

## The Middle Manager - *Change Victim or Change Agent.*

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2007

### Summary:

Jane's experience in facilitating change led her to investigate the role of middle managers. Traditionally seen as blockers, her paper investigates whether that is truly their role, and whether they can be instrumental in making change stick. The paper identifies that middle managers can be excellent change leaders with the right support.

Key Words: Leadership, values, strategy, organizational development, coaching, mentoring, culture change, local government, public sector]

Research methodologies: The study consisted of a literature review of the role of middle managers in change, and also of local government responses to change. It includes primary research with a sample of middle managers across four neighbouring local authorities, each facing similar change issues but each with its own culture and leadership style.

Possible applications: Development programmes for middle managers, strategies for engaging managers in change.

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### Recommendations:

The research project delivered the following recommendations:

- **Do not brand middle managers as change-averse until you know them or they will fulfil your worst expectations:** Avoid assuming that all middle managers are like, as one senior executive said, "a clay layer - nothing comes up through it, and nothing filters down". Some who had been change champions under one management regime resented this assumption and effectively "turned off" under a new regime.
- **Middle management change champions need space to develop:** Successful middle managers were able to share work with their team and enable it to adapt to new working practices - this created space for themselves and used the creativity of their teams. Others needed formal approval of changed priorities to feel secure in tackling change projects.
- **Allow middle managers to work with complexity:** In community development, middle managers are able to deal effectively with very complex situations and relationships if they are empowered to do so.
- **Classroom management development programmes are not necessarily the answer:** Most of the change agents in the middle management sample said that they learned most from two sources - either working with consultants who were willing to share their expertise, or through mentoring by senior managers, either inside or outside their own organization. The middle managers in the sample who had been through a leadership development programme offered by one of the authorities enjoyed it, but primarily because it gave them access to the experience of new mentors.