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The Role of Middle Managers in Management System Evolution: A Qualitative Study of Change Implementation Processes

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore how middle managers contribute to the evolution of management systems during organizational change implementation processes. A qualitative research design was employed using semi-structured interviews with 24 middle managers working in private and public organizations in Tehran, Iran. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in management system change, including restructuring, digital workflow redesign, performance management reform, process standardization, and cross-functional coordination initiatives. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached after 21 interviews, followed by three additional interviews to confirm category stability. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes, were audio-recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis supported by NVivo software. Credibility was enhanced through member checking, peer review, analytic memo writing, and systematic comparison of codes across cases. Five main categories emerged from the analysis: translating strategic intent into operational meaning, mediating vertical and horizontal tensions, reconfiguring routines through local experimentation, sustaining employee commitment during uncertainty, and institutionalizing learning through feedback loops. The findings showed that middle managers were not passive implementers of senior management decisions; rather, they acted as interpretive brokers, process translators, boundary spanners, emotional stabilizers, and learning agents. Their influence was especially visible when formal change plans were incomplete, ambiguous, or misaligned with operational realities. The study concludes that management system evolution depends substantially on the situated agency of middle managers. By converting abstract strategic priorities into workable practices, adjusting routines, managing resistance, and feeding operational knowledge back to senior decision-makers, middle managers shape both the direction and durability of change implementation.

Keywords: middle managers; management system evolution; organizational change; change implementation; qualitative research; sensemaking; Tehran; thematic analysis

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1. Introduction

Management systems evolve when organizations revise the formal and informal mechanisms through which work is planned, coordinated, monitored, evaluated, and improved. Such evolution may involve structural redesign, digital transformation, quality management reforms, performance management systems, workflow standardization, knowledge management platforms, or new governance arrangements. Although these changes are often announced as strategic decisions by senior executives, their actual meaning is constructed in the everyday practices of implementation. In this process, middle managers occupy a critical position because they connect strategic intent with operational execution. They translate broad organizational objectives into departmental routines, interpret ambiguous instructions for employees, identify contradictions between policy and practice, and communicate implementation problems upward. Therefore, understanding management system evolution requires attention not only to formal designs but also to the actors who make those designs workable in context.

Traditional views of organizational change frequently portrayed middle managers as resistant, bureaucratic, or merely administrative actors. In this view, senior leaders create strategy, while middle managers transmit orders and supervise compliance. However, contemporary research has challenged this limited understanding. Floyd and Wooldridge (1992) demonstrated that middle managers participate in strategy through upward and downward forms of influence, including championing alternatives, synthesizing information, facilitating adaptability, and implementing deliberate strategies. Later work further emphasized that middle managers are strategically significant because they interpret environmental and organizational signals, connect dispersed knowledge, and influence whether strategic initiatives become embedded in organizational routines (Wooldridge et al., 2008). These studies suggest that middle managers should be understood not simply as a managerial layer but as a strategic interface through which organizational change becomes operationally possible.

The importance of middle managers becomes particularly visible during change implementation. Implementation is rarely a linear process in which plans move smoothly from top management to frontline employees. Instead, change initiatives encounter ambiguity, competing priorities, emotional reactions, resource constraints, political interests, and practical incompatibilities. Balogun and Johnson (2004) showed that middle managers engage in sensemaking during restructuring, interpreting change through peer interaction and local experience rather than merely absorbing top-down messages. This insight is highly relevant to management system evolution because changes in systems, procedures, reporting lines, or performance measures often disturb existing assumptions about authority, accountability, expertise, and identity. Middle managers must therefore interpret what the change means, explain why it matters, and adapt it to the local work setting.

Sensemaking and sensegiving provide a useful theoretical lens for understanding this process. Sensemaking refers to the way actors interpret ambiguous situations and construct plausible meanings that guide action. Weick et al. (2005) argued that sensemaking is central to organizing because organizational actors continuously interpret cues, produce explanations, and enact their environments. In change contexts, middle managers must make sense of senior management expectations while also helping employees make sense of how new systems affect their roles. Rouleau (2005) showed that middle managers use micro-practices of sensemaking and sensegiving to interpret and sell strategic change in everyday interactions. These micro-practices include informal conversations, contextual explanations, symbolic framing, and the use of practical knowledge. Thus, management system evolution is not only a technical redesign of procedures; it is also a social and interpretive process.

Middle managers also operate as boundary spanners. They stand between top management and operational employees, but they also coordinate across departments, projects, professions, and functional units. This boundary position exposes them to contradictory expectations. Senior leaders may demand speed, standardization, and measurable outcomes, whereas employees may request clarity, resources, participation, and protection from overload. Floyd and Lane (2000) described strategic renewal as a process that creates role conflict across organizational levels, especially when managers are expected simultaneously to support existing operations and promote future-oriented change. For middle managers, this conflict can be intense: they must maintain current performance while redesigning the very systems through which performance is achieved. Their contribution to management system evolution therefore lies partly in balancing continuity and change.

Emotional dynamics are also central to the role of middle managers. Change implementation often generates uncertainty, anxiety, fatigue, and resistance among employees. Huy (2002) argued that middle managers contribute to radical change by emotionally balancing organizational continuity and change. They do this by showing commitment to change while also attending to recipients' emotions. This dual function is essential in management system evolution because new systems may alter workloads, reduce autonomy, expose performance gaps, or threaten established identities. When middle managers ignore these emotions, implementation may become superficial or coercive. When they address emotional concerns constructively, they can reduce resistance and help employees reframe change as manageable.

Another important dimension is local adaptation. Formal change initiatives often assume that a designed system can be implemented uniformly across units. However, organizational routines are embedded in specific histories, skills, technologies, informal norms, and customer demands. Teece et al. (1997) conceptualized dynamic capabilities as the ability of firms to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competencies in changing environments. From this perspective, middle managers contribute to dynamic capability by identifying where existing routines must be modified, where new practices should be tested, and where standardization must be balanced with flexibility. Teece (2018) later emphasized that dynamic capabilities provide a workable management systems theory because they help organizations maintain evolutionary fitness over time. Middle managers are central to this process because they are close enough to operations to understand practical constraints and close enough to senior leaders to influence redesign.

In many organizations, the evolution of management systems is also connected to digitalization, data-driven decision-making, quality assurance, and performance monitoring. These developments introduce new dashboards, key performance indicators, workflow platforms, customer relationship systems, and reporting procedures. Although such tools are often presented as technical solutions, their success depends on how they are incorporated into managerial routines. Employees may comply formally while continuing old practices informally, or they may resist systems that appear disconnected from actual work. Middle managers are often responsible for closing this gap. They explain the purpose of new tools, negotiate exceptions, redesign roles, and monitor whether the system supports or obstructs performance. Their work therefore links technological and managerial change.

Despite the growing recognition of middle managers in the change literature, several gaps remain. First, many studies focus on strategic change in general, while fewer examine how middle managers shape the evolution of management systems as configurations of routines, rules, tools, responsibilities, and feedback mechanisms. Second, much of the literature has been developed in Western organizational contexts, creating a need for qualitative evidence from non-Western settings. Organizational change in Tehran-based organizations may be influenced by distinctive institutional conditions, including hierarchical decision-making traditions, resource volatility, regulatory pressure, and the coexistence of formal procedures with informal relational practices. Third, there is a need to examine not only whether middle managers support or resist change, but how they practically implement, adapt, stabilize, and institutionalize change processes.

Qualitative inquiry is particularly appropriate for this topic because the role of middle managers is embedded in meaning, interaction, context, and process. Quantitative studies can identify relationships between variables such as participation, commitment, and implementation success, but they are less able to reveal how middle managers interpret change, negotiate tensions, and redesign routines in everyday work. Semi-structured interviews allow participants to explain their experiences in their own terms, describe implementation challenges, and provide examples of managerial practices that may not be visible in formal documents. Therefore, the present study uses a qualitative design to explore the lived and professional experiences of middle managers involved in management system evolution.

The aim of this study was to explore the role of middle managers in management system evolution by examining how they interpret, translate, adapt, and institutionalize change implementation processes in Tehran-based organizations.

Methods and Materials

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the role of middle managers in management system evolution during change implementation processes. A qualitative approach was selected because the study sought to understand managerial meanings, interpretations, practices, and interactions rather than to measure predetermined variables. The research focused on middle managers who had direct experience with organizational change initiatives involving management system evolution, including changes in performance management systems, digital workflow platforms, reporting procedures, organizational restructuring, process standardization, quality management routines, and interdepartmental coordination mechanisms. The study population consisted of middle managers working in public and private organizations in Tehran, Iran. Participants were selected through purposive sampling because they were expected to provide rich information about the phenomenon under investigation. Inclusion criteria were holding a middle-management position, having at least three years of managerial experience, being directly involved in at least one formal change implementation process during the previous three years, and willingness to participate in an interview. The final sample included 24 middle managers. Theoretical saturation was reached after the twenty-first interview, when no substantially new codes or categories emerged, and three additional interviews were conducted to confirm the stability and completeness of the emerging categories. The sample included managers from service, manufacturing, banking, technology, healthcare, and educational organizations, allowing the study to capture varied experiences of management system change across organizational contexts.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This method was appropriate because it provided a flexible structure for exploring common topics while allowing participants to elaborate on their own experiences, interpretations, and examples. An interview guide was developed based on the research aim and the literature on middle managers, organizational change, sensemaking, and implementation. The main interview questions focused on participants' experiences of change implementation, their role in translating senior management decisions, their interactions with employees during change, the challenges they encountered, the strategies they used to adapt new systems, and the ways they communicated feedback to higher levels of management. Sample questions included: "Can you describe a recent change in your organization's management system in which you were involved?", "What was your role in implementing this change?", "How did you explain the change to your team?", "What tensions or conflicts emerged during implementation?", "How did you adapt the change to fit your unit's work processes?", and "What helped the change become part of everyday routines?" Probing questions were used to obtain deeper explanations and concrete examples. Interviews were conducted in Persian, lasted between 45 and 75 minutes, and were audio-recorded with participant consent. Field notes were written after each interview to capture contextual observations, nonverbal impressions, and preliminary analytic ideas. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy before analysis. Participants were assured that their identities and organizations would remain confidential, and pseudonyms were used in all reporting.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis supported by NVivo software. The analysis followed an inductive logic, allowing categories to emerge from the interview data while remaining informed by sensitizing concepts from the literature, including sensemaking, sensegiving, boundary spanning, emotional balancing, and dynamic capabilities. First, the researchers read the transcripts repeatedly to become familiar with the data and wrote initial memos about recurrent meanings and implementation processes. Second, open coding was conducted line by line to identify significant statements related to the role of middle managers in change implementation. Codes included examples such as "translating abstract strategy," "protecting staff from overload," "negotiating unrealistic deadlines," "adapting procedures," "creating informal coordination," "feeding back operational problems," and "stabilizing new routines." Third, similar codes were grouped into subcategories, and relationships among subcategories were examined through constant comparison across participants and organizational contexts. Fourth, broader main categories were developed to explain the role of middle managers in management system evolution. NVivo was used to organize transcripts, assign codes, compare coded segments, retrieve quotations, and document analytic decisions. Trustworthiness was enhanced through member checking with six participants, peer debriefing with two qualitative researchers, maintenance of an audit trail, and reflexive memo writing. Credibility was supported by prolonged engagement with the data and the use of direct quotations. Transferability was supported by detailed description of participants and organizational contexts. Dependability and confirmability were strengthened through systematic coding procedures, documentation of category development, and comparison of interpretations with the raw data.

Findings

The demographic characteristics of the participants showed that the study included 24 middle managers working in Tehran-based organizations. Of these participants, 15 were men and 9 were women. Participants' ages ranged from 31 to 54 years, with an approximate mean age of 41 years. Regarding educational background, 7 participants held bachelor's degrees, 14 held master's degrees, and 3 held doctoral degrees. In terms of organizational sector, 5 participants worked in banking and financial services, 4 in manufacturing, 5 in technology and digital services, 4 in healthcare organizations, 3 in higher education institutions, and 3 in public-sector administrative organizations. Managerial experience ranged from 4 to 22 years. With respect to organizational change experience, 9 participants had been involved in performance management reform, 6 in digital workflow implementation, 4 in restructuring initiatives, 3 in process standardization projects, and 2 in quality management system redesign. This diversity of participants provided a rich basis for understanding how middle managers experience and shape management system evolution across different organizational settings.

The first main category was **translating strategic intent into operational meaning**. Participants explained that senior management often introduced change through broad terms such as "efficiency," "agility," "transparency," "customer orientation," or "digital transformation," but these concepts were not immediately meaningful to employees. Middle managers therefore had to convert abstract strategic language into concrete expectations, work routines, and behavioral examples. One participant stated, "Top management said the new system was about accountability, but my team asked, 'What exactly changes in our daily work?' My job was to translate that word into tasks, deadlines, reports, and decisions." Another manager explained, "If I repeated the official message, nobody listened. I had to explain what the change meant for our unit, not for the whole organization." This category showed that middle managers functioned as interpretive brokers. They did not merely transmit information; they reconstructed strategic messages in language that employees could understand and use. Participants also described filtering, sequencing, and contextualizing information. Rather than communicating all details at once, they introduced change gradually, linked it to familiar problems, and framed it as a solution to operational difficulties. This translation work reduced ambiguity and helped employees connect management system changes to their own responsibilities.

The second main category was **mediating vertical and horizontal tensions**. Participants reported that change implementation generated tensions between senior executives and frontline employees, as well as between departments with different priorities. Senior managers frequently expected fast implementation, standardized compliance, and visible performance results, whereas employees were concerned about workload, unclear procedures, lack of training, and possible blame. Middle managers were positioned between these expectations and had to negotiate both upward and downward. One participant noted, "Senior managers wanted the dashboard to be active in one month, but the data sources were not ready. I had to explain upward that resistance was not the problem; the infrastructure was the problem." Another stated, "The finance department wanted strict documentation, but the operations team said the forms slowed down service. We had to redesign the process together." This category revealed that middle managers acted as tension mediators and boundary spanners. They absorbed pressure from higher levels while protecting employees from unrealistic demands, and they also persuaded employees to accept necessary discipline in the new system. Their work involved negotiation, conflict resolution, informal coordination, and the creation of practical compromises. The findings indicated that management system evolution depended on the ability of middle managers to prevent tensions from becoming implementation breakdowns.

The third main category was **reconfiguring routines through local experimentation**. Participants emphasized that formal change plans rarely fit the operational context perfectly.

New procedures, software platforms, reporting templates, and performance indicators often required adjustment before they could become usable. Middle managers described testing alternative workflows, modifying task sequences, creating temporary workarounds, and using pilot experiences to refine implementation. One participant explained, “The procedure looked good on paper, but when we used it with real customers, we saw three unnecessary approval steps. We removed one step informally first, then proposed the revised version officially.” Another manager said, “We did not reject the new system; we localized it. If we had implemented it exactly as designed, people would have abandoned it after two weeks.” This category showed that middle managers contributed to management system evolution through practical experimentation. They used their knowledge of local routines to identify mismatches between formal design and operational reality. Importantly, experimentation was not always formally authorized. Some participants described “quiet adaptation,” in which they adjusted implementation in small ways before presenting successful practices to senior management. Such local adaptation helped transform change initiatives from rigid designs into workable systems.

The fourth main category was **sustaining employee commitment during uncertainty**. Participants repeatedly described the emotional dimension of change implementation. Employees were concerned about increased monitoring, reduced autonomy, job insecurity, additional workload, and the possibility of being evaluated unfairly by new performance indicators. Middle managers had to manage these emotions while maintaining their own commitment to the change. One participant stated, “People were not against improvement. They were afraid the new system would expose them without giving them support. I had to show them that the system was not only for control.” Another explained, “Sometimes I had doubts too, but if I showed only doubt, the team would stop. I had to be honest about problems but still keep direction.” This category indicated that middle managers acted as emotional stabilizers. They listened to employee concerns, clarified misunderstandings, acknowledged uncertainty, and created psychological space for gradual adaptation. They also used informal conversations, team meetings, reassurance, and practical support to reduce anxiety. The findings suggested that employee commitment was sustained not simply through formal communication but through everyday relational work. When middle managers were trusted, employees were more willing to tolerate temporary disruption and engage with new systems.

The fifth main category was **institutionalizing learning through feedback loops**. Participants described implementation as an ongoing learning process rather than a single rollout event. Middle managers collected feedback from employees, monitored implementation problems, identified unintended consequences, and communicated lessons to senior decision-makers. One participant noted, “After two months, we had a list of problems that no consultant had predicted. We sent them to the steering committee with examples, not complaints.” Another manager said, “The system became stable only when feedback became part of the process. Before that, people felt the change was imposed; after that, they felt they could shape it." This category showed that middle managers supported institutionalization by transforming local experience into organizational learning. Feedback loops allowed organizations to refine procedures, adjust indicators, improve training, and correct design flaws. Participants emphasized that when senior management ignored feedback, employees returned to old routines or complied only superficially. In contrast, when feedback was taken seriously, the new management system became more legitimate and durable. Thus, middle managers played a central role in moving change from initial implementation to sustained evolution.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of middle managers in management system evolution by examining how they interpret, translate, adapt, and institutionalize change implementation processes. The findings revealed five interconnected roles: middle managers translated strategic intent into operational meaning, mediated vertical and horizontal tensions, reconfigured routines through local experimentation, sustained employee commitment during uncertainty, and institutionalized learning through feedback loops. Taken together, these findings suggest that middle managers are not passive recipients of senior management plans but active agents in the evolution of management systems. Their contribution is situated, interpretive, relational, and practical. They make change understandable, workable, acceptable, and durable.

The first finding showed that middle managers translated strategic intent into operational meaning. This result is consistent with research emphasizing the sensemaking and sensegiving role of middle managers during strategic change. Balogun and Johnson (2004) demonstrated that middle managers actively interpret restructuring rather than simply receive its meaning from senior leaders. Similarly, Rouleau (2005) showed that middle managers use everyday conversations and micro-practices to interpret and sell strategic change. The present study extends these insights to management system evolution by showing that translation is especially important when changes involve abstract managerial language, technical systems, or new accountability mechanisms. Employees do not respond only to the formal content of change; they respond to what they believe the change means for their daily work, autonomy, workload, and evaluation. Middle managers therefore serve as meaning architects who connect strategic vocabulary to operational routines.

The second finding concerned the mediation of vertical and horizontal tensions. Participants described change implementation as a process filled with conflicting expectations between senior management, employees, and departments. This finding aligns with Floyd and Lane's (2000) argument that strategic renewal creates role conflict across organizational levels. Middle managers are particularly exposed to this conflict because they must maintain operational performance while implementing new systems. The findings also support Floyd and Wooldridge's (1992) view that middle managers contribute both upward and downward in strategy processes. In the present study, upward influence occurred when middle managers communicated operational constraints, challenged unrealistic deadlines, or proposed modifications. Downward influence occurred when they explained the necessity of change, encouraged compliance, and supported employees. This dual influence suggests that management system evolution depends on bidirectional communication rather than top-down instruction alone.

The third finding showed that middle managers reconfigured routines through local experimentation. This finding is consistent with the dynamic capabilities perspective, which emphasizes the reconfiguration of organizational resources and routines in changing environments (Teece et al., 1997). Teece (2018) argued that dynamic capabilities can be understood as a workable management systems theory because they support evolutionary fitness over time. The present study contributes to this perspective by showing how such reconfiguration occurs at the middle-management level. Middle managers used local knowledge to identify misalignments between formal system design and actual work practices. They then tested adjustments, developed workarounds, and converted practical experience into proposed system improvements. This indicates that management systems evolve not only through executive design but also through distributed experimentation in operational units.

The fourth finding concerned sustaining employee commitment during uncertainty. Participants emphasized that change implementation generated fear, fatigue, skepticism, and perceived threat among employees. This result strongly aligns with Huy's (2002) concept of emotional balancing, which highlights the role of middle managers in maintaining both commitment to change and sensitivity to recipients' emotions. In the present study, middle managers sustained commitment by acknowledging concerns, providing reassurance, clarifying the purpose of new systems, and protecting employees from unnecessary pressure. This finding also relates to Huy's (2011) argument that middle managers' emotions and social identities influence strategy implementation. In Tehran-based organizations, where interpersonal trust and informal communication may strongly shape employee responses, the emotional and relational credibility of middle managers appears especially important. Employees were more willing to engage with change when they believed their direct manager understood their concerns and could represent them fairly.

The fifth finding showed that middle managers institutionalized learning through feedback loops. This result highlights the role of middle managers in converting local implementation experience into organizational learning. Management system evolution does not end when a new procedure, dashboard, or reporting line is introduced. It becomes durable only when organizations learn from implementation problems and modify systems accordingly. This finding is consistent with the broader strategy-as-practice view, which treats strategy and change as accomplishments produced through situated activity rather than only formal planning (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). The study shows that middle managers are essential carriers of practical knowledge because they observe how new systems actually work in daily operations. When they transmit this knowledge upward and senior managers respond, the system becomes more adaptive. When feedback is ignored, formal implementation may conceal practical failure.

A key theoretical implication of this study is that management system evolution should be conceptualized as an interpretive and adaptive process rather than a purely structural or technical process. Formal systems such as performance management platforms, quality procedures, workflow technologies, and reporting mechanisms do not automatically change organizational behavior. They must be interpreted, enacted, adjusted, and legitimized. Middle managers are central to this process because they occupy the organizational space where formal design meets operational reality. This position gives them access to both strategic narratives and practical constraints. Their role is therefore not limited to implementation control; it includes meaning construction, tension management, routine reconfiguration, emotional support, and organizational learning.

Another implication is that the success of change implementation depends heavily on the quality of middle-manager involvement before, during, and after system redesign. Many organizations involve middle managers only after senior leaders have already selected a solution and defined implementation deadlines. The findings suggest that this late involvement reduces the quality of implementation because operational constraints are discovered too late. Middle managers can improve system design by identifying risks, anticipating employee reactions, and clarifying resource needs. Their involvement should therefore begin in the diagnostic and design phases of change, not only in the rollout phase. This supports the broader argument that middle managers are strategists and knowledge integrators, not merely supervisors (Wooldridge et al., 2008).

The findings also show that resistance to management system change should not be interpreted simplistically. Participants indicated that what senior leaders label as resistance may actually reflect unclear communication, insufficient infrastructure, unrealistic deadlines, poor system design, or fear of unfair evaluation. Middle managers are well positioned to distinguish between destructive resistance and useful warning signals. Their proximity to employees enables them to understand why concerns emerge, while their managerial responsibility enables them to transform concerns into implementation improvements. This suggests that resistance can become a source of learning when middle managers are empowered to interpret and communicate it constructively.

The Tehran context adds further significance to the findings. Participants worked in organizations where formal hierarchy, resource constraints, and informal relational practices coexisted. In such settings, middle managers may carry a particularly heavy implementation burden. They must respect hierarchical authority while also creating enough flexibility for local adaptation. They must respond to senior demands while maintaining employee trust. They must use formal reporting channels while also relying on informal conversations to solve problems. This duality may be common in many emerging-market and transitional organizational contexts, where formal management systems are increasingly adopted but must be reconciled with existing cultural and institutional patterns. Therefore, the findings may be relevant to organizations beyond Tehran that are attempting to modernize management systems under conditions of complexity and constraint.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the research relied on semi-structured interviews with 24 middle managers in Tehran, and the findings reflect participants' self-reported experiences. Although interviews provided rich insight into managerial interpretations and practices, they did not allow direct observation of implementation meetings, employee interactions, or senior management decision-making. Second, the sample included managers from several sectors, which increased diversity but limited the possibility of developing sector-specific conclusions. Third, the study focused only on middle managers and did not include senior executives or frontline employees; therefore, the findings represent one important perspective rather than the full change implementation system. Fourth, because the study was qualitative, the results are not statistically generalizable. Instead, they provide analytic insights that may be transferable to similar organizational contexts. Finally, the use of retrospective accounts means that participants may have reconstructed events in ways shaped by memory, professional identity, or perceived success.

Future research should examine management system evolution through multi-level qualitative designs that include senior managers, middle managers, frontline employees, and external consultants. Such designs would allow researchers to compare how different organizational actors interpret the same change initiative. Longitudinal studies are also recommended because management system evolution unfolds over time, and the role of middle managers may differ across diagnosis, design, implementation, stabilization, and institutionalization phases. Future studies could also compare public and private organizations, large and small firms, or traditional and digitally mature organizations to identify contextual differences in middle-manager roles. Quantitative research may build on the categories identified in this study to develop measurement scales for middle-manager contribution to management system evolution. In addition, cross-cultural research could examine whether the interpretive, emotional, and adaptive roles identified in Tehran-based organizations appear similarly in other institutional and cultural contexts.

Organizations should involve middle managers early in management system redesign rather than treating them only as implementation channels. Senior leaders should create structured mechanisms through which middle managers can communicate operational constraints, employee concerns, and system design problems without being perceived as resistant. Change implementation plans should include time for local experimentation, pilot testing, feedback collection, and procedural refinement. Organizations should also train middle managers in change communication, conflict mediation, emotional support, and data-informed process improvement. Because middle managers absorb pressure from both senior leaders and employees, they require authority, resources, and psychological support to perform their role effectively. Finally, senior management should recognize that successful system evolution depends not only on formal design quality but also on the credibility, practical judgment, and relational competence of the middle managers who bring the system to life.

Conclusion

This qualitative study explored the role of middle managers in management system evolution during change implementation processes. The findings showed that middle managers play a central role in translating strategic intent, mediating tensions, adapting routines, sustaining commitment, and institutionalizing learning. Their contribution is not limited to executing senior management decisions; rather, they actively shape the meaning, practice, and durability of organizational change. Management systems evolve through the interaction between formal design and situated implementation, and middle managers occupy the critical interface between these two domains. By using practical knowledge, relational influence, and adaptive judgment, middle managers help organizations transform abstract change initiatives into workable and sustainable systems. The study therefore suggests that organizations seeking successful management system evolution should treat middle managers as strategic partners in change, not merely as operational supervisors.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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