

Line Managers' Middle-levelness and Driving Proactive Behaviors in Organizational Interventions

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Purpose - This paper explores line managers' proactive work behaviors in organizational interventions and ascertains how their management of their middle-levelness by aligning with the intervention, or not, influence their proactive work behaviors.

Design / methodology / approach - Our findings are based on thematic analysis of 20 semi-structured interviews of university heads of departments responsible for managing organizational interventions.

Findings - We found that line managers engaged in a range of proactive work behaviors to implement the organizational intervention (i.e., "driving proactive behaviors"). Furthermore, line managers tended to engage in driving proactive behaviors when they aligned with the organizational intervention, but not to when unconvinced of the intervention's validity.

Practical implications - These findings highlight the importance of senior management and HR investing sufficient time and quality in the preparation phase to ensure all actors have a shared understanding of the organizational interventions' validity.

Originality / value - This is the first study to explore line managers' proactive work behaviors to implement an organizational intervention, and how the line managers' management of their middle-levelness influence these proactive work behaviors.

Keywords: organizational intervention; line managers; qualitative research; case study; proactive work behaviors; middle-levelness.

Introduction

Organizational interventions aim to improve employee well-being, in this study defined as psychosocial risk factors, through altering how work is managed, designed, and organized (Nielsen & Noblet, 2018). Reviews of organizational interventions show conflicting results suggesting such interventions are challenging to implement (Montano et al., 2014). Due to the complex nature of organizational interventions, it is essential to understand how they may or may not achieve their goals to improve employee well-being (Nielsen and Miraglia, 2017). The literature has established that line managers are crucial for the implementation of organizational interventions (e.g., Ipsen *et al.*, 2015; Yulita *et al.*, 2017). To develop an in-depth understanding of how line managers influence intervention processes, there is a need to further explore the reasons behind line managers' actions during organizational interventions (Nielsen, 2017).

In this paper, we address this call by investigating line managers' behaviors during organizational interventions, considering how their "middle-levelness" affects these behaviors. Middle-levelness refers to line managers' unique position in the organizational hierarchy as simultaneously superiors to employees and subordinates to senior management (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020). In this study, middle-levelness is used to explore the line managers' reasons for why they decide to align or not align with a concrete organizational intervention. As the theoretical foundation, we use the motivational model of individual-level proactive work behaviors (Parker *et al.*, 2010; Parker and Bindl, 2016). This model suggests that proactive work behaviors are the result of motivational states, individual variation, and context. The relationship between line managers' middle-levelness and proactive work behaviors is, to the best of our knowledge, a previously unexplored area of research that can bring novel and crucial insights about line managers' actions when managing organizational interventions.

The literature suggests a range of behaviors that line managers may engage in during organizational intervention: They may continually inform employees about the intervention in order to maintain their awareness (Sørensen and Holman, 2014), communicate the intervention's importance and follow up with actions that are congruent with that communication (Yulita et al., 2017), act as role models by projecting readiness for change (Nielsen and Randall, 2011), be participative and supportive of the employees (Coyle-Shapiro, 1999), involve themselves with senior management in defining and implementing the organizational intervention (Currie, 2000; Floyd and Wooldridge, 1997), and they may discuss and make sense of how to implement the organizational intervention with their peers, such as other line managers (Balogun and Johnson, 2004). The literature indicates that line managers may also engage in behaviors that thwart the implementation of organizational interventions by restricting employee participation in the intervention (Dahl-Jørgensen and Saksvik, 2005), preventing information flow between senior management and employees and generally resist change (Biron *et al.*, 2010; Weyman and Boocock, 2015), and they may impede the intervention by being unavailable to employees throughout the intervention (Mellor *et al.*, 2011). These studies do not, however, explore line managers' proactive work behaviors and why line managers engage in these behaviors.

This paper aims to expand our knowledge about line managers' behaviors in organizational interventions in light of the motivational model of individual-level proactive work behaviors (Parker *et al.*, 2010; Parker and Bindl, 2016) and their context of middle-levelness (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020). When faced with a senior management plan (e.g., an organizational intervention), line managers are presented with a choice to align with the role senior management intends for them to fulfill, or not. This choice is underlined by how line managers and senior management engage differently with interventions due to differences between senior management's role and accountability, which encompass decision-making on

behalf of the entire organization, and line managers' role and accountability, which cover decision-making in terms of operational activities (Karanika-Murray et al., 2018).

Gjerde and Alvesson (2020) suggest line managers' middle-levelness, their position between employees and senior management in the organizational hierarchy, may bring potentially conflicting expectations. Professional employees may expect their line managers to shield them from perceived supervising or controlling senior management initiatives (Mintzberg, 1998), while senior management expects their line managers to implement their plans (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020). Gjerde and Alvesson (2020) indicate line managers align with the role senior management design for them in their plans depending on motivation: Line managers motivated to achieve results as defined by senior management will abide by their intended role, whereas line managers motivated to shield their employees from senior managements' plans will not align with their designed role and instead diffuse the plans' pressure onto the employees. Nevertheless, line managers who align with their intended role are likely to engage in behaviors that implement the plan. These line managers can be expected to implement interventions as meant by senior management. Conversely, line managers who do not conform to their designed role are less likely to engage in behaviors that implement the plan. These line managers are likely to not engage in behaviors that implement an intervention as senior management intend.

The organizational intervention in this study took place at a university in Norway. The intervention was implemented at the departmental level which offered line managers/departmental heads substantial freedom in how they implemented the intervention. The intervention was initiated by senior management with the aim to improve employees' well-being (i.e., psychosocial risk factors) through the development of detailed action plans (Innstrand and Christensen, 2020), and to satisfy legislative requirements of psychosocial risk management (Working Environment Act, 2017). The intervention design was based on the

organizational intervention implementation model (Nielsen et al., 2010) and consisted of five phases: 1) Preparation, i.e. setting up a steering group and developing a communication plan. 2) Screening to identify psychosocial risks using a standardized survey. 3) Developing action plans using a bottom-up approach whereby employees and manager collaboratively agreed action plans. 4) Action plans implementation where the implementation of action plans is monitored and finally 5) the evaluation of the intervention.

The line managers of this intervention were heads of departments who can be considered line managers as they have personnel responsibility for 20 to 150 employees (i.e., scientific, technical, and administrative staff) and answer to senior management (i.e., deans of faculty and the rector). The motivational model of individual-level proactive work behaviors is an appropriate framework for this paper, as line managers were allocated the responsibility for managing the intervention phases. Previous research has found that line managers' autonomy is crucial to achieve the goals of interventions (Biron et al., 2018). Furthermore, job autonomy is crucial for line managers' ability to engage in proactive work behaviors (Ohly and Scmitt, 2016), rendering line managers' middle-levelness and how they manage it a critical factor for the proactive work behaviors they engage in to drive the intervention – or not.

Theoretical foundation

The Motivational Model of Individual-Level Proactive Work Behaviors

Proactivity is about self-initiated behaviors enabling individuals to strive for an alternate future (Parker *et al.*, 2010). Proactive work behaviors are defined as self-initiated behaviors focused on improving the internal conditions of an organization by taking charge, preventing problems, innovating, or speaking up (Parker and Bindl, 2016; Parker and Collins, 2010; Tornau and Frese, 2013). There are both proximal and distal antecedents of proactive

work behaviors (Parker and Bindl, 2016). Proximal antecedents are the motivational states of “can do”, “reason to”, and “energized to”. Can-do motivation involves the self-efficacy, control and cost that individuals perceive in relation to goals (e.g., “can I/we do this intervention activity?”). Reason-to motivation revolves around the grounds on which proactivity is believed to be warranted (e.g., do I/we have a good enough reason to do this intervention activity?”). Energized-to motivation is about having an affective state that is sufficiently activated to pursue the proactive goals (e.g., “do I/we have the energy or resources to do this intervention activity?”) (Parker and Bindl, 2016). Can do, reason to, and energized to motivations all must align with regards to some goal for specific proactive work behaviors to occur (Parker et al., 2010). However, it is the distal antecedents, and their link with proactive work behaviors, that will be the focus of this paper.

Distal antecedents of proactive work behaviors are individual differences and context. In the motivational model of individual-level proactive work behaviors, proactive work behaviors are distally affected by context in three ways: 1) as directly influencing proactive motivational states, which in turn affect the proactive work behaviors; 2) as interacting with the proactive motivational states in enabling or disabling the manifestation of proactive work behaviors; and 3) as interacting with individual differences in influencing the proactive motivational states that precipitate proactive work behaviors (Parker and Bindl, 2016). It is the latter mechanism that is attended to in this paper.

Researchers have established that context influences the occurrence of constructive leadership during interventions (Lundmark et al., 2020) and proactive work behaviors (Christensen *et al.*, 2019; Ohly and Scmitt, 2016). Context is defined as phenomena external to focal actors that offer opportunities for and constraints on behaviours (Johns, 2006). There are three contextual factors which may influence line managers' proactive work behaviors: 1) Job autonomy (Ohly and Scmitt, 2016), which allows for line managers' motivations to

manifest into proactive work behaviors of their choosing; 2) leadership (Den Hartog and Belschak, 2016), in this case senior management leadership, which conforms with research showing that line managers struggle with implementing organizational interventions when they lack support from senior management (Nielsen *et al.*, 2017); 3) mergers and downsizings, which can be perceived by line managers as threatening employee layoffs, making line managers focus on handling that prospect instead of on implementing the organizational intervention (Nielsen *et al.*, 2010). In this paper, we add a contextual factor to the literature by attending to how line managers' middle-levelness - and how they manage it - affects their proactive work behaviors.

Individual differences, however, also influence proactive work behaviors as a distal antecedent. Individual differences refer to variations in, for example, life values, knowledge, ability, skills, life- and career stage, personality, and demography (Parker and Bindl, 2016). These individual differences affect the proactive motivational states both directly and indirectly by interacting with context. In terms of the motivational model of individual-level proactive work behaviors, line manager alignment with an organizational intervention is most aptly construed as an individual difference. It therefore follows that line managers' alignment interact with their context of middle-levelness. Thus, in this paper we explore how line managers managing their context of middle-levelness affect their proactive work behaviors in organizational interventions.

To the best of our knowledge, there has been no research on how line managers manage their middle-levelness when implementing organizational interventions. In light of the line managers' context of middle-levelness and individual differences in managing their middle-levelness, we aim to expand knowledge of how line managers affect the intervention process. The research question is:

“What proactive work behaviors do line managers engage in during organizational interventions, and how do their management of their middle-levelness affect their proactive work behaviors in organizational interventions?”

Materials and Methods

Design

We employed a case study design as it provides holistic and systematic research of actions in complex situations (i.e., organizational intervention) from informants' points of view (Tellis, 1997). The research was conducted in accordance with the recommended four stages presented by Tellis (1997), wherein the case study is designed, conducted, the evidence analyzed, and conclusions are developed. Accordingly, this study was conducted through interviews with line managers responsible for implementing an organizational intervention in their respective departments at a university in Norway. Ethical approval was applied for and granted (The Norwegian Centre for Research Data).

We used a semi-structural interview guide inspired and framed by the process evaluation checklist provided by Nielsen and Randall (2013) and included: (1) the preparation phase with questions about their motivation for the intervention; (2) the screening phase with questions about how they motivated the employees to complete the survey; (3) the action planning phase with questions about whether they experienced enough leader support and their motivation for developing the action plans; (4) the implementation phase with questions about who were responsible for implementing the action plans and the line managers' role in their implementation; (5) the evaluation phase with questions about the effects of the implemented action plans were evaluated and how; (6) the intervention as a whole with questions about whether they received sufficient leader support to conduct the intervention,

Fifty-three line managers responsible for implementing an organizational intervention in their respective university departments were invited by email and phone to participate in interviews about their roles and actions throughout the intervention. We conducted interviews with 20 heads of departments (i.e., line managers), 5 women and 15 men. This sample size is in accordance with the recommended sample size for thematic analysis (15 to 20 interviews) (Clarke *et al.*, 2015). The interviews took place in the offices of the informants' workplaces. The duration of the interviews ranged from 30 to 90 minutes, and the average duration was approximately 55 minutes. The line managers are given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity: 1LM to 20LM.

Organizational Intervention

The organizational intervention of this study was the ARK (Norwegian acronym for "Working environment and working climate surveys") Intervention Program (Innstrand and Christensen, 2020). The ARK Intervention Program was a holistic program for implementing work environment interventions in knowledge intensive organizations. It was a leadership tool for 1) improving the work environment with an emphasis on job demands and job resources, 2) safeguarding regulatory demands for systematic HSE-work on psychosocial risk factors, and 3) generating action plans to improve the work environment. It was also an arena for participation- and influence for each employee anchored in the Nordic tripartite model (Working Environment Act, 2017). The ARK Intervention Program was implemented in all the departments in a Norwegian University and had a steering group to monitor the intervention and provide support to the university. This study investigated a second cycle of the intervention, as one cycle of the intervention had been previously implemented three years prior. At the beginning of the preparation phase, senior management (i.e., the faculties) and HR gave instructions and recommendations to the line managers at a compulsory meeting. Line managers could also seek further support by HR throughout the intervention.

The general instruction was to follow five phases described by Nielsen *et al.* (2010): preparation, screening, action planning, implementation, and evaluation.

For the preparation phase, the line managers were instructed to deliver a report, in cooperation with a safety representative, to senior management and HR. This report was named "Fact Sheet I" and was to be filled out with objective organizational information of relevance to the working environment. Moreover, senior management and HR recommended line managers arranged meetings to inform their employees about the intervention and its theoretical underpinnings (standardized Power Point slides were provided by HR) and motivate employees to participate in the intervention activities. Line managers were encouraged to signal the intervention's importance and emphasize the importance of employee involvement. They were also encouraged to ensure a high survey response rate by openly discussing the screening survey (i.e., its questions and theoretical foundation) and by emphasizing the survey's anonymity. In some faculties, the senior management and HR arranged a competition (with cake as the reward) for the department with the highest survey response rate, and the line managers could enrol their department in this competition.

In the screening phase, line managers were requested to invite and remind their employees via e-mail to complete the survey. The survey could be answered in both Norwegian and English. The questionnaire used was the Knowledge-Intensive Work Environment Survey Target (KIWEST), a validated questionnaire for use in academia capturing psychosocial risk factors and well-being (Innstrand *et al.*, 2015). The responses to the survey were analyzed and summarized in reports fed back to departments. Responses were confidential and anonymous, and results were not fed back to the departments if fewer than five had responded to the questionnaire in a department.

For the action planning phase, the line managers were recommended to host an action-planning meeting with their employees. HR's role provided support on how to conduct the action planning meeting, and, if necessary, to be present at the meeting or facilitate the action planning meeting. HR provided a checklist for these meetings (e.g., assess risks, define rules, outline a schedule). For the meeting itself, line managers were encouraged to first present the survey's results to the employees and then to facilitate employee-driven action planning based on the survey's results. The line managers were recommended to divide the department into suitable groups, which would discuss and interpret the survey results and develop action plans that they would present to the rest of the department at the end of the meeting. After the action-planning meeting, the line managers were encouraged to create a plan to record the action plans that the groups had developed, to determine who was responsible for the implementation of the actions, and to set a deadline for the implementation of the action plan(s).

For the implementation phase, line managers were recommended to monitor the implementation of action plans. Senior management and HR recommended that line managers integrated the action plan(s) into the department's plans and employees should be kept up to date about the action plans' progress.

For the evaluation phase, line managers, in cooperation with the safety representative, were instructed to complete an evaluation report (named Factsheet II) to senior management and HR about the intervention process and the finalized action plans. For more information about the intervention, see Innstrand and Christensen (2020). The phases of the intervention in terms of the line managers' general steps are summarized and visualized in figure 1. In the interviews, we asked whether line managers had complied with the recommendations from senior management and HR. A summary of their answers can be seen in table I. Most line managers who reported to not monitor and fully ensure the action plans' implementation cited

as reasons other processes that senior management wanted prioritized (Nielsen *et al.*, 2017) as well as a lack of senior management support (Nielsen *et al.*, 2010).

Table I
Line manager compliance with recommendations

Preparation phase	Number of line managers
Attended compulsory meeting	20
Completed FactSheet I with safety representative	18
Informed and motivated employees for intervention	19
Screening phase	
Motivated employees for survey	19
Action planning phase	
Conducted survey feedback- and action planning meeting	16
Implementation phase	
Monitored and ensured action plan implementation	13
Evaluation phase	
Completed FactSheet II with safety representative	16

Analysis

The ontological and epistemological positioning of this study is phenomenological. We focus on the accounts of line managers' reality as they experience it and their meanings of their lived experience (Ashworth, 2015). The line managers are viewed as conscious agents with a system of intertwining meanings, a lifeworld. A lifeworld that can be investigated from the "first-person" perspective through interviews. The phenomenological approach requires that transcribed interviews are read thoroughly with an eye towards presuppositions that are not necessarily stated but must be assumed for their account to make sense (Ashworth, 2015).

In analyzing the evidence and developing conclusions, the interviews were transcribed and then analyzed using deductive thematic analysis, wherein the themes were generated using a theoretical lens (Clarke *et al.*, 2015). This theoretical lens was in accordance with the research question of this paper: the motivational model of individual-level proactive work

behaviors (Parker *et al.*, 2010; Parker and Bindl, 2016) as well as the concept of line managers' middle-levelness (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020). The thematic analysis further consisted of six phases (Clarke *et al.*, 2015): becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

The transcribed interviews were first read twice by the main author for familiarization purposes to help transcend the analysis from the most apparent meanings, but also read by one of the co-authors to ensure that the analysis had basis in the data. Second, initial codes of meaningful data extracts (*i.e.*, as they related to the research question) were identified, labeled, and grouped using NVIVO software and Microsoft Word. The grouping was done through sorting the codes with a preliminary coding structure. This preliminary coding structure was based on the research question and the interview guide: data extracts with implications for proactive work behaviors on part of the line managers were given short codes and placed under the phase that the behavior occurred (*e.g.*, preparation phase). Third, the codes were structured to create plausible and preliminary sub-themes of patterns using the visualization tool in the NVIVO software, and each interview was analyzed and summarized in terms of the research question using Microsoft Word. In total, 11 sub-themes of proactive work behaviors were identified (Parker *et al.*, 2010; Parker and Bindl, 2016). Fourth, themes were generated, reviewed, and revised in terms of their consistency and relevance to the research question by checking whether the themes fit the coded data and the data set, and whether the themes had a central organizing principle. In light of Gjerde and Alvesson (2020), we identified one theme that subsumed the 11 sub-themes: "Driving proactive behaviors". The summaries of the interviews were also categorized as to where the line managers' general approach to the intervention best fit the themes. Finally, the fifth and sixth phases of the thematic analysis were performed simultaneously and iteratively: the results of

the article were written in conjunction with clearly naming and defining the themes as they related to the motivational model of individual-level proactive work behaviors (Parker *et al.*, 2010; Parker and Bindl, 2016) in an organizational intervention and the line managers' context of middle-levelness (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020). Two workshops were held wherein the authors of this paper discussed the results.

Results

The analysis presents the line managers' proactive work behaviors through the identified theme (i.e., driving proactive behaviors) and its 11 sub-themes. It moreover analyzes how line managers' middle-levelness affects their proactive work behaviors. The analysis is structured by way of two components of the motivational model of individual-level proactive work behaviors (Parker *et al.*, 2010; Parker and Bindl, 2016): proactive work behaviors and individual differences. Citations from the interviews support the analysis while themes and sub-themes are marked with an *italic* font. Table II shows the findings of the thematic analysis, structured according to intervention phases, themes and sub-themes, and includes representative data. Figure I show a visualization of the line managers' driving proactive behaviors contrasted with the line managers' general steps throughout the intervention phases.

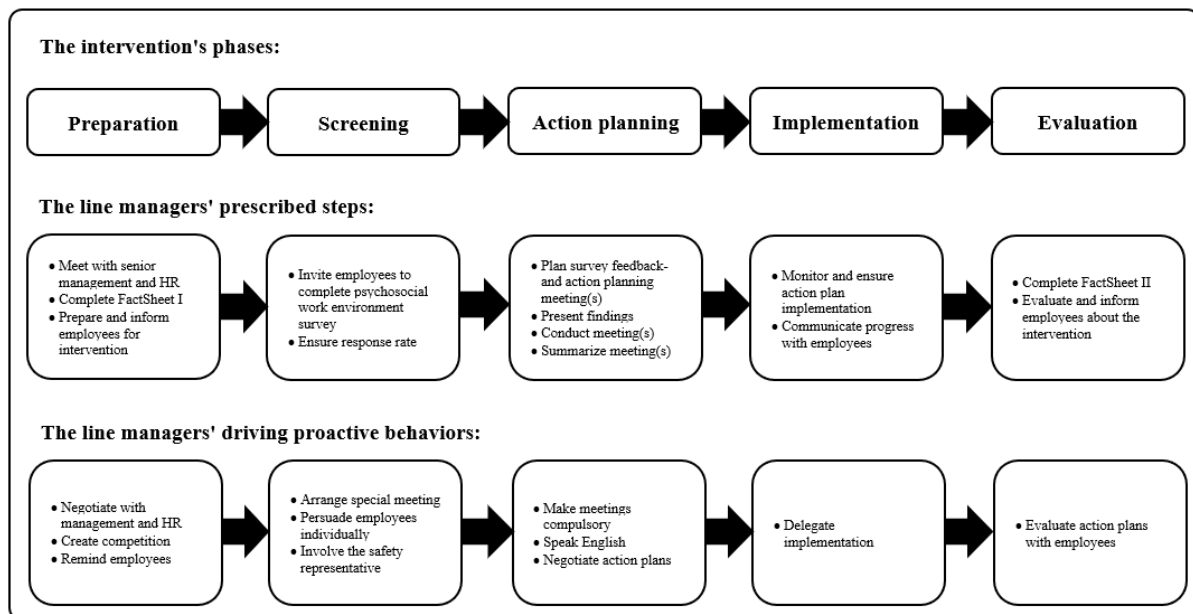


Figure I: The line managers' prescribed steps and driving proactive behaviors throughout the organizational intervention's phases

Table II.

Proactive work behaviors, sub-behaviors, and representative data

Proactive work behaviors (Themes)	Proactive work behaviors (Sub-themes)	Representative data (Data extracts)
Preparation phase		
<i>Driving proactive behaviors</i>	Negotiating with management and HR	I asked questions at the meeting I had with the rector about the importance of receiving the results in a form in which you can point to groups of employees. (...). So, we asked: "Can we receive the results sorted by job categories?". And to begin with I understood that it was not supposed to be like that, but we received it, eventually. [18LM]
	Creating competition	We got those who worked with ARK centrally to pick one person that responded to the survey. They would receive a dinner for two at a restaurant in town. [19LM]
	Reminding employees	[To motivate the employees to participate in the intervention process], I repeated the actions plans we implemented the prior cycle of the intervention. [8LM]
Screening phase		
<i>Driving proactive behaviors</i>	Arranging meeting to explain survey and intervention	What I did was to invite [the temporary employees] to a meeting with good food; pizza and cakes, and said to them: "Ok, we are here for an hour. So, you can ask questions while we are here, and I can help you if you have any questions [about the survey]". [8LM]
	Persuading employees individually	The department is spread over many places. So, I went several rounds to all offices, and tried to reach everyone to increase the survey response rate. [5LM]

	Involving the safety representative	The safety representative participated in motivating the employees to complete the survey when it was open. [11LM]
Action planning phase		
<i>Driving proactive behaviors</i>	Making meetings compulsory	I said that for all permanent employees the [action planning] meeting is compulsory; I said: "You must have a valid reason for not participating". Valid reason being traveling or teaching. [10LM]
	Speaking English at meetings	Every time there is a meeting where people do not speak Norwegian, I hold the meeting in English. [13LM]
	Negotiating action plans	[My role in the action planning meetings] was to lead the process for developing action plans. To make that process constructive wherein we came out of it with something usable. [14LM]
Implementation phase		
<i>Driving proactive behaviors</i>	Delegating implementation of action plans	It was up to me, depending on the action plans, to take responsibility and delegate their implementation to people. [8LM]
Evaluation phase		
<i>Driving proactive behaviors</i>	Evaluating action plans with employees	We had sort of discussions about what had happened. For example, with this [action plan] regarding the on-boarding apparatus, we had several rounds of discussions with the administrative staff. How they experienced it, whether they needed help. And I asked the newly employed how they experienced the new action plans. [5LM]

Proactive work behaviors: Driving proactive behaviors

The key characteristic of driving proactive behaviors was line managers going above and beyond the directions of senior management and HR to implement the intervention (i.e., they “drove the intervention”). We identified 11 sub-themes of driving proactive behaviors by line managers (see table II). In the preparation phase there were three sub-themes identified, one of which was about *negotiating with management and HR*. This negotiation took two forms. The first consisted of convincing senior management and HR to change the implementation level of the intervention from the departmental to a sub-level of professional groups. Which meant that the leaders of the professional groups were given the responsibility to drive the intervention for the members of their professional group. The survey and the action plan development- and implementation were implemented at the professional group

level as well. Meanwhile, the heads of the departments followed up and monitored that the leaders of the professional groups implemented the intervention as intended.

The second form of *negotiating with management and HR* was to persuade senior management and HR to change how the survey results were presented, from global statistics covering the whole department to specific statistics for each job category: administrative staff, temporary scientific staff, and permanent scientific staff. Thus, the survey results were generated and presented based on job categories instead of on the department. In both cases of *negotiating with management and HR*, the line managers reported how this more granular implementation of the intervention activities made the intervention more relevant and useful for the employees' everyday work life.

The second sub-theme in the preparation phase was *creating competition* for example in the form of a lottery for completing the survey, which was in addition to the inter-departmental competition that HR and faculty had designed. In one instance, the line manager asked HR to randomly pick staffer of the department to win a dinner for two in town. The line managers said this action may have moved the needle of the survey participation rate somewhat. Especially for temporary employees, who are not bound to the department for the long term and may therefore not perceive and receive the same benefits in completing the survey as the permanent employees.

The third sub-theme in the preparation phase was *reminding employees* of what had been achieved in previous intervention cycles when preparing and motivating them for participation in the intervention. The line managers who did this, stated it boosted the employees' motivation for participating in the forthcoming intervention activities because it conveyed how participation would likely result in tangible improvements to their work environment – as their track-record could testify.

In the screening phase we identified three sub-themes. The first was *arranging preparatory meeting to explain survey and intervention* wherein employees that needed additional explanation of the concepts of the intervention and the questions of the survey could ask questions of and receive answers from the line manager. This action was reportedly impactful for getting the temporary staff on board with the organizational intervention, especially in terms of completing the survey. The line managers elaborated that this was important for the temporary staff because they are contracted for a short time but also because quite a few were from countries wherein stating your opinion about the workplace is unusual. Thus, they needed guidance in getting acclimated to the employee participation that the organizational intervention encouraged.

The second sub-theme of the screening phase was *persuading employees individually* to complete the survey and increase the survey participation rate by either seeking the office of each employee or by bringing it up at lunch. This line of action was reportedly effective in elevating the survey participation rate as it gave the employees an opportunity to more privately ask questions and raise concerns to the line manager, which the line manager could address then and there. The line managers also reported that this was a time-consuming endeavor.

The third sub-theme of the screening phase was *involving the safety representative* by having the safety representative front the intervention and motivate the employees for participation in the intervention activities. According to the line managers, this was an efficient way to have the intervention not appear as just a top-down directive – citing a concern that the employees would react negatively and not be motivated for the intervention if it appeared to be a pure top-down initiative.

We identified three sub-themes of driving proactive behaviors in the action planning phase. The first sub-theme was about *making meetings compulsory* to make potentially indifferent employees participate in developing the action plans. The line managers engaging in this action said it made more employees participate at the survey feedback- and action planning meeting because they had to show up and that it was helpful in signaling the meeting's importance.

The second sub-theme was about *speaking English at meetings* whenever there were employees attending that did not understand Norwegian, to enable them to participate and speak at the various meetings of the intervention. The line managers reported that this action presented a dilemma as it on the one hand enabled the employees that did not speak Norwegian to participate at the survey feedback- and action planning meeting, but that it on the other hand made employees who primarily spoke Norwegian participate and involve themselves less due to uncertainty in their English-speaking capabilities.

The third identified sub-theme of the screening phase was about *negotiating action plans* with the employees to develop action plans that the line manager believed were realistic to successfully implement. This negotiation took place either at the end of the action planning meeting or after the action planning meeting at a follow-up meeting. Some line managers also created workgroups after the action planning meeting with the task to make the action plans more realistic to implement. The line managers negotiated adjustments, additions, or subtractions to the action plans with the employees. The line managers typically reported that concreteness was an important criterion for whether they believed the action plans would be successfully implemented. Buying bike racks or arranging social events are instances of what these line managers thought were concrete enough action plans, whereas action plans consisting of "general ideas" of what to improve or conserve (e.g., improving/conserving the social community) they believed were not. A second criterion of what line managers believed

made action plans realistic was whether the action plans' implementation depended on actors inside or outside the department. The line managers felt the action plans would most likely be successfully implemented if they could be implemented by members of the department (e.g., the line manager or other employees) and not if, for instance, the action plans' implementation depended on senior management to change practices (e.g., in recruitment).

In the implementation phase, one sub-theme was identified: *delegating implementation of action plans* to employees that were able to realistically implement the action plans. In the pursuit of successfully implementing the action plans, some line managers evaluated the match between the content of the action plans and who in the department that would most likely be able to implement the action plans. Typically, action plans that involved budgetary concerns, the line manager or other in the leader group were given the responsibility to implement. Action plans that required planning and arranging (e.g., social events) to implement were often delegated to administrative staffers or other employees, while the line manager monitored that the action plans were implemented.

In the evaluation phase, one sub-theme was identified: *evaluating action plans with employees* to ascertain their effect, whether help was needed to implement action plans, and to potentially make changes that would improve upon the implemented action plans. The line managers that acted this way did not find completing Factsheet II with the safety representative enough to properly evaluate the action plans' effect. They wanted direct feedback from the employees about whether the implemented action plans had the intended effect to evaluate whether adjustments were needed, and to find out why some action plans were not yet implemented and what might be done to make that happen.

Individual differences in the line managers' alignment

The propensity for line managers to engage in *driving proactive behaviors* appeared to be tied with individual differences in how they managed their middle-levelness. To ascertain this question, we analyzed the line managers' reported motivations in relation to the organizational intervention. All line managers stated a good work environment is important, but there were differences in their alignment with the intervention. Most line managers, fifteen, described being motivated to implement the organizational intervention as senior management intended. Of these fifteen line managers, ten tended to engage in *driving proactive work behaviors*. In line with Gjerde and Alvesson (2020), this suggests they aligned with senior management and the intervention, and that this alignment preceded their *driving proactive behaviors*. They did not, however, explicitly report their alignment was motivated by senior managements' expectations. Instead they stated it was motivated by believing the intervention was, or became through their feedback, a valid tool for developing or maintaining the work environment, which suggests line managers may manage their middle-levelness by aligning with an intervention and implement it as senior management intend while having the employees' interests in mind. To illustrate, a line manager that engaged in the *driving proactive behavior* of *involving the safety representative* to implement the intervention activities stated:

I really support what the ARK-process establishes; that it is a continual process to work on the work environment. (...) [I was motivated to implement the ARK-process], as I think it is important. This is what it communicates being, but I agree with it: To identify things to improve if there is anything relevant (...) and to figure out how to maintain what works well. [11LM].

The line managers who tended not to engage in *driving proactive behaviors* can be categorized into two groups and one outlier. The first group consisted of five line managers who aligned with the intervention, but strictly followed the instructions and recommendations

of senior management. The second group of line managers consisted of four line managers that not only did not implement the intervention as senior management intended, they also acted in ways contrary to recommendations. They downplayed the intervention's importance and validity when discussing it with their employees, facilitated an action plan development detached from the survey, and/or chose not to monitor the action plans' implementation. Although it may have been implicit, these line managers did not state their dealignment with the intervention was motivated by employee expectations or a prioritization of the employees' interests above that of the interventions' implementation, as might have been expected (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020; Mintzberg, 1998). Rather, their rationale for these behaviors was a belief the intervention was invalid for developing their work environment (i.e., too cumbersome, unnecessary, poor survey, and/or action plans unable to target senior management practices). These line managers managed their middle-levelness by not aligning with the intervention because the intervention was perceived to be invalid. To illustrate, a line manager who detached the action plan development from the survey and chose not to monitor the action plans' implementation said:

So much time and energy were spent to introduce us to the ARK-process that I began thinking: 'How many FTEs are spent on this?' It was simply demotivating for the work environment survey. I thought: 'This cannot be!' Because it is very important the survey is good. More than spending a lot of time making commercials for it. [12LM]

As an outlier, a line manager said the motivation for conducting the intervention was to boost one's ego by showing senior management that action plans had been developed.

Discussion

Using the individual-motivational model of proactive work (Parker *et al.*, 2010; Parker and Bindl, 2016) and Gjerde and Alvesson's (2020) notion of line managers' middle-

levelness, this study adds knowledge about line managers' effect on the intervention process (Nielsen, 2017). Prior research has found disparate behaviors line managers may engage in during organizational interventions (e.g., Biron *et al.*, 2010; Yulita *et al.*, 2017). This study adds driving proactive behaviors as a concept line managers may engage in to drive and implement an organizational intervention. The sub-themes of driving proactive behaviors identified in this paper (i.e., negotiating with management and HR, creating competition, reminding employees, arranging preparatory meeting to explain survey and intervention, persuading employees individually, involving the safety representative, making meetings compulsory, speaking English at meetings, negotiating action plans, delegating implementation of action plans, and evaluating action plans with employees), lines up with previous findings of behaviors that participates in successfully implementing organizational interventions (e.g., Sørensen and Holman, 2014; Yulita *et al.*, 2017).

This study also adds that line managers' alignment or dealignment with the organizational intervention to manage their middle-levelness (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020) helps answer why line managers may engage in proactive work behaviors to implement an organizational intervention. As expected, line managers that aligned with the intervention tended to engage in driving proactive behaviors. To successfully implement organizational interventions, it therefore seems beneficial that line managers manage their middle-levelness by aligning with the intervention. Line managers that did not align with the intervention tended not to engage in driving proactive behaviors. They even tended to engage in behaviors contrary to recommendations. However, the line managers' alignment with the organizational intervention appeared to primarily be tied with their assessment of the intervention's validity for developing their work environment. Line managers finding the intervention valid had a proclivity to align with the intervention and to engage in driving proactive behaviors. Line managers finding the intervention invalid had a proclivity to not align with the intervention

and to engage in behaviors opposed to recommendations. Line managers who do not align with the intervention may nevertheless give insight into sub-optimal aspects of intervention activities that can be improved. Be it, for example, the survey or the action plan development and implementation.

Research suggests that job autonomy (Biron, 2018; Ohly and Scmitt, 2016), senior management leadership and support (Den Hartog and Belschak, 2016; Nielsen *et al.*, 2017), and downsizings and mergers (Nielsen *et al.*, 2010) influence line managers' proactive work behaviors. This paper adds the line managers' middle-levelness to the list of contextual factors affecting their actions during organizational interventions. Their middle-levelness, however, is not a contextual factor that varies across different line managers; it is a definitional aspect of the line managers' role (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020). The choice to align with an intervention, or not, will always be present for line managers. The findings suggest line managers may fruitfully consider the ramifications their management of their middle-levelness have for the intervention process, and by extension the consequences for work environment conservation or improvement. It may also be crucial that senior management and HR are aware how line managers' middle-levelness and associated evaluations of an intervention's validity impact their tendency to implement an organizational intervention as they recommend. Senior management and HR should therefore take care to allocate sufficient time and quality in the preparation phase to ensure all actors of an organizational intervention generate a shared understanding (Nielsen, 2017) of the intervention and its validity. Part of that process should include listening to and integrating line managers' insights about the intervention's validity.

Limitations

An important limitation of this study researches one organizational intervention in one organization. The insights provided in this paper may therefore have limited applicability for other organizations and other interventions. However, organizational interventions have not only proved to be important in academia but also in other settings, for instance blue collar workplaces (Nielsen *et al.* 2014). Academic institutions can also be considered somewhat of an organizational outlier compared to many other workplaces (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020). Heads of department in academia are seldom in it to advance their careers in management (Sims, 2003), which may affect how they tend to manage their middle-levelness. Not being as motivated to achieve a higher position in the hierarchy is likely to influence their tendency to align with any senior management plan, including organizational interventions. However, most line managers did align with the intervention of this study. This paper nonetheless brings novelty by investigating line managers' middle-levelness that exist in other work settings as well.

Conclusion

This study shows line managers engaged in proactive work behaviors, driving proactive behaviors, to implement an organizational intervention. Line managers' alignment or dealignment with organizational interventions to manage their middle-levelness affected their proactive work behaviors. Line managers aligning with the intervention tended to engage in driving proactive behaviors that implemented the intervention, whereas line managers who did not align with the intervention tended not to, and even acted opposite of recommendations. Thus, the findings indicate line manager alignment with the intervention is most fruitful for successfully implementing organizational interventions. The line managers' assessment of the intervention's validity for developing the work environment appeared to be a crucial factor in managing their middle-levelness. The findings suggest that both practitioners (senior management, HR, line managers) and researchers consider how line

managers' proactive work behaviors help implement organizational interventions, and how line managers' middle-levelness and its management influences the intervention process.

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