

Chapter 12

Middle Managers in Search of Excellence: To Be a Better Leader or a Better Follower?

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ABSTRACT

As leaders, managers are expected to be proactive, self-confident, and independent, while as followers they must be willing to obey, conform and depend. Should middle managers roll the dice to choose which of the two roles they seek excellence in? The purpose of this chapter is threefold: first, to present some of the main internal factors and individual characteristics that define the work of middle managers as successful leaders or followers; second, to exhibit the main external factors that affect managers' opportunities to excel; and third, to analyze the potential impact of internal and external factors on the development of middle managers as better leaders or better followers. The analysis shows that to achieve excellence as leaders and followers, middle managers must be excellent influencers who correctly read situational factors and know how to take advantage of them.

The term 'middle management' is often used to describe employees who are neither top managers nor pure subordinates (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020). Actually, middle managers constantly switch roles: they are bosses one moment and subordinates the next (Bhawuk & Ferris, 2000). Their dual role as an object and subject of influence (Kotsev, 2023a) can lead them to confusion and hesitation about the qualities they should possess and the behavior they are expected to demonstrate. The search for excellence is a solitary endeavor influenced by both external and internal factors. External factors are mainly related to the superior, the subordinates,

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and the organizational specifics, while internal factors arise from the personality of the manager.

Most internal factors stem from the Big Five personality traits (Costa & McCrae, 1999), but are far from limited to them. Here, particular attention is paid to maturity, proactivity, self-confidence, sociability, needs for power, independence and awareness (awareness), as well as work attitude. Among the individual characteristics listed, motivation does not appear, because this chapter rests on the belief that everyone who seeks excellence is already motivated enough to have made such a decision. In fact, a manager's motivation is the fuel that provides the energy and desire to move along the path of excellence. It is a necessary but not sufficient condition for success. Since the relationship between motivation and leadership/followership has already been extensively explored (e.g., Buble et al., 2014; Peyton et al., 2019), some of the remaining internal factors are emphasized here.

Among the external factors associated with the direct supervisor are the leadership style, knowledge in the professional field of the subordinate manager, degree of predictability of her decisions and actions, power resources, and relationships. Correspondingly, external factors affiliated with the subordinates refer to their followership styles, technical expertise, predictability, power resources, and nature of relationships. The external factors related to the specifics of the organization include organizational hierarchy, culture, and nature of the goals and the tasks to be performed. To meet high expectations and excel in their work, middle managers need to consider their internal and external factors and assess what qualities and behaviors are most likely to lead to success: whether to emphasize developing leadership qualities and corresponding behaviors or to pay more attention to meeting the requirements for good and reliable followers.

The purpose of this chapter is threefold: first, to present some of the main internal factors and individual characteristics that define the work of middle managers as successful leaders or followers; second, to exhibit the main external factors that affect managers' opportunities to excel; and third, to analyze the potential impact of internal and external factors on the development of middle managers as better leaders or better followers.

Being a better leader requires effective communication with subordinates and the development of personal qualities such as proactiveness, self-confidence, and independence. Being a better follower concerns the opposite characteristics – more intensive communication with the superior, sensitivity to her opinion, and corresponding qualities such as obedience, conformity, and dependence. The contradiction is obvious. As is no less obvious the lagging of research on followership styles from leadership studies: 83% of all the articles published in *The Leadership Quarterly* before 2018 used the term 'leader' (or a derivative) in their title, compared to only 8% that used the term 'follower' (Bastardo & Van Vugt, 2019). The leadership

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