates behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Seeks closure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Producer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Sets goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Clarifies roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Establishes clear expectations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: adapted from Quinn et al. (1988), Vilkinas & Cartan (2006) and Smith & Lewis (2011)*
DISCUSSION

In the 90s, Hatch and Ehlrich (1993) suggested that “when environments are complex and changing, conditions are ripe for the experience of contradiction, incongruity, and incoherence and the recognition of paradox and ambiguity within organizations”. Right now, this finding is especially true given that tensions such as collaboration-control, individual-collective and exploration-exploitation (Smith & Lewis, 2011) appear to be increasingly present in organizations. Paradoxes became central to organizational processes and actors’ daily work.

As the rise of articles focusing on middle managers translates the increasing importance of these actors in organizations, this paper aimed to answer the calls to address the emergence and management of paradoxes at middle managers’ level. In particular, this case study highlighted how organizational paradoxes come in a range of dualities that middle managers deal with on a daily basis.

As learning paradoxes are concerned, this research underlined that middle managers must now consider change as the normal condition of organizations. As a result of which, they operate in a dynamic system that requires to act like a tightrope artist. Furthermore, data analysis underpinned that belonging paradoxes, driven by complexity and plurality, are nested in middle managers’ daily works in two ways. Firstly, they constantly make arrangements to satisfy as well senior managers as operational employees. Secondly, as their teams consist of individuals with different profiles, they need to regularly switch between an individual approach and a collective management. As regards organizing paradoxes, it appeared that middle managers have to deal with competing demands to achieve organizational goals. As examples, the analysis has put forward the tensions between control and empowerment, planning and improvisation. Finally, performing paradoxes stemming from the plurality of stakeholders also impact middle managers’ daily work. Just like at the organizational level, tensions that middle managers must manage surface between the differing and conflicting demands of varied internal and external stakeholders. Generally speaking, the findings confirm that paradoxical tensions may be nested, as the paradoxes experienced at the organizational level create new challenge for middle managers (Smith & Lewis, 2011).
Overall, data showed that as organizations are evolving in a context of constant change, the management of paradoxes is increasingly put on the agenda. Therefore, middle managers have no choice but to learn to manage the paradoxical nature of their roles. In this line, Clegg et al. (2002) suggest that “tensions are necessary to keep managers from the temptations of simplicity. Those that argue that paradoxes are inherently unsolvable suggest that the attempt to eliminate paradoxes is a disservice to organization theory, because it risks oversimplifying it.” Whereas it has been shown that nowadays middle managers are required to manage various dualities, data analysis also highlighted the use of the “integrator” role as a mechanism to face ambiguity and daily tensions. It is assumed here that role ambiguity is helpful in paradoxical situations as the individual may rely on his agency to adapt his actions to the way in which he interprets the duality encountered. In this respect, Clegg et al. (2002) add that “individuals use mechanisms such as roles to handle most of the problems and opportunities that organizations face in their day-to-day activities by generating the diversity of actions necessary to handle unforeseen, although not necessary novel, challenges. However as with plans, in practice the way these are used cannot be designed or understood before such action occurs. The relationship between the structural and the structuring poles of paradoxes are enacted and not designed.” If the lack of description of their roles is generally considered as a source of uncertainty and anxiety for middle managers, it also offers them the opportunity to adjust their roles in order to meet competing demands simultaneously.
CONCLUSION

The findings suggest that paradox management should be taken into account throughout the organization. In particular, it seems crucial for senior managers to be aware of the role of middle managers in the daily management of paradoxes. Based on their "emotional intelligence" and "situational creativity", they are most likely to find local solutions to paradoxes encountered across the organization. In this line, it seems essential that managers at different levels share similar paradoxical understanding (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). To support this, Handy (1994) suggested that discrepancies between top and middle management views can challenge both sides: “Living with paradox is like riding seesaw. If you know how the process works, and if the person at the other end also knows, then the ride can be exhilarating. If, however, your opposite number does not understand, or willfully upsets the pattern, you can receive a very uncomfortable and unexpected shock.”

In line with Smith et al. (2010), we would say that a paradoxical approach of organizational tensions is not new to managerial or academic literature, but it may become an important differentiator of excellence in the coming years. In this respect, Gotsi, Andropoulos, Lewis, and Ingram (2010) suggest to consider paradox management as a complement to traditional approaches. In fact, as traditional form of organizing, characterized by stability, hierarchy and control, has failed to deliver, it is now time to complement it by a paradoxical lens that enables flexibility, adaptability and agility and that considers tensions as two sides of the same coin, rather than as polarized contradictions.
## APPENDIX A

### Table A.1: Roles repertoire and the underlying contextual elements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Middel managers’ roles</th>
<th>INTERNAL FOCUS</th>
<th>EXTERNAL FOCUS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>FLEXIBILITY</strong></td>
<td>Mentor</td>
<td>Innovator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Facilitate development</strong></td>
<td>Facilitate change by providing support to employees</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The human management part is kind of important. We must well supervise our employees and train them properly in relation to the mission they are assigned.” (Methods &amp; Maintenance Department)</td>
<td>“Come up with new ideas and change projects”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I have never seen the control in a negative way. There are many people who believe that it is negative but for me the aim of controlling is to make an assessment in order to develop tools to help employees grow” (Direct Maintenance Department)</td>
<td>“Before we can help others to change, we should be able to change ourselves. The best way to show others that the change goes well is to show that we accept it and put it into practice.” (Finance Department)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Listen actively</strong></td>
<td>Facilitate change by providing support to employees</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“As a manager, I must be available and open to discussion” (Indirect Maintenance Department)</td>
<td>“The change can only be done by accompanying people. It is a bit like raising a child. In the early years, parents should help their children by holding their hands” (Indirect Production Department)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitator</td>
<td>Broker</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Manage conflicts</strong></td>
<td>Manage national and international clients</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Each day, I am coaching. As you may know I work with people who all have a different character. People react differently to a situation that is why I need to adapt my management to each of my employees. I sometimes also have to manage conflicts and disagreements between employees”. (Finance Department)</td>
<td>“In some cases, I am brought into play either because I know the customer for a long time, or because there is a special relationship. Yesterday for example, I had lots of fun. I had the world on the line: the Middle East, Russia, Romania, North Africa.” (Finance Department)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Seek consensus</strong></td>
<td>Make use of external experts (lawyers, tax experts, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“We do not all agree. Our target is not always set to 100% so it is necessary to find a compromise by being present on the ground with employees.” (Production Department)</td>
<td>“We have contacts with tax inspectors when we are controlled, with lawyers, as well as with administrative units while there may be concerns with payments.” (Finance Department)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“From time to time it is necessary to make decisions. Instead of imposing them, it is preferable that all members participate in the decision process and reach a consensus. In this way, everyone is aware of the advantages and disadvantages of the decision taken.” (Indirect Maintenance Department)</td>
<td><strong>Exert upward influence</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| “I am part of the steering committee so I participate in decisions or at least I advise” (Production Department) | ""
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Middel managers’ roles</th>
<th>INTERNAL FOCUS</th>
<th>EXTERNAL FOCUS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>STABILITY</strong></td>
<td>Monitor</td>
<td>Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validation and signature of documents</td>
<td>“We are asked to validate production documents, simply to avoid the risk of errors” (Indirect Maintenance Department)</td>
<td>Engage in planning and manage inventory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Check productivity</td>
<td>“With regard to control, everything is based on productivity.” (Direct Production Department)</td>
<td>“The SPRF service is in charge of planning and forecasting: S for stock management, P for master planning, R for replenishment and F for commercial forecasting” (Sales Department)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintain tight logistical control</td>
<td>“We must try to meet production deadlines. Then if there are emergencies or priorities, it may be possible to adapt.” (Indirect Production Department)</td>
<td>Take into account financial constraints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“There are procedures that must be followed” (Finance Department)</td>
<td>“Taking into account budgetary constraints, I set priorities for investments to be made.” (Indirect Logistics Department)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organize follow-up meetings</td>
<td>“There are follow-up meetings to discuss things that are good or not and to determine which actions have to be taken” (Sales Department)</td>
<td>Clarify priorities and direction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“As a team manager, I have to check from time to time the work of my colleagues and say if it's good or not good.” (Indirect Maintenance Department)</td>
<td>“We must give deadlines. Sometimes it’s faster, sometimes it takes more time but the most important is that we advance” (Maintenance &amp; Methods Department)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordinator</td>
<td>Manage team schedules</td>
<td>Motivate behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I manage the staff so the first thing I should do is make sure we have an operator present on each line.” (Production Department)</td>
<td>“We are not the only ones interested in making employees want to work. So we give explanations in order that they understand why it is important to work this way. The worst is someone who does not want to collaborate, who is not motivated. I think it is part of our job to motivate our employees.” (Finance Department)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organize interdepartmental meetings</td>
<td>Complete tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Every morning, managers of the industrial unit and of the commercial unit all come together to discuss the following: safety, quality, productivity, sales methods and the maintenance part.” (Direct Maintenance Department)</td>
<td>“My daily job is to receive requests from the commercial service. Following this, we draft specifications, we resize cables according to customer needs, we analyze cost prices and we look at which lines to use for producing cables” (Indirect Maintenance Department)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“My role is to coordinate and try to get everyone with the nose in the same direction ... This is what is the hardest.” (Indirect Maintenance Department)</td>
<td>Collaborate with other departments on cross cutting issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collaborate with other departments on cross cutting issues</td>
<td>“Some parts of our work are used by other departments. That is why sometimes we have to coordinate with them to know when they need our reports.” (Finance Department)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B

Table B.1: Information processing as basis for eight roles fulfillment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Middle managers' roles</th>
<th>INTERNAL FOCUS</th>
<th>EXTERNAL FOCUS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>FLEXIBILITY</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentor</td>
<td>“It is important for me to translate my accounting figures in actual events. With my accounting terms, they do not understand. But this is normal ... I have to adapt my speech.” (Finance Department)</td>
<td>Innovator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“My first role will be to play down. IT professionals like to explain that their work is complicated and difficult, which is why it is rewarding for them. My role will be to turn everything they explained me into pragmatic explanations for my team members.” (Direct Maintenance Department)</td>
<td>“It is essential that I communicate with my employees to collect and relay their ideas to top managers.” (Direct Maintenance Department)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitator</td>
<td></td>
<td>Broker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“I am responsible for external communications. This is important because if information is disorganized, it gives us plenty of arguments to get beaten up after. If information is poorly communicated, it may be misunderstood. It can be harmful for the company” (Finance Department)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>STABILITY</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrator</td>
<td>“You have to get the information to the right people and then distribute it to people who might be interested in the subject. It serves no purpose to distribute information to everyone, this is too much information” (Indirect Production Department)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitor</td>
<td>“My role is to monitor activities of the customer service. To do this, I organize a meeting every morning which allows me to collect information on what happened and rectify the situation by giving instructions” (Marketing Department)</td>
<td>Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordinator</td>
<td>“I meet production managers weekly to discuss numbers and understand why it is good or not good” (Finance Department)</td>
<td>“In my job, I have to collect information in order to be able to plan” (Supply Chain Department)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Producer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Since the production process goes from point A to point X, each step depends on the previous one. Therefore, when one step is delayed, I inform the workers of the next step.” (Indirect Production Department)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REFERENCES


