

MASTER THESIS

# PUTTING STRATEGY INTO PRACTICE: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF MIDDLE MANAGERS' LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOR

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## Abstract

Many organizations are facing difficulties in implementing their strategy, or in other words, in putting their strategy into practice. It turns out that organizations realize only 60 percent of their strategies' potential because of the poor execution of developed plans for strategic change (Mankins & Steele, 2005). Formulating strategy is difficult. Making strategy work - executing or implementing it throughout the organization - is even more difficult. Currently, we keep failing to fill in our gap in our knowledge of what implementation exactly means in terms of micro detail of the agency involved. As such, there is a need for a deeper understanding of the micro-level characteristics of strategy implementation. This study provides this deeper understanding by identifying which behaviors middle managers - aggregate practioners - should actually engage in order to put strategy into practice. Accordingly, the following research question is formulated: *Which leadership behaviors should middle managers engage in order to put strategy into practice?*

The theoretical part explains the theoretical concepts of the research question. In summary, this thesis provides relevant literature about the Strategy as Practice (SAP) approach, which is taken as the base for this study. This research approach is concerned with the doing of strategy: who does it, what they do, how they do it, and what implications this has for implementing strategy. This study therefore focuses on the actual *doing* of middle managers - aggregate strategy practioners -, it is about their behavior and how this influences the practice of strategy. Behaviors can be divided into four categories: task-oriented, relation-oriented, change-oriented and passive leadership. For all categorical behaviors, it is examined which behaviors are essential when putting strategy into practice.

In order to obtain empirical results, an exploratory case study was conducted in which the qualitative research method was adopted. Fifteen semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted among five different research groups. These research groups concerned middle managers and employees from all clusters within one business unit.

In this research, a large number of leadership behaviors have been identified. It is noted that not necessarily one category of leadership behavior emerges as the most effective category. Effective behaviors in the implementation process therefore consist of a mix of task-, relation-

and change-oriented behaviors. In this, both empirical and theoretical results show that passive behaviors do not support the implementation process. The empirical results show that there are more desired leadership behaviors than recognized in literature as effective behaviors in the strategy implementation process. By this, our knowledge of how aggregate practitioners - middle managers - should behave in relation to the implementation of strategy is extended. However, causal relationships should be established in future research.

The theoretical relevance of this research is that existing SAP research will be extended since micro-level characteristics of strategy implementation are identified in this study. An in-depth understanding of which leadership behaviors middle managers should engage to put strategy into practice is provided. This research therefore reduces the gap in our knowledge of what implementation exactly means in terms of micro detail of the agency involved. Also, the identified leadership behaviors can be utilized for future research. To be specific, future researchers can deductively test the behaviors resulting from this thesis. The practical relevance is that the identified leadership behaviors in this study can serve as a frame of reference for practitioners and organizations to put strategy into practice.

**Keywords** – *strategy implementation, strategy as practice (SAP), leadership behavior, middle management*

## Table of contents

1 Introduction.....	7
1.1 Research.....	7
1.2 Origin of the research.....	10
1.3 Key concepts in this research .....	11
2 Literature review .....	12
2.1 Strategic as Practice (SAP) .....	12
2.2 Middle managers and leadership – <i>aggregate practioners</i> .....	14
2.3 Leadership behavior – <i>praxis</i> .....	16
2.3.1 Task-oriented behaviors .....	17
2.3.2 Relation-oriented behaviors .....	18
2.3.3 Change-oriented behaviors.....	20
2.3.4 Passive behaviors .....	21
2.4 The strategy implementation process – <i>put strategy into practice</i> .....	21
2.5 Conceptual model.....	23
3 Methodology .....	25
3.1 Research design .....	25
3.2 Units of analysis.....	25
3.3 Case description.....	26
3.4 Data collection .....	26
3.5 Data analysis .....	28
4 Results .....	30
4.1 Task-oriented behaviors .....	30
4.2 Relation-oriented behaviors .....	35
4.3 Change-oriented behavior.....	42
4.4 Passive behaviors.....	45
4.5 Barriers strategy implementation .....	45
5 Discussion and conclusion.....	55
5.1 Discussion .....	55
5.1.1 Task-oriented behaviors .....	55
5.1.2 Relation-oriented behaviors .....	58
5.1.3 Change-oriented behaviors.....	59
5.1.4 Passive behaviors .....	61

5.1.5 Barriers strategy implementation.....	61
5.2 Answer to the research question .....	64
5.3 Practical recommendations.....	65
5.4 Limitations .....	68
5.4.1 Internal validity .....	68
5.4.2 External validity and representativeness.....	69
5.4.3 Reliability.....	71
5.5 Contributions.....	72
References.....	74
Appendix 1: Organization chart.....	82
Appendix 2: Interview protocol.....	83
Appendix 3: Questionnaire.....	84
Interview with middle managers.....	84
Interview with employees .....	87
Appendix 4: Coding tree.....	90

## 1 Introduction

In this chapter, an introduction is given by describing the research framework. Firstly, the research is specified, and the second section is about the origin of the research.

### 1.1 Research

Effective strategy implementation is a key requirement for superior business performance. Management Guru Morris Chang (1999) once said: “Without strategy, execution is aimless. Without execution, strategy is useless”. For the past two decades, strategy formulation has been widely regarded as the most important component of the strategic management process – more important than strategy implementation. However, in recent studies the importance of effective strategy implementation is recognized as a more powerful source of competitive advantage (Gębczyńska, 2016; Hess, Matt, Benlian, & Wiesböck, 2016; Hyväri, 2016). Even though organizations have the right strategy in place, firm performance suffers because of poor execution. Once people walk out of the boardroom, firms experience a shortfall in execution of developed plans for strategic change (Tawse, Patrick, & Vera, 2019). It has been found that organizations realize only 60 percent of their strategies’ potential, which means 40 percent of strategic goals are not achieved (Mankins & Steele, 2005). In addition, there is increasingly recognition that most important problems in the field of strategic management are related to strategy implementation, rather than in strategy formulation (Khouly, AbdelDayem, & Saleh, 2017).

Studies highlight the importance of middle management in strategy implementation and specifically the connection with leadership in order to ensure successful implementation (Floyd & Woolridge, 1994; Rossouw, 2006). Leadership appears to be a key function in strategy execution (Khouly et al., 2017; Martin, 2017). To be successful in strategy implementation, top managers and specifically middle managers, must bear primary responsibility for strategy formulation and more important, implementation of the strategy. Their engagement in the implementation process is crucial (Hrebiniak, 2006). Although there is significant research which supports the importance of involvement by managers at all levels in the implementation process (Greer, Lusch & Hitt, 2017), research in strategy is mostly concerned with strategy as that which organizations have, rather than strategy as that which top managers and other business leaders

do (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009). In other words, the activity of developing and implementing the strategy of organizations by the people concerned with actually doing it has become marginalized. Strategy as Practice (SAP) reverses this trend by analyzing what people, and especially not only top managers but also middle managers, do in relation to the development and implementation of strategy in organizations (Vaara, 2015). Therefore, SAP is taken as the base of this research.

SAP as a research topic is concerned with the doing of strategy: who does it, what they do, how they do it, what they use, and what implications this has for shaping and implementing strategy (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009). As such, this study focuses on the actual *doing* of strategy practioners, it is about their behavior and the actions they take to direct activities of a group towards a shared goal. In this study, strategy practioners are identified as middle managers. From a managerial perspective, SAP is about finding ways to give a particular direction to organizational activity. It is hard to see practice as 'successful' unless it somehow achieves the desired goal (Fenton & Langley, 2011). Many scholars of strategy are interested in understanding how this direction is achieved, maintained or disrupted. However, we keep failing to fill in our gap in our knowledge of what implementation exactly means in terms of micro detail of the agency involved (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). As such, there is a need for a deeper understanding of the micro-level characteristics of strategy implementation. This study provides this deeper understanding by identifying which leadership behaviors middle managers - aggregate practioners - should actually engage in order to put strategy into practice. Reducing the gap in our knowledge of what strategy implementation exactly means in terms of micro detail of the agency involved is a valuable addition to existing SAP research (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). This research will therefore answer the calls from the SAP perspective (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 2003; Vaara & Whittington, 2012).

In summarize, strategy implementation is an important component of the strategic management process. Moreover, organizations realize only 60 percent of their strategies' potential because firms experience a shortfall in execution of developed plans for strategic change. Middle management and leadership are identified as crucial factors to solve this problem. Therefore, and in order to contribute to existing SAP research, this study identifies which

leadership behaviors (praxis) middle managers (strategy practioners) should engage in order to put strategy into practice. Accordingly, the following research question is formulated:

*Which leadership behaviors should middle managers engage in order to put strategy into practice?*

The research question is divided into sub-questions to focus on the main aim and to provide the research a consistent structure:

- Which task-oriented leadership behaviors of middle managers will put strategy into practice?
- Which relation-oriented leadership behaviors of middle managers will put strategy into practice?
- Which change-oriented leadership behaviors of middle managers will put strategy into practice?
- Which passive leadership behaviors of middle managers will put strategy into practice?
- What are barriers to the successful implementation of strategy?

This study investigates new ways to put strategy into practice by focusing specifically on one component of leadership, namely leadership behavior, singling out X as a case in point.

The theoretical relevance of this research is that existing SAP research will be extended since micro-level characteristics of strategy implementation are identified in this study. An in-depth understanding of which leadership behaviors middle managers should engage to put strategy into practice is provided. This research therefore reduces the gap in our knowledge of what implementation exactly means in terms of micro detail of the agency involved. Also, the identified leadership behaviors can be utilized for future research. To be specific, future researchers can deductively test the behaviors resulting from this thesis. Additionally, this study distinct from traditional studies by providing insight in how strategy should be implemented by middle managers. This study therefore extends the traditional perspective which attributes strategy only to senior management and therefore neglects the influence of middle management on strategy. Lastly, this study also provided insight into the role of middle management in a

specific context, namely from the perspective of an organization of engineers and technicians (Balogun & Johnson, 2005). Existing theories can therefore be extended with these findings. The practical relevance of this research is that organizations and people with a leading role within organizations can learn from the results of this study. The identified leadership behaviors in this study can serve as a frame of reference for practitioners and organizations to successfully implement strategy, or in other words, to put strategy into practice.

## 1.2 Origin of the research

Many organizations are facing difficulties in implementing their strategy, or in other words, in putting their strategy into practice. As mentioned before, it turns out that organizations realize only 60 percent of their strategies' potential because of the poor execution of developed plans for strategic change. Formulating strategy is difficult. Making strategy work - executing or implementing it throughout the organization - is even more difficult. Unfortunately, most managers know far more about developing strategy than they do about executing it. It is important to address this problem, since successful strategy implementation is essential for competitive advantage and superior business performance.

Currently, we keep failing to fill in our gap in our knowledge of what implementation exactly means in terms of micro detail of the agency involved. As such, there is a need for a deeper understanding of the micro-level characteristics of strategy implementation. This study provides this deeper understanding by identifying which behaviors middle managers - aggregate practitioners - should actually engage in order to put strategy into practice.

The case of this study, X, is a perfect example of an organization which is facing difficulties in implementing their strategy. At this organization, middle managers seem to be unable to translate the strategy to the work floor. Employees do not know how they can contribute to the greater whole, they have questions like: "what is expected of me?" and "how can I contribute?". Management, specifically the middle management, is not able to steer people and activities in the right direction. Practice is not aligned with the strategy of the organization. Resulting in strategies that are not implemented successfully. X is very strong in making and analyzing plans, though, it fails in actual implementation. Employees at X often feel good about making long to-do lists, but end up keep analyzing and re-overthinking and not implementing them.

This research is specifically focusing on the successful implementation of the 'X strategy' of X. Strategic objectives of the X strategy are divided over five areas: financial, home market, export market, portfolio and organization & behavior. These long-term objectives are translated into a set of short-term objectives. At X, these short-term goals are called Business Challenges. These Business Challenges are divided over three strategic topics: growth, competitiveness and people. In order to reach the long-term objectives, organizational activities should be in line with the defined Business Challenges. Business Challenges for 2019 were: manage the growth, digital transformation, boost operational performance, boost customer service and boost people engagement. Although this study examines how a specific strategy can be put into practice, the results of this study can be used by other organizations for the implementation of their strategy as well. To implement strategy, it does not specifically matter which strategy has to be implemented. It is about the principle of putting a strategy into practice. However, for the executability of the research it is important to make a demarcation within the case study.

### 1.3 Key concepts in this research

- Leadership

A set of behavior that enforces the people to formulate the organizational goals and then motivate them to jointly contribute in order to achieve organization's goals (Azhar, Ikram, Rashid, & Saqib, 2013).

- Leadership behavior

A set of actions, taken by individuals in a position of power and influence, to direct activities of a group toward a shared goal (Ireland & Hitt, 1999; O'Reilly et al., 2010; Rowe, 2002).

- Middle managers

The intermediate management of a hierarchical organization that is subordinate to the executive management and responsible for at least two lower levels of junior staff (Teulier & Rouleau, 2013).

- Strategy implementation

The process of converting the formulated strategy into organizational action in order to reach strategic goals and objectives of the organization (Kaplan & Norton, 2004).

## 2 Literature review

This chapter describes the theoretical foundation of the research. First, relevant literature is provided about the Strategy as Practice (SAP) approach. Then, literature about middle managers – aggregate strategy practioners - and leadership within the context of strategy implementation is discussed in order to highlight its relevance to the research problem in this study. After this, literature about leadership behavior, in other words *the actual doing* of strategy practioners – praxis -, is provided. Finally, literature about the strategy implementation process is provided.

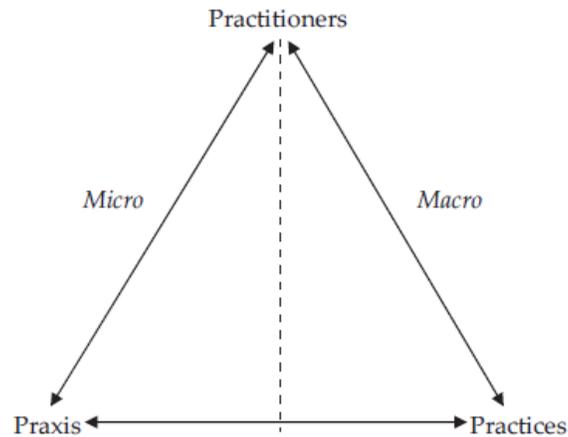
### 2.1 Strategic as Practice (SAP)

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of strategy was introduced in business and organizational science. Decades of intensive research has created a vast amount of scientific publications and practical guidelines about strategic management processes (Mintzberg, 1990; Mintzberg, 1998). Surprisingly, almost all strategic management concepts are dominated by the understanding of strategy as a rational and top down formal planning process. This traditional perspective of strategy has recently drawn major criticism from scholars and practitioners as well (Farjoun, 2002). The traditional perspective focuses on how strategies should be formulated, rather than how strategies should be implemented. It is about formal planning, rational resource assignment and top down led action to achieve certain goals. This is reflected in popular strategy frameworks such as Porter’s five forces analysis and the SWOT framework (Johnson, Scholes, & Whittington, 2008; Nag, Hambrick, & Chen, 2007).

In recent years, SAP has emerged as a distinctive approach for studying strategic management, strategy-making, strategizing, strategic decision-making and strategy work (Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007; Johnson, Langley, Melin, & Whittington, 2007; Whittington, 1996). SAP has taken issue with the more traditional view of strategy as a property of organizations. SAP has argued that strategy should be thought of as something that people *do* that can and should be studied through the lens of theories and practice. In contrast to the traditional view of strategy, SAP considers the wider context of strategy development and implementation (Jarzabkowski, 2004; Whittington, 2006). From a SAP perspective, strategy can be defined as ‘a situated, socially accomplished activity, while strategizing comprises those

actions, interactions and negotiations of multiple actors and the situated practices that they draw upon in accomplishing that activity' (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007, 7-8).

As shown in Figure 1, SAP can be described in terms of reciprocal relationships spanning micro and macro levels of organizations between the three key elements which are the three building blocks that serve as an integrative framework for Strategy Practice: practioners, practices and praxis (Whittington, 2006).



**Figure 1.** Reciprocal relationships in Strategy as Practice (Whittington, 2006)

The first element, practitioners, covers all actors who are actively involved in strategy formulation and execution. By this, the traditional perspective is extended, which attributes strategy to senior management and therefore neglects the influence of middle management and functional key players on strategy. SAP research makes a distinction between individual and aggregate strategy practioners. Some identify strategy practioners as individuals, other studies identify practioners as an aggregate actor, a class of actor, such as 'top management', 'middle management', 'engineering' and so forth (Jarzobkowski & Spee, 2009). The second element, practices, refers to social structure such as shared routine, traditions, norms and rules which are continuously created, changed and replaced in praxis. Practices are organization specific, embodied in routines, operating procedures and cultures that shape local modes of strategizing (Whittington, 2006). Lastly, praxis, is about all activities that are related to strategy formulation and execution. What practioners *actually do* is strategy praxis (Johnson et al., 2007; Whittington, 2006). In this sense, strategy praxis is also about the behaviors of practioners, about their *actual doing*. SAP research

focuses on the micro-level characteristics of organizational strategy and strategizing (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Johnson et al., 2007; Whittington, 2006). It is about analyzing what people do in relation to the development and implementation of strategy in organizations. As a result, current issues in strategy that require a more micro level of understanding can be discovered.

The traditional perspective on strategy assumes that implementation of strategy deals with the application of a plan, involving little reflexive human agency. This view is discredited by various empirical and conceptual developments (Mintzberg, 1990; Hart, 1992), while still failing to fill in the gap in our knowledge of what implementation exactly means in terms of the micro detail of the agency involved. Descriptions of what people *should do* when they implement strategy do not agree with the emerging evidence of what they *actually do* (Jarzabkowski, 2004). This suggests a need for empirical and theoretical investigations of how and where strategizing and organizing is actually done (Whittington, 2003) which has given rise to the Strategy as Practice (SAP) approach (Whittington, 1996; Jarzabkowski, 2005). SAP is about finding ways to instill a particular direction to organizational activity. In other words, it is about finding ways to steer people in the right direction, so that activities contribute to the implementation of the strategy of an organization (Sillince & Mueller, 2007). Lastly, the central research interest of SAP is about who strategists are, what they do and why, and how that is influential for the practice of strategy.

In the last decade, there has been an increasing body of research in the SAP field. Some research studies have focused on individual strategy practioners and their perspectives on organizational issues (Bourque & Johnson, 2008; Hodgkinson & Clarke, 2007; Mantere, 2008). Other studies have centered on aggregate practioners, such as middle managers (Rouleau & Balagun, 2011; Teulier & Rouleau, 2013). Further, SAP scholars have developed an interest in studying strategy practioners and their practices, emotions, activities and behaviors (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009).

## 2.2 Middle managers and leadership – aggregate practioners

As mentioned, organizations realize only 60 percent of their strategies' potential, which means 40 percent of strategic goals are not achieved (Mankins & Steele, 2005). Even though organizations have the right strategy in place, strategic goals are not achieved because of poor execution. Leadership and middle managers are identified in literature as crucial factors in the

strategy implementation process (Goleman, 2000; Huy, 2011; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; Teulier & Rouleau, 2013). Another study that highlights the importance of middle management in strategy implementation and specifically the connection with leadership in order to ensure successful implementation, is the study of Rossouw (2006). In addition, Floyd and Woolridge (1994) stated that middle managers contribute greatly to strategy implementation by translating organizational strategies into operational actions through strong leadership.

Middle managers are the intermediate management of a hierarchical organization that is subordinate to the executive management and responsible for at least two lower levels of junior staff (Teulier & Rouleau, 2013). As such, middle managers have a unique position within organizations enabling them to influence organization's strategic activities (Salih & Doll, 2013). Because of their structural position, middle managers can be seen as a channel for the translation of top management strategic intents as well as an important force for managing the daily organizational operations. They play an important role in the communication chain between top and bottom. Middle managers have a leading role within organizations and are responsible for "getting things done" by translating organizational goals into action (Neilson, Martin, & Powers, 2008).

In the past 30 years, leadership has come to be viewed as a critical aspect of organizational success (Daft, 2014; Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Koene, Vogelaar, & Soeters, 2002). Leadership is widely described as one of the key drivers of effective strategy implementation (Hebrinak, 2005; Jooste & Fourie, 2009; Kaplan & Norton, 2004; Pearce & Robinson, 2007; Ulrich, Zenger & Smallwood, 1999). It has been found to have a significant impact on organization-wide outcomes, such as the implementation of strategic change of a large multinational company. Leaders create a sense of purpose and direction, which guides strategy formulation and implementation within the firm (Daft, 2014). Strong leaders will be able to steer people in the right direction, so that activities contribute to the implementation of the organization's strategy. Over the last years, organizations and their environments became increasingly complex and dynamic. As a result, leaders are forced to navigate through these complexities and develop and implement strategies that will allow their organizations to be successful.

The influence of leadership is most visible when an organization changes its strategy. However, adopting a new strategic initiative is distinct from implementing it (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000). Researchers found that CEOs are only able to implement change throughout the entire organization when leaders at lower hierarchical levels are supporting the change. Moreover, it can be stated that when a senior leader wants to affect organizational performance, it requires managers and employees at lower levels support the new strategy as well (House & Aditya, 1997; O'Reilly, Caldwell, Chatman, Lapid, & Self, 2010; Thomas, 1988; Wasserman, Anand, & Nohria, 2001). Since leadership is a broad research field, this study focuses on specifically one component of leadership, namely leadership behavior.

### 2.3 Leadership behavior – *praxis*

Many researchers define leadership as a set of behaviors that will steer people in the right direction so that a strategic initiative will be implemented (Ireland & Hitt, 1999; O'Reilly et al., 2010; Rowe, 2001). The definition of Azhar et al. (2013) highlights the importance of leadership behavior as a component of leadership as well: "leadership can be defined as a set of behavior that enforces the people to formulate the organizational goals and then motivate them to jointly contribute in order to achieve organization's goals". In this study, the definition of Azhar et al. (2013), Ireland and Hitt (1999), O'Reilly et al. (2010) and Rowe (2001) is taken as the base. Moreover, although the three defined leadership styles in literature – transformational, transactional, and Laissez-faire - are a good classification for different leaders, this study is focusing on leadership behavior since effective leadership often requires switching between styles (Pasmore, Lafferty, & Spencer, 2009). Some behaviors cannot be classified to one of the styles and this research assumes that these styles are static in nature. The SAP perspective, which is central in this study, is focusing on the behaviors of strategy practioners as well. SAP is about analyzing what people *do* in relation to the development and implementation of strategy in organizations. Given the formulated definitions of leadership in literature, the SAP perspective which is central in this study, and the fact that leadership styles are static in nature, leadership behavior is taken as the base of this research.

Behavioral theories are theories wherein "leaders exhibit behaviors and leadership styles in relations to the situation and follower's needs" (Rilling & Jordan, 2007, p. 195). Within the

behavioral research one consistent theme is that behaviors can fit into a few categories: task-oriented, relation-oriented, change-oriented and passive leadership (Derue, Nahrgang, Wellman & Humprey, 2011; Yukl, Gordon & Taber, 2002). Other researchers made somewhat the same distinction. In the study of Reddin (1970) leadership behavior is distinguished into task-oriented and relationship-oriented behavior. Blake and Mouton (1964) used the terms 'concern for production' and 'concern for people' to distinguish leadership behavior and Ekvall and Arvonen (1991) called for a distinction between 'employee-centered', 'production-centered' and 'change-centered' leadership behavior. Many researchers used the four above mentioned categories to arrange leader behaviors. However, many studies only focus on a single behavioral perspective. Judge, Piccolo and Ilies (2004) for example, focused on initiating structure and consideration (task-oriented and relational-oriented), while Judge and Piccolo (2004) focused only on transformational leadership (change-oriented). It is argued that it is important to not only focus on one of the categories, but to take the categories together and to see how these categories influence the strategy implementation process. Therefore, in this study the effect of all four categories of leadership behavior on the strategy implementation process is studied.

### 2.3.1 Task-oriented behaviors

The task-oriented behaviors model is a classic and widely used model concerning leadership behavior. This model was first developed by Blake and Mouton in 1964 and was extensively studied in later years (Day & Antonakis, 2012). The primary purpose of task-oriented behaviors is to ensure that people, equipment, and other resources are used in an efficient way to accomplish the desired goal. It is about the organization of work, the distribution of tasks and definition of responsibilities. The task-oriented behaviors of a leader are related to the structure, design and control of the organization, establishing routines for achieving organizational goals (Bass & Stogdill, 1990) and developing and formulating organizational changes (Battilana, Gilmartin, Sengul, Pache, & Alexander, 2010). Components of this behavior include planning and organizing work-unit activities, monitoring work-unit operations, clarifying roles and objectives, setting goals and deadlines to ensure tasks get completed and informing (Bass & Stogdill, 1990; Fey, Adaeva, & Vitkovskaia, 2001; Taberner, Chambel, Curral, & Arana, 2009; Yukl, 2012).

An essential task-oriented behavior of middle managers that is desired when implementing a strategy is implementing and maintaining change. It is the task of the middle manager to develop effective plans for the implementation and to monitor the implementation. It is important as well to evaluate the implementation (Antonakis & House, 2014; Higgs & Rowland, 2005). Middle managers are expected to fulfil this task because of their unique position in the organization, which is, as mentioned before, between the strategic and operational level of the organization. To conclude, according to literature, an essential task, and therefore leadership behavior, is to implement plans, strategy and changes (Huy, 2002; Balogun & Johnson, 2004).

Furthermore, according to Battilana et al. (2010), leaders need to clarify objectives to all members of the organization. Regardless of their position in the organization's hierarchy, everyone must know and understand the objectives of the organization. As such, confusion about strategic objectives will be avoided, which will positively affect the implementation of strategy. Finally, it is important to set clear, specific and challenging goals in order to ensure the successful implementation of strategy (Battilana et al., 2010). Strategic objectives need to be translated into operational implementation sub-objectives (Reid, 1989), be linked to departmental and individual goals (Kaplan & Norton, 2004), and be measurable (Reid, 1989).

### 2.3.2 Relation-oriented behaviors

The relation-oriented behavior of a leader fosters interaction between employees within the organization and the policy of fair treatment of all employees. Besides, it contributes to the development of a good social climate (Bass, 1999). The behavior of relation-oriented leaders is essential to implement strategy because these leaders are able to motivate their employees to do so (Battilana et al., 2010). Relation-oriented behaviors are used by leaders to enhance member skills, the leader-member relationship, identification with work and the organization, and commitment to the mission (Yukl et al., 2002). Relation-oriented leaders are leaders who show respect, affective commitment and loyalty. Components of relations-oriented behaviors include supporting, recognizing, empowering, and developing. Tabernero et al. (2009) claim that relation-oriented behavior has a strong effect on follower satisfaction, and it generates cohesion between

members of the group. The first priority for a relation-oriented leader is to establish rapport, trust and good communication with subordinates (Fey et al., 2001).

In order to put strategy into practice, an essential relation-oriented behavior is according to literature communication. Communication about the strategy by middle managers is essential. For example, Higgs and Rowland (2005) state that communication and related activities of a leader play an essential role in strategy implementation. These behaviors include defining the basic principles of the strategy and communicating the strategy to the employees (Higgs & Rowland, 2005). Battilana et al. (2010) argue that it is of great importance as well to communicate about the necessity of the change, about the necessity to implement the strategy. When middle managers pay sufficient attention in communicating the strategy, and thus show the need to employees why the change is necessary, middle managers will be able to reduce the confusion and uncertainty of the employees in the implementation process (Battilana et al., 2010). When it comes to communication, managers need to act decisively and with conviction. By this, employees will be convinced that strategy, and the changes that it entails, will bring a positive future for both the organization and the employees (O'Reilly et al., 2010). In addition, Van der Weide and Wilderom (2004) argue that middle managers are well positioned to influence their employees by means of personal interactions.

Additionally, the emotional support of employees is also an important leadership behavior according to Bass and Stogdill (1990). This leadership behavior is also called individualized consideration (Bass & Stogdill, 1990). Managers must be able to show sympathy to their employees (Kavanagh & Ashkanasy, 2006) and take into account whether or not employees are prepared to change (Miller, 2001). Huy (2002) states that managing emotions during radical organizational changes is essential. This in itself demonstrates the essential role that middle management has in change, in implementing a strategy. Another essential leadership behavior is the involvement and integration of employees in the implementation process. This contributes to employees' understanding of the need to implement the strategy and thus contributes to the successful implementation of the strategy (Higgs & Rowland, 2005; Miller, 2001).

Delegating responsibilities to employees, allow participation in decision making, give employees more control over their work are all examples of empowering. According to Yukl

(2012), middle managers need to empower employees in the strategy implementation process. As a result, the motivation and execution performance, self-confidence and self-determination, and willingness to take initiative of employees will increase. All these attitudes and behaviors have a positive impact on strategy implementation.

Another crucial relation-oriented behavior in the implementation process is to challenge employees to continuously develop, learn and innovate, also called intellectual stimulation by Bass and Stogdill (1990). Higgs and Rowland (2005) assume that managers need to facilitate their employees and develop opportunities to challenge them during an organizational change to develop themselves. Lastly, according to Stoker (2006), coaching and developing employees is an important task of the middle management when implementing a strategy. Stoker (2006) states that the middle management should focus more on coaching and developing employees instead of managing results. Despite the fact that this shift in the role of middle managers is occurring, the execution of this role is not yet optimized in practice. Middle managers still focus excessively on managing results, activities and content, rather than on developing and inspiring people and thus on relation-oriented behaviors (Stoker, 2006).

### 2.3.3 Change-oriented behaviors

According to Bass and Stogdill (1990), change-oriented leaders act as agents of change by transforming the behaviors and motives of their employees. These leaders do this by expressing their vision and by making them aware of and believe in the interests of the organization instead of focusing on their own goals (Avolio & Yammarino, 2013; Bass & Stogdill, 1990). A change-oriented leader is a visionary, charismatic and creative leader (Skogstad & Einarsen, 1999). This leader sets new goals and identifies new methods for accomplishing them. Change-oriented behaviors include articulating and inspiring vision, advocating and envisioning change and encouraging innovation (Yukl, 2012). Leaders use change-oriented behaviors to increase innovation, collective learning, and adaption to external changes. Two well-known change-oriented leadership theories are transformational and charismatic leadership.

When implementing a strategy, in the first place, it is important that a leader acts in accordance with the norms and values that reflect the mission and goal of the organization and of the leader (Bass & Stogdill, 1990). This leadership behavior is also called attributed and

behavioral idealized influence (Bass & Stogdill, 1990), which is also called charisma. Articulating values and a positive vision of the future contributes to a more successful implementation of a strategy as well (Gill, 2002; Rouleau, 2005; Seo et al., 2012). By propagating a clear and fascinating vision, the involvement of employees in the implementation process will be increased and they will therefore be more willing to make an effort (Rouleau, 2005). It is an effective way for leaders to build commitment to new strategies and initiatives. When articulating a clear, fascinating vision of what can be attained by the work unit or organization, employees will be more committed. A vision will be more inspiring and motivating if it is relevant to the values, ideals, and needs of followers and is communicated with colorful, emotional language (e.g., vivid imagery, metaphors, stories, symbols, and slogans) (Gill, 2002).

Another essential leadership behavior when implementing strategy is inspiring and motivating employees to achieve goals that seem impossible, also called inspirational motivation (Bass & Stogdill, 1990). Lastly, Gill (2002) states that a leader in the strategy implementation process must be trustworthy. This trustworthiness arises from a leader's honesty and ability to inspire employees to achieve goals. Employees become inspired and motivated when the organizational goal match the needs, values and interests of the employees (Gill, 2002).

#### 2.3.4 Passive behaviors

Lastly, a passive leader is a leader who behaves passively. Meaning he or she reacts only after problems have become serious to take corrective action, and making decisions is avoided at all (Avolio, Bass & Jung, 1999). Passive behaviors include avoiding involvement, avoid making decisions, only reacting to problems if serious, reacting to failure and responding with delay (Avolio et al., 1999; Avolio & Yammarino, 2013). These leadership behaviors also signify the lack or absence of leadership and is the most inactive form of leadership. Passive behaviors are also seen as barriers to the successful implementation of strategies or changes (O'reilly et al., 2010; Van der Weide & Wilderom, 2004).

#### 2.4 The strategy implementation process – *put strategy into practice*

The strategy implementation process is the process of converting the formulated strategy into organizational action, it is about putting strategy into practice in order to reach strategic goals and objectives of the organization. Strategy implementation is an important component of the

Strategic Management process (Martin, 2017). Recent studies acknowledge the importance of strategic plans needing to be turned into action to be of any real value to an organization (Johnson et al., 2011). Moreover, research indicates that the ability to implement a strategy is viewed as considerably more important than strategy formulation (Flood, Dromgoole, Carroll, & Cordon, 2000; Holman, 1999; Kaplan & Norton, 2004).

The strategic management process, as shown in Figure 2, contains of three phases: strategy formulation (create), strategy implementation (action), and strategy performance (achieve goals) (Pearce & Robinson, 2011). Firstly, strategy formulation is about the formal process of deciding which are the best course of action for accomplishing organizational objectives (Johnson et al., 2011). Corporate, business and functional strategies will be formulated. Then, the organization's chosen strategy will be putted into action. Strategy implementation can be described as the translation of a strategy into organizational action in order to achieve strategic goals and objectives (Ehlers & Lazenby, 2004). Strategic performance is the final step of the strategic management process. In this phase, it is evaluated if the organizational objectives are accomplished. Evaluation is needed in order to make sure that the strategy as well as its implementation meets the organizational objectives.



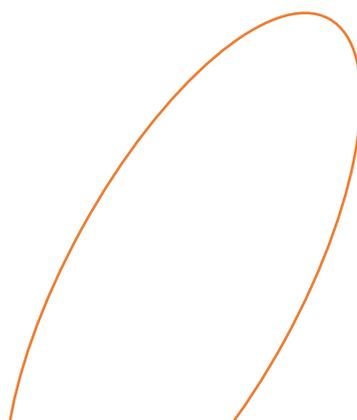
**Figure 2.** The three phases of the Strategic Management Process

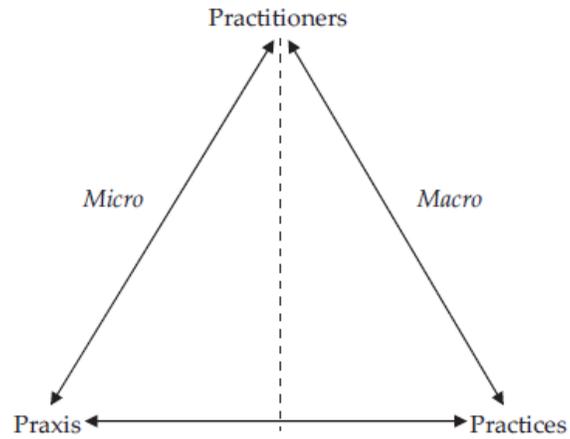
Even though the importance of turning plans into action, many organizations seem to fail in implementing their strategy (Dandira, 2012). Surprisingly, much focus in literature is still on strategy formulation and not enough on implementation (Khouly et al., 2017; Martin, 2017). More research on the implementation of strategies is valuable since the gap between strategy formulation and strategy implementation has been found to have significant impact on organizational performance (Olivier & Schwella, 2018; Overstreet, Hazen, Skipper, & Hanna, 2014;

Tait & Nienaber, 2010). Finding ways to put strategy into practice is essential since this could result in an increase of organizational performance. Even the most excellently formulated strategies will fail if they are not properly implemented. When an organization succeeds in aligning organizational action with the formulated strategy, the formulated strategy will be successfully implemented. As mentioned in previous sections, leadership behavior of middle managers plays a crucial role in this.

## 2.5 Conceptual model

The model of Whittington (2006) is taken as the base for this study. This integrative framework of strategy practice combines three elements. However, practice-oriented studies do not need to combine all three elements of praxis, practices and practioners at the same time (Whittington, 2006). This study is therefore focusing on the two elements which span the micro-levels of organizations, namely practioners and praxis (Figure 3). By focusing on the micro-levels characteristics of strategy it can be examined what aggregate strategy practioners (middle managers) *actual should do* (praxis – their behavior) in order to put strategy into practice. As such, current issues in strategy that require a more micro level of understanding can be discovered. Practices, or in other words the social structure such as shared routine, traditions, norms and rules are not included in this study.





**Figure 3.** Conceptual model based on the model of Whittington (2006)

*For example, based on the theoretical framework it is assumed that when middle managers (aggregate practioners) communicate frequently about strategy (praxis) this will positively affect the implementation of strategy (the practice of strategy).*

## 3 Methodology

In this section, the methods and techniques which are used to answer the research- and sub-questions are described.

### 3.1 Research design

The aim of this study is to provide insight into which leadership behavior middle managers should engage in order to successfully implement strategy, or to put strategy into practice. In order to find answers, this study involves a literature study as well as an empirical investigation. In this study, a qualitative research approach is chosen as it fits the objectives of getting a better understanding of certain phenomena. To understand which leadership behaviors will put strategy into practice, it is important to investigate perceptions and real-life experiences. Since qualitative research allows for more in-depth detail and being open and flexible to potential findings is important, in this study, qualitative research is more appropriate than quantitative research. In addition, the study is an exploratory research in order to gain insight into specific phenomena (Creswell, 2013). Two common and useful techniques that are used in qualitative research are questionnaires and in-depth interviews (Richie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013), which were aimed at gathering detailed information on the key concepts in line with objectives of the study. For this research, interviews seemed to be best aligned with the defined research questions. This study is a case study, since it is explored which leadership behaviors middle managers should engage to put strategy into practice in a specific context. The main objectives of a case study are to explore a topic in real-life context and to provide an in-depth description of a single or small number of cases (Creswell, 2013; Richie et al., 2013).

### 3.2 Units of analysis

In this research, the units of analysis are the different leadership behaviors which are necessary when putting the X strategy into practice. Interviews are conducted with both employees and middle managers of the X organization. Traditional research attributes strategy only to senior management and therefore neglects the influence of the middle management on strategy. SAP research is extending this traditional perspective. Therefore, this study investigates which leadership behaviors middle managers should engage in order to align practice and strategy. In order to be sure that the interviews will add value to this research, some characteristics are

determined of the middle managers and employees. A middle manager should have at least two years experience in a leadership function. Employees must have been employed within the organization for at least one year. The case of this study is the X organization of X Nederland.

### 3.3 Case description

XXXXXXXXXX

### 3.4 Data collection

The qualitative data set is gathered in an international company over a one-month period. The primary method that is used to collect data is semi-structured face-to-face interviews. Semi-structured interviews include questions that are relevant to the research and creates an opening for an interactive conversation to unfold (Galletta, 2013). By conducting semi-structured interviews, same as to other types of interviews, perceptions and opinions of interviewees could be identified. However, by conducting semi-structured interviews additional interesting information was acquired by adjusting questions or asking additional questions based on provided answers.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation was reached. Theoretical saturation assures that sufficient respondents are interviewed which improves the representativeness of this thesis (Eisenhardt, 1989). Fifteen interviews were held with respondents at X. In order to obtain a good view of the leadership behavior of middle managers in the strategic implementation process, data was collected from various perspectives, namely from various research groups. The strategy 'maximum variation' was used to interview stakeholders from different organizational levels and clusters in the X organization (Boeije, Hart, & Hox, 2009). Considering the large size of X as an organization and the short period of research, a selection of research participants was made within X. This selection was initially made based on targeted selection, as specific groups of stakeholders were selected from the target population (Boeije et al., 2009). In order to achieve maximum variation, research participants were selected together with a number of HR managers from an overview containing the names of managers and employees from all clusters within the X organization. All stakeholders were approached by e-mail with the question whether they wanted to participate in the research. The goal was to select

two or three research participants per cluster from different levels and this goal was achieved. In this way, all relevant stakeholders of the X organization are represented.

The following table provides an overview of the position of the research participants in the organization, the cluster in which they work and their gender and age. Because the target population of the study is the X organization of X Nederland, the stakeholders have been selected within the different clusters of X, namely within Engineering, Supply Chain, Sales, Capturing & Business Development, Standard Solution Management and Project Management. It should be noted that Engineering and subsequent Supply Chain are by far the largest clusters of the X organization.

<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Cluster</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>
R01	Middle manager	Engineering	Female	45
R02	Middle manager	Engineering	Male	49
R03	Employee	Engineering	Male	59
R04	Employee	Engineering	Female	34
R05	Employee	Engineering	Male	38
R06	Middle manager	Sales, Capturing & BD	Female	27
R07	Middle manager	Sales, Capturing & BD	Male	47
R08	Employee	Project Management	Male	54
R09	Middle manager	Supply chain	Male	61
R10	Middle manager	Supply chain	Male	32
R11	Middle manager	Standard Solution Management	Male	51

R12	Middle manager	Project Management	Male	54
R13	Middle manager	Engineering	Male	45
R14	Employee	Standard Solution Management	Male	32
R15	Employee	Supply chain	Female	26

**Table 1.** Overview of research participants

In appendix 2 an interview protocol can be found which was send to the interviewees beforehand. This protocol contains an introduction to the research topic and the way the interview will be conducted regarding the way of processing data and duration. In appendix 3, the interview itself can be found. The interview starts with general and open questions to prevent guiding interviewees in a certain direction. After a few questions, questions become more specific. The questions were formulated based on constructs that were explained in the theoretical background. The interviews were conducted individually, as a result, the chance that respondents influence each other's opinion will be removed. In order to minimize the chance of socially desirable answers, interviews were conducted in person and at a convenient location chosen by the interviewee. To prevent misinterpretation, the interviews were recorded and fully transcribed afterwards. The interviewees were asked beforehand whether they agree with recording the interviews by means of a phone recorder. This way of recording is preferred over taking notes, because taking notes at the time can interfere with the process of interviewing and notes written afterwards are likely to miss out some details (Britten, 1995). The duration of the interviews was approximately between 40 and 60 minutes.

### 3.5 Data analysis

The semi-structured interviews are narrowed down in transcripts. These are not included in this thesis because of confidentiality reasons. Then, the transcripts were divided in fragments and subsequently coded with the 'Grounded Theory method' (GTM) of Glaser and Straus (1967) in order to derive leadership behaviors that support the strategy implementation process. This method is chosen because it can be utilized in order to discover theory from data. In addition, this

method is beneficial to avoid presumptions and biases in order to discover what exactly is going on (Glaser & Straus, 1967). The GTM consists of three phases: open coding, axial coding and selective coding. In the first phase, the transcripts were divided into fragments of text. Afterwards, open codes were assigned that represented each of the fragments. This conforms to Corbin and Strauss (1990) who argue that open coding is the starting point of the coding process. The codes attached to the categories were based on the results of the interviews. The first few interviews were coded using this method. Subsequently, the concepts in theory were examined and codes were partly made on the basis of these concepts. After this, the open codes were restructured to find the core concepts in the thesis, which is called axial coding. The core concepts imply the few codes to which all other codes relate. In this way, a complete picture of the data was generated. The coding and labeling was done by one author. All codes are conveniently brought together in code trees which is shown in appendix 4.

## 4 Results

In this section, leadership behaviors of the middle managers at X that are influential for the practice of strategy are described. The behaviors are linked to the four categories of leadership behavior which are discussed in the theory. After this, it is described which factors or leadership behaviors are barriers to the successful implementation of strategy.

### 4.1 Task-oriented behaviors

Nearly all respondents mentioned that the strategy is implemented in an abstract and limited way by the senior management. Therefore, respondents consider it a task for middle managers to translate and implement what is 'thought up above' to the work floor. To successfully implement strategy, all respondents mentioned a middle manager should have a clear plan to implement these strategic objectives, which is also called an implementation plan. This is supported by the study of Higgs and Rowland (2005). In this study it is concluded that the development of effective plans for the implementation is an essential task-oriented behavior when putting strategy into practice. An implementation plan describes the activities, processes and resources which are required to realize the strategy. The plan forces the management to work out the strategy in detail, it also allocates clear responsibilities for the realization of the objectives and activities. As a result, clarity is provided, and adjustments can be made. Middle managers must be able to work with focus towards results. Employees expect their manager to have a clear implementation plan and to communicate this to the employees.

Subsequently, it is the role of the middle manager to monitor whether the strategy is actually being implemented. According to most respondents, this is another essential leadership behavior that will contribute to the successful implementation of a strategy. The study of Antonakis and House (2014) and Higgs and Rowland (2005) confirms this as well. Respondents mentioned that middle managers should actively monitor whether activities are actually in line with the strategy. This can be done, for example, by letting employees provide frequent feedback on what they have done to implement certain strategic objectives and thus examining the progress. When monitoring, it is important to explain how activities of employees contribute to the implementation of the X strategy. This is emphasized by the following quote:

*“It should be discussed more often by checking whether appointments that are made are actually being fulfilled, by examining the progress of the achievement of certain goals and also discussing how this, in turn, contributes to the implementation of the X strategy at a higher level.”*

- Respondent 04 (employee)

As mentioned, translating the strategy to the work floor is seen as an important leadership behavior of middle managers in order to put strategy into practice as well. The strategy must be translated in such way that everyone can understand it. One respondent explains this as follows:

*“If the middle manager is able to ‘ad his own flavor to’ the X strategy, to translate it into what his people can understand, I think the strategy will be a lot closer to us than it is now. Then you also know how you can implement strategy as an employee, now I don't know. But that's the challenge for the manager.”*

- Respondent 03 (employee)

One of the most important aspects in this translation is to concretize the abstract strategy for the employees on the work floor. The middle manager must be able to communicate what the X strategy - which is formulated at a high level - actually means to the employees. This translation must be aligned with the employees at the operational level and with their daily work. Employees all need a manageable story in which they can identify themselves and from which they can derive concrete goals. Moreover, a number of respondents mentioned that giving practical examples contributes to the implementation of the strategy. In terms of content, middle managers can do this by enabling employees to experience strategy in practice by means of workshops, assignments and working groups. If the strategy is not put into practice, employees will experience the strategy in an abstract and complicated way which will impede the implementation of the strategy. Furthermore, respondents mentioned that a more practical approach to strategy also involves giving employees the opportunity themselves to present something about strategy. A respondent argued as follows:

*"X is a chief architect in our team. He had a great story, which was very inspiring. That was about (...). It was a very simple story, but very fun and inspiring, and this helps people. 'Well, do we go that way?!' (...). In this way, as a manager, you make sure that strategy gets closer to the people and that ultimately people act in line with the strategy."*

- Respondent 01 [middle manager]

According to respondents, the strategy becomes less abstract when a manager connects a task to the strategy. When employees understand why a task is important, it increases their commitment. Middle managers therefore need to communicate the strategy in a simple, practical way. Employees want to know how the implementation of the strategy at departmental level contributes to the implementation of the X strategy at a higher level. This is emphasized by the following quote:

*"I think it is just too complicated for me. (...) really descends to the level of the employee. I liked that very much, it was really well explained what was happening at a higher level. Then it just comes in. You can see that people really enthusiastically left the meeting. Apparently, that's a tone that appeals to people, that appeals to me. And that's what I expect to see from a manager."* - Respondent 04 (employee)

In this context, a number of middle managers mentioned they expect more support from senior management in translating the strategy; this subject is discussed in more detail in section 4.2. It becomes clear that all respondents have the desire that their managers clarify strategic objectives and inform about the 'why'. To clarify objectives, it is important to set clear and manageable goals (Reid, 1989). As a result, praxis will become in line with the strategy. The study of Battilana et al. (2010) confirms this as well. In addition, it is emphasized by the following quote:

*"Setting clear and manageable goals and communicating them is so important to get activities in line with strategy."* - Respondent 01 [middle manager]

A few respondents, mainly middle managers, believe that middle management should set both team and personal, clear and specific goals together with the employees which contribute to the

implementation of the strategy. By setting objectives at both departmental and personal level, the strategy is broken down to a lower level. One respondent stated: "*Then you should practically set a KPI per person in order to get a very clear picture of how they contribute to the greater whole.*" (Respondent 10 [middle manager]). This finding is supported by the study of Kaplan and Norton (2004). A respondent additionally calls it leadership when a manager knows how to stick to the strategy. "*Because thinking out a strategy is one thing, sticking to it is another.*" (Respondent 14 [employee]).

As mentioned, in addition to setting clear, specific and challenging goals, informing about the 'why' is a very important leadership behavior. Nearly all respondents mentioned that they want to know and can understand why certain strategic decisions are made, why certain strategic choices are so important. In other words, the thought behind the strategic decisions must be clear. One respondent mentioned: "*But then objectives have to be clear, and the thought behind the objectives has to be clear as well.*" (Respondent 11 [middle manager]). Another respondent mentioned that clarifying objectives and informing about the 'why' will create support among the employees:

*"If you want to create support, then at some point you will have to clarify the decisions. So how did you come to these strategic actions? Where did you get those business challenges? Where did they actually come from?"* - Respondent 12 [middle manager]

A few respondents mentioned that a manager should give clear roles to employees to ensure the strategy is putted into practice correctly. For example, one respondent stated: "*To do this, roles must be assigned by our manager.*" (Respondent 05 [employee]). However, a majority of the respondents indicated that they would rather get the freedom and responsibility from their manager to organize their own activities. An important precondition in this respect is that there is a clear framework within which the employees can operate. Moreover, this is considered one of the most essential leadership behaviors by the respondents. Practically every respondent mentioned that providing a clear framework is an essential leadership behavior of middle managers when putting strategy into practice. It must be clear which direction the middle manager wants to go with his team, what he or she stands for and what you are working on as a

team. In such a way, employees will feel responsibility to actually align their praxis with strategy. When there is a clear and focused framework within the X strategy, teams are able and willing to put it into practice themselves. Employees just want to know what is expected from them and what direction is being taken. This is emphasized by the following quotes:

*“Give people a deadline, an expectation. When there is no expectation about strategy, then people don’t know how to contribute. Provide them a framework and have a clear vision with your team, then your team knows how to contribute.”* - Respondent 15 [employee]

*“You should actually have some kind of framework, like this is your freedom within the X strategy, you might be interested in picking this up. That way, together with my team, I can put that into practice. If you know what your framework is as a department, you can make it your own and give substance to the strategy yourself. Then you know where you have to work on, and you automatically get a supported vision.”* - Respondent 06 [middle manager]

In addition to providing a clear framework, many respondents mentioned that a middle manager should be able to make decisions based on the strategy, in which it is important to avoid wanting too much. Making and prioritizing decisions therefore requires strong leadership, since sometimes difficult and painful decisions have to be made. So, an essential behavior is to make clear decisions about objectives and priorities. This is emphasized by the following quote:

*“The middle manager must have the decisiveness to make decisions and, in this way, steer the department in the right direction. When no clear decisions are made, or when they are not substantiated, it feels to us as if we are just doing everything.”* - Respondent 03 [employee]

As mentioned above, few respondents believe middle managers should be decisive when putting the strategy into practice, despite the fact that people show resistance. Finally, when considering factors that barrier the successful implementation of the X strategy, 'time' is a crucial factor. Nearly all respondents therefore consider committing time and resources to successfully

implement strategy as an essential leadership behavior. This is how a respondent stated: *“You should have a manager who makes time for strategy, who makes time to discuss strategy. This is definitely not the case now.”* (Respondent 15 [employee]). Moreover, committing time and resources to implement a strategic plan is almost more important than the plan itself. This finding is supported by the study of Van der Weide and Wilderom (2004) as well.

In conclusion, according to this study, most important task-oriented behaviors – praxis - of middle managers – aggregate practioners - when putting strategy into practice are: having a clear plan to achieve goals, monitoring, translating, setting clear, specific and challenging goals, informing about the ‘why’, reserving time and resources, providing a clear framework and making decisions about objectives and priorities. Existing literature supports most of these findings. However, some behaviors are not yet clearly linked to the successful implementation of strategy, which is interesting. This will be discussed in more detail in the discussion (chapter 5).

#### 4.2 Relation-oriented behaviors

Mentioned by all respondents, it is obvious that communicating about the strategy is an essential leadership behavior of middle managers when putting strategy into practice. This finding is supported by Higgs and Rowland (2005), who state that the communication of a leader plays an essential role when putting strategy into practice. Respondents indicate that middle managers should be able to explain what the underlying idea behind the strategy is, what the necessity is of implementing the strategy and what benefits it will bring to both the organization and the employees. A respondent also explains that middle managers must communicate what the strategy exactly means and what it implies for the department. This is emphasized by the following quote:

*“By discussing it with us. Communicating what X strategy exactly means, and that this is also communicated to us in clear language. And subsequently discuss how we see ourselves as a department in this and discuss what this implies for our department. We don't have such sessions very often, or actually almost never.”* - Respondent 04 [employee]

As mentioned by this respondent as well, it is about communication and not just about informing. Therefore, this is a relation-oriented behavior. Middle managers must be able to enter into dialogue with the employees (Respondent 07 [middle manager]). According to Van der Weide and Wilderom (2004), middle managers are in the perfect position to enter into dialogue with their employees. Because of their unique position in the organization they are able to influence employees by means of personal interactions. The aim of these dialogues must be to enable employees to recognize the problem or situation and to take them along. When there is recognition, it will reach the people and there will be support and involvement to implement the strategic goals at any cost (Respondent 12 [middle manager]). Another respondent mentioned: *"In the end, everything lies at the basis of 'the understanding'"* (Respondent 07 [middle manager]). Understanding can be generated by going into dialogue with each other. Employees mainly convince themselves, and they do so by being in dialogue. Through discussion, the strategy is highlighted from all perspectives and you ensure that employees can identify with the strategy. A respondent also stated that middle managers should be able to enter into an active dialogue with employees about why certain strategic objectives have not been implemented (Respondent 15 [employee]).

Almost all respondents mentioned as well that it is of great importance to frequently communicate about strategy. The power of repetition. Respondents mentioned: *"You have to keep repeating and communicating"* (Respondent 01 [middle manager]) and *"I do not think you should communicate it once a year. (...) You'll have to keep it coming back. Otherwise, it's something that's communicated once a year, as it is now. Then you don't get a supported vision of where we want to go, of our strategy how we actually get there."* (Respondent 04 [employee]). This finding is supported by the study of Battilana et al. (2010), in their study it is proven that when managers pay much attention in communicating the strategy, the confusion and uncertainty of the employees in the implementation process will be reduced. In communication, middle managers must have the capacity to communicate convincingly. When middle managers themselves are convinced of the necessity and importance of implementing the strategy, he or she will be able to communicate this convincingly as well. Respondents mentioned that when a middle manager can convincingly propagate the strategy, why the implementation of the strategy

is valuable for the organization and for the employees, then the employees will go along with the realization of the strategic goals. If a middle manager himself is not convinced of the strategy, the employees will not be convinced either. This finding is supported in literature (O'Reilly et al., 2010) and emphasized by the following quote:

*"I think he has to fully support it himself first. He has to propagate convincingly that he thinks strategy is important. But then I feel very quickly, does he support it himself or not? If I have the feeling that he is doing it purely because he is the intermediary, then it doesn't work."*

- Respondent 03 [employee]

Respondents mentioned as well that middle managers should create moments in which there is an opportunity to ask questions. This in order to ensure that it is not just about informing, but really communicating (Respondent 08 [employee]). A precondition in this respect is that there must be clear communication beforehand to enable employees to ask the right questions (Respondent 02 [middle manager]). In addition, listening to employees, being open to feedback and being able to communicate information again with senior management appears to be important relation-oriented behaviors when putting strategy into practice. For example, one respondent mentioned middle managers should give employees the opportunity to share their ideas and experiences during meetings and should be able to give feedback. Subsequently, it is the responsibility of the middle manager to communicate this information back to the top of the organization. Nevertheless, a few respondents mentioned that currently there is no active listening to people on the work floor. In order to put strategy into practice, respondents mentioned that it is important for middle managers to listen and anticipate to comments from the work floor. A high-level strategy may have been developed, but sometimes this strategy simply does not fit in with practice. Strategic goals are sometimes not realistic, which means that it cannot be implemented either. This emphasized by the following quote:

*"However, when a lot of noises come from the work floor, you have to anticipate those noises in a timely manner. If you don't listen to them, there will be no successful implementation"*

*of the strategy. Simply because certain goals are not realistic, the path to the vision needs to be adjusted in order to be able to achieve goals.*" - Respondent 07 [middle manager]

One other important leadership behavior a few respondents mentioned is transparency. One respondent mentioned: *"In any case, I try to communicate the movement and the strategy that we have defined as a company in a transparent way"* (Respondent 09 [middle manager]). Middle managers can do this by telling the same story to everyone, by passing on all information they have themselves, by not only showing the benefits of implementing the strategy by means of success stories, but also by communicating where things are not going well and in which aspects the implementation of the strategy still needs to be improved. According to respondents, this is necessary because most X employees are highly educated. These employees expect an honest, intelligent story about which they can have a discussion. Employees want to understand where strategic objectives originate from, what the concept behind the strategy is and what it exactly means for the future.

Another leadership behavior which is considered important when putting strategy into practice by a number of respondents is a personal approach of the middle manager. Employees within the company appreciate a personal approach and wish to see more middle managers adopting this approach. Middle managers need to engage with employees at a personal level to understand what strategy means to them in daily practice and to support them in translating it into practice. Consequently, resistance will be reduced as well. One respondent, a middle manager, stated the following:

*"I think I choose a very personal approach and I believe that not every middle manager is doing this. Ultimately, it is the employees who have to implement the strategy, so I think by taking them with you in a personal way, you will at least remove some resistance."*

- Respondent 11 [middle manager]

In addition, it is mentioned that there should be personal contact with the employees during informal moments, beyond the formal moments, so that the strategy and the changes can be

discussed. Some middle managers believe personal attention and one-to-one conversations with employees are important and should also be used to communicate the strategy and to put it into practice. However, other middle managers believe there is not enough time to properly guide the employees and to include them in the process. Currently, little or no effort has been made by middle managers to involve and integrate the employees, the team, in the implementation process of the strategy. As a result, strategy and its implementation is highly considered to be a top-down process, while respondents believe strategy implementation is both a top-down and bottom-up process (Respondent 12 & 13 [middle managers]). *"To create a shared vision and to ensure that everyone knows how to contribute to the implementation of the strategy, I believe that you have to involve people from the bottom up"*. (Respondent 05 [employee]). This is an important finding, since literature highlights the importance of involving and integrating employees as well. Higgs and Rowland (2005) and Miller (2001) state that middle managers should involve and integrate employees in the implementation process. This will create understanding of the need to put the strategy into practice. A middle manager who does involve his employees in the process provided the following example:

*"At the end of the year, X has formulated the new 2020 X strategy and I will discuss this with the team. I will do this in one session, presenting a draft version of the strategy. Also, to indicate there is opportunity for feedback and input from the team, in this way it is not something I do on my own and therefore determine: this is what we will do. No, this is my current translation or image of where we want to go, what do you think about this? By this I give my team the opportunity to mention what is missing in the strategy. Where should I make adjustments?"*

- Respondent 02 [middle manager]

Employees do not necessarily want to be involved in the formulation phase of the X strategy, since according to the respondents this would be too many employees. However, it is considered desirable by most respondents to be involved in the implementation process. Middle managers should do this by asking employees about their perspective on strategic objectives and how they can jointly implement them as a team. A middle manager must clearly propagate his openness to

new ideas from the employees and therefore make sure that everyone can express their ideas. This relation-oriented behavior is also called consulting by Yukl (2012). A respondent mentioned the following:

*“By being open to everyone who contributes in one way or another, or has smart ideas, and subsequently be able to communicate about it very easily. You must ensure that employees can express their ideas, and that something is done with these ideas.”*

- Respondent 09 [middle manager]

Additionally, a middle manager could ask his team if there are people who would like to become 'ambassadors' of the change towards their colleagues. In this way, the qualities of employees who want to be involved in the implementation process are utilized. As a result, the strategy is expected to be implemented more efficient at the work floor. A respondent mentioned the following: *“So, in order to make strategy really work, you need a lot of ambassadors. Which are on the work floor.”* (Respondent 14 [employee]).

Furthermore, nearly all respondents mentioned that giving employees responsibility in the implementation process can be considered as a crucial leadership behavior of middle managers. In literature, this is also called empowering (Yukl, 2012; Yukl et al., 2002). A manager should allow substantial responsibility and discretion in work activities and trusting employees to solve problems and make decision without getting prior approval (Yukl, 2012). This is emphasized by the following quote: *“Also, to give responsibility down to the work floor, to give employees confidence that they also represent what they are involved in.”* (Respondent 09 [middle manager]). For example, employees should be able to decide themselves how to exactly put strategy into practice and subsequently get the possibility to present their plan to the middle manager. In this, it is important the manager monitors whether the right activities take place to ensure the successful implementation of the strategy.

One other important leadership behavior mentioned by the majority of respondents is when putting a strategy into practice, middle managers should give attention to the personal and work-related development of employees. This finding is supported by the study of Stoker (2006).

In this study it is stated that middle management should focus more on coaching and developing employees instead of managing results. According to the respondents, a middle manager's role is to take into account the needs of employees, to give them opportunities and to make optimal use of their talents and qualities in their work. It is considered an important behavior of middle managers to ensure their employees are effectively deployed and employed in the right position so that the strategy can be implemented. One respondent mentioned the following: "*He should actually develop the people in such way as to prepare them for the future X wants to move towards.*" (Respondent 14 [employee]) and "*I have to make sure people fit in with the strategy, that people are developing in such way they fit in with the strategy. So, that is where I am essential.*" (Respondent 01 [middle manager]).

In addition, it is important to keep employees continuously informed of the booked results and quick wins. Not only figures, but also, for example, a new contract the organization has won. This contributes to trust, motivation and commitment. This is emphasized by the following quote:

*"But it starts already with us as managers to propagate and celebrate success in the results we achieve. Show that you are proud of your team. Celebrate results. This also motivates them to commit themselves to achieve objectives."* - Respondent 13 [middle manager]

If employees notice their efforts have a real effect, it will stimulate them enormously. People will realize that things are really changing. And this in turn leads to better performance. Finally, a few respondents considered it desirable for middle managers to have both the substantive expertise and knowledge of the activities as well as management skills focused on the employees. This approach comes close to the functional leadership approach according to Zaccaro, Rittman, & Marks (2001). Though, other respondents believe a middle manager does not necessarily need to have an in-depth knowledge of the job content. The majority of the respondents do believe that middle managers should increasingly focus on supporting, facilitating and developing employees. This means that managers should increasingly behave in a relation-oriented manner.

To conclude, relation-oriented behaviors – praxis - which are most frequently mentioned by respondents, and therefore most important behaviors of middle managers – aggregate

practioners - when putting strategy into practice are: (frequently) communicating, listening, involving team members, empowering, developing people within a team and communicating with senior management. All of these behaviors are linked to the successful implementation of strategy in literature as well.

#### 4.3 Change-oriented behavior

A middle manager should be a leader who creates vision and promotes the value of strategy. Respondents expect a middle manager to show through his own behavior that he is serious about the implementation and that he supports it. Promoting one's own vision and leading by example are considered to be important leadership behaviors when putting strategy into practice. In the literature, these leadership behaviors are also described as behavioral idealized influence (Day & Antonakis, 2012). A number of respondents believe that middle managers have to propagate the mission and vision and express their own view and perspective on strategy. A respondent mentioned the following:

*"Middle managers have to propagate the mission and vision, in my opinion this is insufficiently done. The MT (management team) asks middle managers to communicate with team leaders and employees. However, they have to tell the story themselves in their own way, to master the strategy."* - Respondent 14 [employee]

A middle manager is expected to articulate a clear, appealing vision. In addition, this vision must be reflected in the environment (Respondent 05 [employee]). Hereby, it is expected that the manager's vision and strategy will fit within the strategy at a higher level and thus be in line with each other. According to Bass and Stogdill (1990) it is important that a leader acts in accordance with the norms and values that reflect the mission and goal of the organization and of the leader. By propagating a clear vision and fascinating vision, involvement of employees in the implementation process will be increased (Gill, 2002; Rouleau, 2005, Seo et al., 2012; Yukl, 2012). An essential aspect in this is that middle managers themselves lead by example, as one respondent states: *"Practice what you preach."* (Respondent 05 [employee]). According to some respondents, when a manager shows exemplary behavior, he or she is seen as a role model for

the organization. An effective leadership behavior when putting strategy into practice also consists of being able to include people in the new strategy, in the change process. To be able to do this, middle managers themselves must be open to change so that they can anticipate this and fully involve their team in the implementation process. It is important as well that the vision for the future of the organization and the department is clear. This is emphasized by the following quote:

*“When I ask my manager about our vision or strategy, we get the question back again: What do you think about that? How do you see this? And I think that's very wrong. As a manager, you need to have a clear vision, and you need to propagate this clearly.”*

- Respondent 14 [employee]

In addition, having a vision on the implementation of the strategy is considered to be very important. Respondents mentioned that the reason for the new strategy must be communicated clearly to the organization, in an inspiring story in which pain and perspective come together. A vision on the implementation expresses both the necessity of the new strategy, the necessity for change, and the vision for the future. Middle managers need to have a clear vision on this and must be able to answer why the new strategy needs to be implemented, what the consequences will be if this is not done and for example how big the necessity of the new direction is.

Additionally, nearly all respondents mentioned that middle managers should promote and valuing strategy and that this will contribute to a successful implementation of a strategy. As mentioned before, respondents stated that if a manager does not consider strategy to be a priority, this will not trigger them to devote time and attention to it. It is therefore important for a middle manager to propagate the strategy and to devote attention to both the strategy and its implementation. *“Yeah, I'm expecting more communication about it from the middle management too. So that I can see that they are paying attention to it, that they consider it important. Then I get triggered, I think you have to get triggered.”* (Respondent 10 [middle manager]) and *“Show that it is important”* (Respondent 08 [employee]). Almost all respondents also mentioned that middle managers should show employees the value of strategy by outlining

a vision for the future and a perspective in which this strategy is seen as a positive aspect for X. By sharing personal experiences which demonstrate that strategy actually works and has value in practice, employees understand how the strategy works in practice. The use of such imagery and symbols also belongs to the leadership behavior of a leader, namely behavioral idealized influence (Day & Antonakis, 2012). Middle managers have to let the employees experience that strategy and its implementation can add something, that it has added value for the employees. Since, an important aspect which currently barriers the implementation of the strategy is the fact that employees, and sometimes also managers, do not see the value of the strategy and therefore do not prioritize it. This is emphasized by the following quote:

*"When I look at my team, they are not concerned with the strategy of the organization. But when I imagine why is that? It's not clear to them what it brings them, they don't see the value of it. A manager should be able to show them this value."* - Respondent 06 [middle manager]

Lastly, a number of respondents mentioned that middle managers should motivate their employees to achieve strategic objectives and to be aware of the strategy and its implementation. One respondent mentioned employees want to be motivated to get involved in strategy: *"Yes, but if I was told by my manager like "Well, it would be interesting to go to such a strategic session because it fits your role really well""*. (Respondent 05 [employee]). According to Bass (1990) motivating is an essential leadership behavior as well.

In summarize, according to the respondents, most important change-oriented behaviors – praxis - of middle managers – aggregate practioners - when putting strategy into practice are: articulating a clear, appealing vision, leading by example, promoting and valuing strategy, having a vision on the implementation of strategy and motivating. Though some behaviors are considered as essential behaviors in the strategy implementation process in literature as well, there are behaviors which are found in this study which are not identified in literature yet. This will be discussed in more detail in chapter 5, the discussion part.

#### 4.4 Passive behaviors

Passive behaviors of middle managers are considered as barriers to the successful implementation of strategy by all respondents. What meets the expectations of the theoretical framework (O'Reilly et al., 2010; Van der Weide & Wilderom, 2004). For example, one respondent mentioned that many middle managers are very reactive. Action is only taken when something seems to go seriously wrong, there is no timely response to noises from the work floor. It also appears that middle managers avoid making decisions, respondents have the feeling that everything is done instead of clear choices being made. As mentioned before, employees therefore are in need of a decisive middle manager. In literature, avoiding making decisions, only reacting to problems if serious and reacting to failure are all seen as barriers to the implementation process as well (O'Reilly et al., 2010; Van der Weide & Wilderom, 2004). Finally, respondents mentioned middle managers do not involve employees and ignore their influence in the strategy implementation process. Which is also seen as both a passive behavior and barrier to the implementation process (Skogstad, Einarsen, Torsheim, Aasland, & Hetland, 2007). Therefore, it can be concluded that the implementation of strategy will not be supported by passive behaviors of middle managers.

#### 4.5 Barriers strategy implementation

Nearly all respondents experience middle managers do too little to put the X strategy into practice. Moreover, many respondents indicate there is a high level of ignorance about the X strategy. They simply do not know what the strategy is about and do not have a conscious idea of whether their activities contribute to the practice of strategy. One respondent argued: *"If you talk about the X strategy, if one asks me what that strategy is about? I really don't know."* (Respondent 06 [middle manager]) and *"I think a lot of people don't even know the X strategy when you walk through the company."* (Respondent 10 [middle manager]). According to Jooste and Fourie (2009), misunderstanding about the organization's strategy is an important barrier to successful strategy implementation. It barriers the implementation process to a large extent. Respondents mentioned that middle managers mainly communicate their strategy once a year, usually at the beginning of the year, or not at all. One respondent explained: *"Currently, no real information about the X strategy is shared with me, perhaps only at the beginning of the year, but as you can notice, it does not impress very much."* (Respondent 04 [employee]) and *"The strategy or vision*

*of our department or at a higher level, the X strategy? It's never actually expressed, at least not to me."* (Respondent 15 [employee]). Moreover, the way in which the strategy is communicated at the beginning of the year is not favorable. A presentation is given with about 60 slides, in which information is mainly provided rather than communicated. The lack of communication can be seen as a passive leadership behavior of middle managers, these leaders are not proactive and just communicate the necessary things (Skogstad et al., 2007).

To conclude, an important barrier is the lack of communication from middle managers about strategy. This while communication, frequent communication, is an essential leadership behavior in the successful implementation of a strategy (Higgs & Rowland, 2005). The study of Jooste and Fouri (2009) similarly confirms that inefficient communication about the organization's strategy to the workforce barriers the implementation process to a large extent. Though respondents mentioned that middle managers share the strategy once a year, in practice it is not clear what the strategy actually implies for the department. Middle managers fail to provide employees a clear framework and communicate the strategy on an abstract level in which it is not made clear what the strategy implies on departmental level. Respondents indicated this as follows:

*"You are told what the strategy is, on a very abstract level, from the top, but subsequently it is not made clear what this means for the department (...). This is something I notice very strongly within my team."* - Respondent 06 [middle manager]

*"I do not really pay much attention to this, to providing a clear framework. Maybe that's where it all goes wrong."* - Respondent 10 [middle manager]

Since middle managers communicate poorly about strategy, employees perceive strategy as not being important enough. This is therefore considered an important barrier: middle managers do not consider strategy to be a priority. One respondent mentioned: *"Of course it's all important, but there are so many things which are considered more important. There is definitely not enough priority for strategy."* (Respondent 02 [middle manager]). As mentioned in the previous section,

employees consider it of great importance that their manager considers strategy important and shows them the value of strategy. Until a manager considers strategy to be a priority, employees will not pay attention to its implementation. The middle manager is responsible for setting the example that the strategic plan is important. Therefore, for example, canceling a meeting in the planning or implementation process signifies it is not. One respondent mentioned a good example in this respect: *"We were supposed to receive an update every quarter. I think we've had it once now."* [18-10-2019] (Respondent 10 [middle manager]).

Research by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) shows that middle managers often do not have strategic priority 'top of mind'. An important explanation for this is that middle managers are not involved in translating the strategy into their own reality. Strategy is often 'communicated' by the top while the execution is the responsibility of the middle management. This clearly impedes the successful implementation of a strategic plan. Almost all respondents confirm this and consider middle managers as a conduit for senior management:

*"Managers are obliged to show it to the employees. Then managers reluctantly start showing things they don't even feel about. Subsequently, employees look at things they have nothing to do with. The whole atmosphere that surrounds it is just not pleasant."*

- Respondent 04 [employee]

Besides the fact that middle managers do not consider strategy to be a priority, it can be stated that middle managers mainly focus on the short term and only react when a serious problem arises. As such, this is a passive leadership behavior which barriers the process of putting strategy into practice. This is emphasized by the following quote:

*"We are very reactive. Only when certain things don't go well, action is taken. Managers have priorities, until something goes completely wrong, we don't take any action."*

- Respondent 07 [middle manager]

Practically all respondents mentioned that middle managers have a major focus on the short term. The middle manager is not perceived as a visionary who has a clear vision and strategy where he and his team want to be in the future. In this, managers lack change-oriented leadership behavior. This is also visible in meetings which middle managers organize with their teams. During these meetings, primarily operational issues are discussed. This is emphasized by the following quote:

*"Strategy is not really discussed during the meetings of the department. You are far too much in the operational sphere, the issues of today. (..). We are so preoccupied with the issues of the day that we don't really discuss our strategy, we don't focus on the longer term and we don't know if we're going in the right direction. You just assume it's okay."*

- Respondent 10 [middle manager]

As mentioned above, nearly all respondents indicated they are guided by the issues of the day. Only once or twice a year a meeting is organized to discuss strategy and its implementation. Middle managers do not spend time on translating vision and strategy into operational activities and are busy with the daily routine, which makes them ineffective in implementing the strategy. *"Actually, we just live by the issues of the day. We don't look at the longer term. Strategy is very important, but here it is the issues of the day that rule."* (Respondent 11 [middle manager]). The fact that middle managers are primarily concerned about the short-term, and not about the long-term, the strategy, is an important barrier to strategy implementation. In addition, it threatens the continuity of the organization.

It is obvious that many respondents indicated that strategy is far removed from them. These are mainly employees and middle managers at a lower level. One respondent mentioned the following: *"But it's rather far removed from me. And that's hard."* (Respondent 05 [employee]). Consequently, employees cannot identify themselves with the strategy, which is abstract for them, and are unable to implement it. Hereby, an important given is that currently both the formulation and the implementation of the strategy are characterized by the respondents as a top-down process. As discussed earlier, respondents, employees, indicated they

want to be involved in the implementation process. Currently, employees are not or barely involved. As a result, it is almost impossible to get support and commitment from the work floor to implement the strategy. Not involving employees and ignoring their influence can be seen as passive leadership behavior (Skogstad et al., 2007). Respondents mentioned it feels as if the strategy is determined for them and they cannot influence it. For example, one respondent mentioned: *"The decisions are only taken top-down, while we are not stupid either."* (Respondent 05 [employee]). Since strategy is considered as a top-down process, respondents mention they feel strategy is not always in line with what is happening on the work floor, in practice. In addition, strategy sessions are always conducted by managers, while respondents mention they prefer to see employees from the work floor have a podium as well. This is emphasized by the following quote:

*"Give teams or departments a stage during such a Townhall, let them explain how they started working on strategic objectives. This will help people to recognize themselves in those lower-level goals. Now it's all high-level, so the message doesn't reach the people on the work floor."* - Respondent 06 [middle manager]

A leadership behavior which is currently lacking among a large number of middle managers is translating the strategy to the work floor. It is considered to be the task of the middle managers to get the strategy closer to the people, to translate it. However, managers clearly indicate they have difficulties in translating the abstract strategy to their department. This is emphasized by the following quote:

*"In some ways, I can make up the link with the strategy by myself. But it's hard for me to 'peel off' the strategy to my team."* - Respondent 10 [middle manager]

Two respondents additionally mentioned that middle managers sometimes feel insecure or inexperienced with strategy. The inability to manage the implementation process effectively constitutes a large barrier according to Jooste and Fourie (2009). One respondent argued:

*"Personally, I think strategy is very interesting, but I'm not sure how to translate and implement it within my team, maybe that's also a bit of inexperience and insecurity from my side".* (Respondent 06 [middle manager]). Managers therefore expect support from senior management. However, this support is not yet sufficiently present, which negatively affects the successful implementation process to a small extent (Jooste & Fourie, 2009). Respondents indicate more attention and direction from senior management is necessary. As mentioned before, some respondents mentioned that it seems as if senior management perceives strategy as not being important enough. A strategic plan is currently being drawn up by senior management and it is expected that middle management will implement it. One respondent said: *"It is now thought that the person who comes after me will implement it, well that will not happen. That's where it goes terribly wrong."* (Respondent 01 [middle manager]). In addition, communication from senior management to middle managers is not clear enough. Strategic objectives and how to achieve these objectives are often not clearly communicated. Consequentially, each manager gives his own interpretation to the implementation of the strategic objective. This is emphasized by the following quote:

*"The strategy needs to be communicated more clearly, enabling you to better understand how to implement it. If a strategic objective is unclear, such as the objective "to become more efficient", then each manager still gives his or her own twist to it."*

- Respondent 13 [middle manager]

Most of the respondents believe middle management should be supported and guided in implementing the strategy. Senior management plays an important role in this. It is recommended to ask middle managers what they need in terms of support, such as training, courses, coaching, or something else. In addition, middle managers should be given the opportunity and time to pay extra attention to strategy and its implementation. Confidence from senior management also contributes to this. All respondents mention there is a lack of time and resources to put the strategy into practice. According to Jooste and Fourie (2009) this barriers the

implementation process to a small to moderate extent. Respondents in this study mentioned the following:

*“Actually, you notice that all people struggle with a reasonable overload. I don't know if you've heard this before, but you look like you are not surprised.”* - Respondent 08 [employee]

*“I should have more time for it. Throughout the years that the company has been in decline, the organization has been downsized, and now there is so much work to be done, so there is simply no time to pay enough attention to it.”* - Respondent 02 [middle manager]

Another obvious finding is that most middle managers do not have an implementation plan and there is also no follow-up after presenting the strategy. This while having a clear plan to achieve goals is considered to be an important task-oriented behavior of middle managers. If there is no clear timeline that contains the next steps and deadlines for completing the plan, employees don't know how, when and what is needed to be happen within the implementation process. In the study of Jooste and Fourie (2009) it is argued that when the implementation of strategy is not controlled, it will barrier the process to a moderate extend. Some respondents also mentioned a number of employees from each department should be involved in the implementation process, so that they are also able to propagate the strategy. As a result, shared routines, norms and rules can be changed faster and more effectively, since this makes them, in addition to middle management, the ambassadors of the strategy.

Furthermore, most respondents mentioned they do not know how to contribute to the implementation of the strategy. One respondent argued: *“But I don't know if the vision and strategy of our department fits within X strategy and how we can contribute.”* (Respondent 05 [employee]). There is a high degree of ignorance about how employees can contribute to the implementation of the strategy at a higher level. In this respect, there is a clear role for middle management to remove this ignorance, since according to both the results of this study and previous theoretical studies, this is an important barrier to the implementation process. Furthermore, it is clear that there is currently no support from the work floor to put strategy into

practice. Respondents mentioned there is no interest in the organization's strategy, they do not concern themselves with it and they do not consider it important enough. This clearly shows that the organization is currently stuck in certain shared routines. These routines need to be broken in order to get practice more in line with the strategy.

An important starting point in this respect is that first and foremost, according to many respondents, a clear strategy and vision is missing. They indicated to have the desire that choices which are made, objectives which are set, can be traced back to the strategy of the organization. One respondent mentioned: *"Currently, we do not really operate according to a clear strategy. It would be nice if there is a clear strategy from which you can deduce why choices are made."* (Respondent 11 [middle manager]). An integrated vision and strategy, an integrated plan, is missing, which barriers the successful implementation to a moderate extent (Jooste & Fourie, 2009). An important leadership behavior in this respect is to propagate a clear vision and strategy. However, the vision and strategy of the middle manager must be aligned with the strategy at a higher level, the X strategy. This immediately addresses another barrier: a large number of respondents believe the strategy at departmental level, the strategy and vision the middle manager has, is not properly aligned with the X strategy at a higher level. This is an important barrier, since the effect of the barrier on the implementation process is large (Jooste & Fourie, 2009).

*"There are quite a lot of middle managers who determine the strategy themselves. They determine the strategy for their team, which is often a very different strategy compared to the strategy at the top. You notice this a lot."* - Respondent 11 [middle manager]

*"One thing that goes terribly wrong here is that all managers draw their own plan, they have their own strategy and vision. Sometimes their strategy is simply the opposite of that of X. But neither is there any control over it, so every manager can just do his own thing."*

- Respondent 14 [employee]

Furthermore, middle managers mentioned that the formulation of the X strategy must be clearer and more focused. In this way it is easier to explain the strategy all in the same way and to translate it to their teams. Since in particular focus is lacking in the current X strategy, middle managers face difficulties in translating the strategy. This is an important fact, given that barriers to the implementation phase already arise in the formulation phase of the strategic management process. According to nearly all respondents, focus in the X strategy will ensure that it gets putted into practice. Currently, the organization has too many strategic objectives and wishes to change too much. As a result, only a small part of the strategy is putted into practice. This is emphasized by the following quote:

*“So yeah, do you focus on too many things? Then you have a good chance that many goals won't be achieved and most of your strategy will receive limited attention. So, do you want to implement successfully? Then make sure to not want too much. Because in that case, you are busy with everything, but actually with nothing. At the end most of the goals will not be achieved because they simply cannot be implemented due to a lack of focus. You can't do everything.”*

- Respondent 09 [middle manager]

In addition, the lack of focus in the strategy ensures that both middle managers and employees are demotivated to engage in the implementation of the strategy. One respondent explained: *“Yes, and that is demotivating. Because every time you fail to achieve what you aimed for since there are so many strategic objectives.”* (Respondent 13 [middle manager]). Finally, three respondents mentioned that many middle managers at X were promoted to a management position from a technical position. It is argued that managers who have been educated from a technical point of view are usually not strong in communication. This while communication is considered to be one of the most important leadership behaviors when putting strategy into practice. This is emphasized by the following quote:

*“I think we have a big problem there. We have managers who are very technical. These people are educated in technology, they aren't communicators. (...) So if strategic goals are*

*discussed during meetings (...) and that's not translated to us, then I'm not always going to hear it."* - Respondent 05 [employee]

Furthermore, a number of respondents mentioned that these middle managers are too much involved in the job content. Respondents believe the role of the middle manager is to focus on the 'why' and 'what' instead of on too much the 'how' (job content). This is emphasized by the following quote:

*"Middle managers are still too concerned with the job content, while they have to focus more on the 'what' and 'why'."* - Respondent 05 [employee]

Lastly, one respondent represented the quite large percentage of employees who had been employed by X for many years, or in other words, have spent their entire careers at X. Most of these employees are characterized by a tendency to adhere to the past. They do not want to change along with the organization and believe that in the past everything worked better. For example, the respondent stated: *"I think you have to look at how things used to work in the past."* (Respondent 03 [employee]). Although it is expected that in five years' time a large proportion of these employees will have left the organization, the organization currently has to deal with this group of employees who are a barrier to the implementation of the strategy, a barrier to change.

Overall, X is an example of a large, complex, international organization with many hierarchical layers. *"X is such a large organization, there are so many layers. I think that's where things go wrong. In every layer, the message becomes a little less."* (Respondent 06 [middle manager]). It is therefore even more difficult to successfully put the X strategy into practice, which has been formulated at a high level, throughout the entire organization. To summarize, barriers which are mentioned most frequent, and therefore considered most important, are: the lack of communication, ignorance about the strategy, focus on only the short term, no clear strategy or vision (lack of focus), no alignment with organizational strategy, no implementation plan or follow-up, no involvement of employees (top-down) and managers do not consider strategy to be a priority and therefore do not spend time on translating strategy into operational activities.

## 5 Discussion and conclusion

In this chapter, first theory will be compared to the empirical results in order to be able to answer the sub questions. Subsequently, the main question of this research will be answered. After this, practical recommendations are presented to the research organization X. Then, the limitations of this research will be discussed, together with the recommendations for further research. This chapter will end with a description of the theoretical and practical contributions of this research.

### 5.1 Discussion

In this discussion the five empirical sub questions will be answered. Theory will be linked to the empirical results, explaining which aspects of the expectations have or have not been fulfilled and where theoretical recommendations can be made.

#### 5.1.1 Task-oriented behaviors

The first sub question in this study was: *“Which task-oriented leadership behaviors of middle managers will put strategy into practice?”*. The desired<sup>1</sup> task-oriented behaviors in the empirical results and theoretical framework are generally similar. As such, the expectations have been fulfilled. However, there are a few important points for discussion. The empirical results show there are more desired leadership behaviors than recognized in literature as effective behaviors in the strategy implementation process. By this, our knowledge of how aggregate practitioners - middle managers - should behave in relation to the implementation of strategy is extended. These results could be used to establish causal relationships in a future study in which these behaviors could be used as variables. The most important task-oriented behaviors that were identified in the empirical research are summarized in the table below (Table 2).

<b>Task-oriented behavior</b>	<b>Desired by this study</b>	<b>Desired by existing literature</b>
Translate strategy	+	?
Clarify objectives	+	Battilana et al. (2010)
Inform about the “why”	+	?
Provide a clear framework	+	?

<sup>1</sup> By 'desired by this study' is meant the leadership behavior of middle managers during the strategy implementation process which, according to respondents who participated in this study, is 'desired' and therefore considered essential/effective when implementing strategy. By 'desired by existing literature' the same is meant only according to existing literature.

Have a clear plan to achieve goals (implementation plan)	+	Higgs & Rowland (2005)
Monitoring	+	Antonakis & House (2014) Higgs & Rowland (2005)
Reserve time and resources	+	Van der Weide & Wilderom (2004)
Make decisions about objectives and priorities	+	?
Set clear, specific and challenging goals	+	Battilana et al. (2010)

**Table 2.** Schematic overview of desired task-oriented behaviors according to this research and existing literature

From this research it can be concluded that there is a strong need for a middle manager, a leader, who possesses many task-oriented behaviors. This is contrary to what is described in literature. Considering the last 20 years there has been a shift in leadership theories towards a more change-oriented leader (Avolio et al., 2009). Comparing this with leadership of the middle manager, Stoker (2006) argues that in recent years, the middle manager has shifted his focus to change-oriented behaviors. Moreover, the attention paid to the work process and tasks has been reduced. This also indicates a shift from a task-oriented leader to a more change-oriented leader. However, the results of this study show a middle manager should possess a significant number of essential task-oriented behaviors when putting strategy into practice. Probably more than change-oriented behaviors.

While it is clear that employees want increasingly freedom in their work, at the same time they seem to have a strong need for a clear framework within which they can operate. Especially when it comes to strategy implementation. People want to know what the organization is expecting from them. It must be clear which direction the middle manager wants to go with his team, what he or she stands for and what you are working on as a team. In this respect, it is important that middle managers can make decisions and set priorities. When employees have the feeling that 'just everything is done', they will not be motivated to commit themselves to the implementation of the defined objectives. In addition, having a clear plan to achieve the intended strategic objectives is an important behavior. In this implementation plan, the middle manager needs to describe what activities, processes and resources are needed to realize the strategy. Subsequently, it is important to monitor whether the strategy is actually putted into practice.

However, many middle managers lack this leadership behavior. They are good in making a plan, though afterwards there is no follow-up. This while in the theoretical framework it becomes clear that it is seen as a task, and therefore as leadership behavior, of middle managers to develop effective plans for the implementation and to monitor the implementation (Antonakis & House, 2014; Higgs & Rowland, 2005).

Another essential leadership behavior when putting strategy into practice is reserving time and resources for the implementation of strategy. Although in this research this behavior is considered very important, the study of Jooste and Fourie (2009) shows that the effect of this behavior on the implementation process is only small to moderate. One explanation for this might be that this research took place in a different context. The organization in which the interviews were conducted is struggling with a shortage of employees. As a result, respondents indicate they are under great pressure and hardly have time to complete their tasks. Time is therefore seen as an important barrier to the implementation process, which means that in this context allocating time and resources to strategy is considered to be an essential behavior of the middle manager. It is therefore assumed that the influence of this behavior for the practice of strategy is very large in this context.

Although existing literature about strategy implementation strongly focuses on communication, communication from both sides (Higgs & Rowland, 2005), this study shows that informing is very important as well. To be more specific, it is about informing about the 'why'. This means that it is necessary to explain why certain strategic decisions are made, where these decisions originate from, why the implementation of strategy is so important, why one should be involved in strategy. By informing about this, respondents mentioned that there will be more support for strategy, which will result in more effort to put strategy into practice. In paragraph 5.1.4, barriers to implementation are discussed, in this section it will become clear why this task-oriented behavior of middle managers is so important.

Finally, translating the strategy is a behavior which is clearly identified in this research as an essential behavior when putting strategy into practice. Middle managers are expected to be able to communicate what the strategy - which is formulated at a high level - actually means for the employees at the operational level. However, it appears that many middle managers do not

yet possess this quality or in other words, behavior. Translating the strategy is experienced as complicated and middle managers often have limited experience with this. The extent to which the absence of this task-oriented behavior influences the implementation process is discussed in section 5.1.4. It is noteworthy that relatively little can be found in literature about translating the strategy as a specific leadership behavior of middle managers. Moreover, according to existing leadership models, this leadership behavior is not clearly related to a leadership style in literature (Khouly et al., 2017). It may be relevant for theory to indicate the important role that middle management has in the implementation of strategy, in a leadership style through which these, and other important leadership behaviors that have been identified in this research, can be captured in a leadership style of middle management. Initially, this research contributes to this as the findings provide insight into important leadership behaviors of middle managers during the implementation process.

### 5.1.2 Relation-oriented behaviors

The second sub question of this study was: *“Which relation-oriented leadership behaviors of middle managers will put strategy into practice?”*. The desired relation-oriented behaviors in the empirical results and theoretical framework are roughly similar, which is summarized in Table 3. As such, the expectations have been fulfilled. However, again there are a few important points for discussion. The empirical results show there are more desired leadership behaviors than recognized in literature as effective behaviors in the strategy implementation process. Nonetheless, most of these behaviors did not appear very clearly in this research. It is therefore questionable whether these behaviors actually have an effect when putting strategy into practice.

<b>Relation-oriented behavior</b>	<b>Desired by this study</b>	<b>Desired by existing literature</b>
Communication	+	Higgs & Rowland (2005)
Frequent communication	+	Battilana et al. (2010)
Listening	+	Van der Weide & Wilderom (2004)
Involve team members	+	Higgs & Rowland (2005) Miller (2001)
Empowering	+	Yukl (2012) Yukl et al. (2002)
Develop people within a team	+	Stoker (2006)

Communicate with senior management	+	?
Emotional support	-	Bass & Stogdill (1990)

**Table 3.** Schematic overview of desired relation-oriented behaviors according to this research and existing literature

A behavior that did appear clearly is communicating with senior management. Though, this behavior is not yet recognized in literature and requires further research. Middle managers are expected to communicate with senior management about what is happening at the work floor. Employees want to feel heard, which can be achieved by having their 'voice' heard by the middle manager towards the senior management. If senior management anticipates this, it will ensure that strategy, which has been developed at a high level, will be more in line with practice. Since the workforce know better than anyone how strategy works in practice, it is relevant to include input from them in the implementation of strategy. As a result, it is possible to continuously monitor whether the strategy is in line with practice. Respondents therefore consider this behavior to be essential when putting strategy into practice.

Finally, it is valuable to consider emotional support as leadership behavior. This behavior is not considered as an essential leadership behavior in the empirical data, in contrast to the theory (Bass & Stogdill, 1990). When operationalizing the behavior 'emotional support' in theory, this appears to consist of showing sympathy to their employees (Kavanagh & Ashkanasy, 2006) and take into account whether or not employees are prepared to change (Miller, 2001). Although this was expected, the emotional support of employees was not mentioned during the interviews.

This research shows that the majority of respondents do believe that middle managers should increasingly focus on communicating and supporting, facilitating and developing employees. This implies that managers should increasingly behave in a relation-oriented manner. This is in line with previous studies (O'Reilly et al., 2010; Van der Weide & Wilderom, 2004).

### 5.1.3 Change-oriented behaviors

The third sub question of this study was: *"Which change-oriented leadership behaviors of middle managers will put strategy into practice?"*. The desired change-oriented behaviors in the empirical results and theoretical framework are generally similar. As a result, the expectations

have been fulfilled. However, there are a number of important points for discussion. Again, the empirical results show there are more desired leadership behaviors than recognized in literature as effective behaviors in the strategy implementation process.

The table below (Table 4) shows an overview of the change-oriented behaviors which according to this research are considered to be desired when putting strategy into practice.

<b>Change-oriented behavior</b>	<b>Desired by this study</b>	<b>Desired by existing literature</b>
Articulate a clear, appealing vision	+	Gill (2002) Rouleau (2005) Seo et al. (2012)
Leading by example	+	?
Promote and valuing strategy	+	?
Having a vision on the implementation of strategy	+	?
Motivating	+	Bass & Stogdill (1990)
Advocating and envisioning change	-	Yukl (2012)
Encouraging innovation	-	Yukl (2012)

**Table 4.** Schematic overview of desired change-oriented behaviors according to this research and existing literature

Firstly, this research shows that middle managers themselves should lead by example. Middle managers need to show exemplary behavior in order to be seen as a role model. When managers are engaged in implementing the strategy and leading by example, it is expected that employees will be inspired and motivated to make an effort as well. Secondly, promoting and valuing strategy is considered as another essential behavior. Middle managers should propagate the strategy and show employees the value of strategy by outlining a vision for the future and a perspective in which strategy is seen as a positive aspect for X. Making people aware of the value of strategy, the added value, is a very effective leadership behavior when employees do not see the value of the strategy and its implementation and therefore do not prioritize it. Thirdly, having a vision on the implementation of strategy is considered to be an important change-oriented behavior as well. In this study it becomes clear that middle managers need express both the necessity of the new strategy and the vision for the future. Middle managers need to have a clear vision on this

and must be able to answer why the new strategy needs to be implemented, what the consequences will be if this is not done and for example how big the necessity of the new direction is. These three above-mentioned behaviors are not yet linked in literature to the successful implementation of strategy. Therefore, these behaviors complement existing literature. However, causal relationships need to be established in future research.

Both advocating and envisioning change and encouraging innovation did not appear clearly as essential leadership behaviors in the empirical research. This is in contrast to the theory (Yukl, 2012). Though this was expected, these two behaviors were not mentioned during the interviews. Respondents mainly talked about vision, not about change. One can see this as a matter of concern, since it seems as if the respondents do not explicitly realize that implementing a strategy involves major changes and implies that change has to occur.

In addition, it is interesting to note that respondents often mentioned task- and relation-oriented behaviors while being asked about desired leadership behaviors in the implementation process. This is reflected in the empirical results. However, in literature there is an increasing focus on change-oriented leaders. These leaders are seen as leaders who are able to bring about change in an organization and thus also able to implement a strategy (Avolio et al., 2013; Bass, 1999; O'Reilly et al., 2010; Van der Weide & Wilderom, 2004). Nevertheless, in this research a number of important change-oriented behaviors have been identified that will support the implementation process.

#### 5.1.4 Passive behaviors

The fourth sub question was formulated as follows: *“Which passive leadership behaviors of middle managers will put strategy into practice?”*. It can be concluded that passive leadership behaviors of middle managers will not support the strategy implementation process in any way. Moreover, passive behaviors are considered as barriers when putting into practice. As a result, the expectations have been fulfilled (O'Reilly et al., 2010; Van der Weide & Wilderom, 2004).

#### 5.1.5 Barriers strategy implementation

The final sub question was: *“What are barriers to the successful implementation of strategy?”*. It appears that current leadership behaviors of middle managers in many aspects do not correspond with the desired leadership behaviors within the organization. This while many leadership

behaviors which are absent, both according to this research and previous studies, are essential for the successful implementation of strategy. Besides the absence of essential leadership behaviors, there are some other barriers which indirectly relate to the (passive) leadership behaviors of middle managers as well.

In this research, many barriers have been identified. When comparing these barriers with the barriers identified in the study of Jooste and Fourie (2009), it can be concluded that the five most important barriers that were identified in the study of Jooste and Fourie (2009) are present at X, with one exception. This is worrying, as the presence of these barriers has a major impact on the successful implementation of strategy and therefore on the business performance. Consequently, it is valuable for the research organization that current barriers have been identified in this study. These barriers need to be removed, which is to some extent possible by putting into practice the desired leadership behaviors described in this study.

Firstly, this research clearly shows that the workforce does not understand the X strategy. There is a high degree of ignorance about the strategy, employees do not know what the strategy is about and do not have a conscious idea of whether their activities contribute to the practice of strategy. According to the study of Jooste and Fourie (2009), this is also the biggest barrier to the implementation process. The second biggest barrier (Jooste & Fourie, 2009) is the ineffective communication of the strategy to the workforce. In this study, this also emerges as an important barrier. Strategy is communicated only once or twice a year, with approximately 60 slides being shown to make the strategy "clear". Thirdly, the study of Jooste and Fourie (2009) shows that "the goals of, and incentives for, the workforce are not aligned with the strategy of the organization" is another important barrier. This barrier is clearly visible in this research as well. Currently, there is little or no support from senior management to translate the strategy properly. As a result, strategic objectives are interpreted in a too different way by middle managers. In addition, these managers make many self-serving decisions, instead of making them in the interests of the organization's strategy. The support that middle management expects from senior management is the result of the fact that many middle managers indicate they do not know how to properly implement strategy at departmental level. They are uncertain or inexperienced, which according to Jooste and Fourie (2009) is the fourth most important barrier. Middle

managers experience that strategy is not communicated to them in a clear and unambiguous way. Nor do they offer any leadership courses on this subject. This makes it even more difficult for them to successfully put strategy into practice.

A barrier which does not emerge in this research, yet is number 5 as the most important barriers in the study of Jooste & Fourie (2009), is "human capital is not effectively developed to support strategy implementation". However, this organization does develop its human capital effectively to support the implementation of the strategy. However, when considering the longer term, the company is struggling with an excessive outflow of knowledge. This is a cause for concern as it may become a major barrier to the successful implementation of strategy in the future.

Other important barriers which clearly emerged in this study were, first of all, a lack of priority given to strategy by middle managers. Employees notice there is little or no attention for strategy. Middle managers mainly focus on the short term and pay little attention to the long term. Yet, these barriers are not included in the study of Jooste and Fourie (2009). In addition, the lack of time and high workload is considered to be an important barrier to the implementation process, which means middle managers should reserve time and resources for the implementation. In other words, currently, the allocation of time and resources is not aligned with the X strategy. In this research it is assumed that this barrier has a large effect on the practice of strategy. However, the study of Jooste and Fourie (2009) claims it is not. As mentioned, one explanation for this might be that this research took place in a different context. Furthermore, the absence of an implementation plan and the fact that strategy is experienced as a top-down process in which there is no possibility for bottom-up influence are considered as important barriers in this study. Employees prefer to be involved in the strategy implementation process, though currently this is not the case. As a result, it is almost impossible to get support and commitment from the work floor to put strategy into practice. Finally, the lack of clarity and focus in the formulated strategy is considered to be a major barrier. It is important to formulate fewer strategic objectives in order to ensure focus in the implementation of strategy. However, the formulation of strategy will not be extensively discussed in this study.

According to the study by Jooste and Fourie (2009), many of the above barriers affect the strategy implementation process only a small to moderate extent. However, as mentioned before, this research was conducted in a different context. According to the contingency theory (Fry & Smith, 1987) different environmental factors ensures that each environment requires adapted behavior and adapted approaches. It is therefore assumed that the effect of the barriers defined in this study as important is more significant.

## 5.2 Answer to the research question

The objective of this study was to provide insight into which leadership behavior middle managers should engage in order to implement strategy, or in other words, to put strategy into practice. Therefore, this thesis was aimed at answering the following research question: *“Which leadership behaviors should middle managers engage in order to put strategy into practice?”*. In this research, a large number of leadership behaviors have been identified. It is noted that not necessarily one category of leadership behavior emerges as the most effective category. Effective behaviors when putting strategy into practice therefore consist of a mix of task-, relation- and change-oriented behaviors. In this, both empirical and theoretical results show that passive behaviors do not support the implementation process. As a result, the expectations were partly fulfilled (O'Reilly et al., 2010; Van der Weide & Wilderom, 2004).

From literature, it is argued that relation- and change-oriented behaviors of the middle manager are most important when putting strategy into practice. Moreover, a shift in leadership theories has emerged towards a more change-oriented leader (Avolio et al., 2009; Stoker, 2006). However, this research shows that task-oriented behavior is at least as important regarding strategy implementation. As such, this is an important finding. It is necessary to re-focus on goal-oriented management, on providing a clear framework. This research shows that middle managers do not pay enough attention to setting goals and deadlines to ensure strategy gets implemented, to monitor, to clarify objectives and to provide a clear framework. However, it should be noted that employees want to receive freedom to decide for themselves 'how' they implement the goals and strategy. After all, it is also about empowering, about giving people responsibilities, which is a relation-oriented behavior.

Furthermore, it can be concluded that the large number of leadership behaviors that are considered desirable in this study do not fit within one leadership style. As a result, the expectations have been fulfilled (Passmore, Lafferty, & Spencer, 2009). Additionally, the desired leadership behaviors in the empirical results and the theoretical framework are generally similar. As such, the expectations have partly been fulfilled. However, the empirical results show that there are more desired leadership behaviors than recognized in literature as effective behaviors when putting strategy into practice. This concerns the following leadership behaviors: translating strategy, informing about the “why”, providing a clear framework, making decisions about objectives and priorities, communicating with senior management, leading by example, promoting and valuing strategy and lastly having a vision on the implementation of strategy. By this, our knowledge of how aggregate practitioners - middle managers - should behave – praxis – when putting strategy into practice is extended. However, causal relationships should be established in future research.

Finally, it can be concluded that current leadership behaviors of middle managers in many aspects do not correspond with the desired leadership behaviors within the organization. This while many leadership behaviors which are absent, both according to this research and existing literature, are essential for the practice of strategy. Together with a number of other barriers, this is an important explanation of why strategy is currently not being successfully implemented, or in other words, putted into practice. However, if middle managers succeed in engaging the defined leadership behaviors in this study, it will definitely influence the practice of strategy, as it will remove important barriers at the same time as well.

### 5.3 Practical recommendations

In this section, five practical recommendations will be given to the research organization X. These recommendations are based on both the results and the interviews in which research participants made suggestions. This study provided insight into which leadership behaviors middle managers should engage in order to put strategy into practice. In addition, the barriers to the successful implementation process were examined. For X, this insight contributes to how their strategy could be implemented more successfully and in what way it is currently impeded. The successful

implementation of a strategy is crucial for organizations to be able to continue to exist; it enhances the competitive advantage and improves the business performance (Olivier & Schwella, 2018; Overstreet et al., 2014; Tait & Nienaber, 2010). If X wants to be able to implement its strategy successfully in the future, it is essential that middle managers engage the identified leadership behaviors from this study.

Therefore, in the first place, it is recommended to develop a Management Development program for middle management. This research and existing literature show that it is desirable for middle managers to have the right qualities, competencies and knowledge to implement strategy. Additionally, managers must be trained in the process of leading the strategy implementation process. A Management Development can contribute to acquiring knowledge about managing strategy implementation. Moreover, one can work on developing the right leadership behaviors of middle management which are required for the successful implementation of strategy. A continuous program emphasizing the future is desirable. In this, attention must be paid to the differences between middle managers. For example, part of the middle management appears to have more desired leadership behaviors than the others. Nevertheless, their need to develop themselves as leaders also remains. One remark that must be made is that not every middle manager wants to participate in that program. The effectiveness of the program will be less if managers are obliged to participate. However, it is expected that when key figures in the organization will participate in this program, other managers will notice these people consider strategy important and are willing to make time for this. It is expected that this will encourage them to participate as well.

The majority of the current middle management within X has grown to a management position because of their technical expertise in the field. These are often technical people. As a result, many middle managers are occasionally more specialists or advisors than managers. The middle management is not selected based on leadership skills, on a willingness to change or on competencies that are relevant to the position for now and in the future. Therefore, the next recommendation is to redesign the recruitment and selection of middle management. The middle management should no longer be a specialist, but a generalist. This calls for a more critical view of the role than before. It is important that middle management is selected on the basis of

knowledge, skills and competencies that correspond with the desired leadership behavior from theory and this research, rather than their expertise within the domain of the profession. With regard to the recruitment of middle management, it is important that the task and job description is clearly defined. Tests on competencies and leadership skills and practical cases could help to select the right people.

To ensure that middle management can implement the strategy successfully, it is important to remove important barriers identified in both theory and empirical results. It is important to note that specific leadership behaviors of middle managers are expected to remove these barriers. Important leadership behaviors which are identified are involving and integrating employees in the implementation process, giving employees the opportunity to exert bottom-up influence, communicating frequently and effectively about the strategy, clarify objectives and providing a clear framework. Other important conditions which must be fulfilled are getting support from senior management during the implementation process and having the space, time and confidence to implement strategy. Moreover, both senior and middle management really need to prioritize strategy and its implementation. Currently, these leadership behaviors are not or rarely present in middle management and the preconditions are not fulfilled. This clearly barriers the successful implementation of strategy. In first place, senior management needs to understand the current barriers and the necessity to remove them. Next, it is crucial that both senior and middle management, do everything in their power to remove these barriers.

Here, an important point is made. The starting point is the fact that both senior and middle management have to consider strategy as important. Currently, strategy is not prioritized, as a result of which it is not implemented. As long as strategy is not considered a priority, and is not seen as valuable, no one will pay attention to it. So, it all starts at the top. They have to lead by example and propagate that they consider strategy and its implementation as important, they have to propagate an inspiring vision. Subsequently, middle management will also be inspired and will be able to communicate convincingly to the employees about the value of strategy.

Lastly, it is clear from this study that there is a lack of focus in the current strategy. There is no clear and concrete strategy and the vision is not unambiguous. It is therefore recommended to pay attention to the first phase of the strategic management process as well, the formulation

phase. Currently, no clear decisions are made, so both middle managers and employees experience just everything is done, and ultimately nothing. Also, no one can describe, communicate or monitor the strategy in an effective way. Focus in the number of strategic objectives will therefore contribute to putting strategy into practice. Strategic objectives are the basis for implementing the strategy. However, this study does not focus in detail on the formulation phase of the strategic management process.

It should be noted that these recommendations require time before things can be achieved. Moreover, this also applies to the implementation of the strategy in an organization such as X; the behavior of approximately 2200 employees does not suddenly change.

## 5.4 Limitations

### 5.4.1 Internal validity

An attempt is made to uncover all relevant leadership behaviors of middle managers that are influential for the practice of strategy. This is done by conducting an explorative case study in which interviews were conducted. Then, the interviews were coded through the use of the grounded theory method. However, it remains arguable whether literature research should be done in combination with the grounded theory. To be more specific, it can be argued that literature review biases the view of researchers. As a result, the researcher would only take into account particular relevant aspects which could negatively influence the internal validity. On the other side, as Dey (1999) argues, an open mind is not an empty head. This implies that it makes a difference how prior knowledge is used. In other words, prior literature should be utilized to inform the analysis instead of directing towards existing literature. This thesis takes this into account because it allows new important leadership behaviors to be found which improves the internal validity of this thesis.

In addition, during the interviews it turned out that the respondents did not always give an objective answer. More specifically, certain respondents applied too much nuance to their answers. This is probably because they wanted to give socially desired answers, or they were afraid their manager would be told what they said. Moreover, not every opinion was supported by an underlying motivation. This can lead to more leadership behaviors playing a role than the

behaviors that are represented in this thesis' findings. As a result, this thesis becomes less internally valid. In order to mitigate this issue, the interview questions were reformulated if it turned out that they were misunderstood or misinterpreted.

This study identified a large number of leadership behaviors. Due to the qualitative research approach, it has not been possible to establish causal relationships or to test theoretical hypotheses. In addition, there was room for interpretation of the findings. As a result, it was not possible to make explicit statements about the relationship between leadership behavior and the degree of impact on the practice of strategy. This can be seen as a limitation for this research. As a result, a hierarchy has yet to be discovered that indicates to what extent each leadership behavior has an effect on the successful implementation of strategy. This is relevant because it will clarify the significance of the leadership behaviors. Therefore, the internal validity of this thesis would have been better if more orientation interviews were held in which the relevant leadership behaviors emerged. Subsequently, an interview phase could take place in which the degree of influence was determined. Another option is to conduct an interview phase to determine the relevant leadership behaviors, and then arrange a survey phase to determine the degree of influence. Future research could adopt one of these approaches.

However, the qualitative research method in this study was a well-considered choice, both in terms of gaining insight into the desired leadership behaviors of middle managers, and in terms of the contribution this research makes to science by carrying out a qualitative study into leadership. Qualitative research into leadership is considered to be more related to literature on strategy implementation than quantitative research (O'Reilly et al., 2010). In addition, a qualitative approach makes it easier to provide insight into the actual leadership behavior of middle managers (Higgs & Rowland, 2005).

#### 5.4.2 External validity and representativeness

The interviews were spread over five different research groups (clusters). When the research groups are further specified, two or more research participants of each research group were interviewed. It is recommended to interview more research participants from each research group, in order to increase the representativeness of each research group. Moreover, the X organization of X was the target population, which meant that the scope of the study was large.

As a result, the representativeness of the study is limited. For this reason, it is recommended to interview more research participants in the follow-up study. Nevertheless, the chosen research group remains of great added value for this study. By means of the used method of collecting the perspectives of various stakeholders from different organizational levels and clusters in the X organization, a clear understanding was obtained of the desired leadership behaviors. As was shown in the results section, the perspectives sometimes differ. This is illustrated by the fact that middle management was relatively often convinced that they translated the strategy well to their team and that their team knew the strategy, while employees indicated the opposite. If, for example, it had been decided to not include the employees, but only the middle managers, the perspective on the middle management with its leadership behavior would not have been complete.

As a result of the above-mentioned way of collecting data, the representativeness and thus the external validity of this thesis is positively influenced. In addition, the findings in this study are not formulated too specified because then it would be difficult to generalize them. This positively influence the external validity as well. Nonetheless, including only respondents from one case, X, implies that this thesis uses a convenience sample as these respondents are easy to contact and reach. This entails some representativeness issues due to sampling errors. Namely, the findings of this thesis could be influenced by contexts as the case is based on one specific business. It would be more representative to analyze multiple businesses from the Netherlands. At the end this will positively influence the external validity.

In addition, it has yet to be discovered to what extent each leadership behavior discussed in this thesis findings influences the practice of strategy. It is also unknown whether the behaviors iteratively or in conjunction influence each other. As a result, the generalizability of this thesis' findings is diminished. To mitigate this, future research could deductively test this thesis' findings in other industries, business segments and countries. For example, future researchers can utilize these leadership behaviors as variables in surveys in order to determine on a large scale whether the leadership behaviors are influencing the practice of strategy. The propositions of this thesis can be used to do this. In the end, the leadership behaviors and barriers should be generalized in order to understand how to put strategy into practice. This is valuable because by this the

traditional perspective of strategy can be extended (Farjoun, 2002; Jarzabkowski, 2004; Whittington, 2006). A first step could be to generalize this thesis' findings for the Netherlands. Subsequently, the findings could be generalized for neighboring countries of the Netherlands and lastly for Western Europe.

#### 5.4.3 Reliability

Several attempts are made to improve the reliability of this thesis. For example, reliability of qualitative research is improved by showing how the findings are derived. Therefore, the full coding process can be requested from the author. Moreover, this research used a coding format that has been provided with feedback from several professors and teachers. The format treats the data consistently, so the chance is small that the findings will be different if this thesis is repeated. Nevertheless, the reliability of this thesis can also be questioned. The findings are based on experiences and observations of the respondents. It is found that respondents have given opinions and experiences that were significantly different. In addition, it is possible that respondents make a new observation, which influences their opinion on a certain aspect. As a result, the opinion given during the interview is different from the opinion they currently have. This decreases the chance that the same findings are found when this research is done again, which has a negative effect on the reliability of this thesis.

Furthermore, it remains questionable whether the four categories to arrange leader behaviors (Derue et al., 2011; Yukl et al., 2002) can cover all effective behaviors in the strategy implementation process. In addition, it is possible more behaviors have been identified in literature that positively affect the implementation process than is shown in the theoretical framework of this study. As mentioned, in this study, a large number of leadership behaviors have been identified to have a positive effect on the strategy implementation process. The variety of desired leadership behaviors is higher in practice than those demonstrated by theory. It appears that the identified leadership behaviors do not apply to one particular leadership style. As a result, the expectation has been fulfilled that effective leadership often requires switching between styles. Moreover, the identified leadership behaviors in this study, creates the demand to indicate the crucial, strategic role that middle management has in the strategy implementation process, in leadership styles and thus to complement the leadership theories.

## 5.5 Contributions

These findings have implications both for researchers who wish to untangle the complexities of strategy implementation processes and for practitioners who want to improve middle managers behaviors to enact their role as strategists. At first glance, the leadership behaviors – praxis - found in this study broadly resonate with prior works on middle managers' behaviors in the strategic implementation process, considering them as strategic assets. However, these findings differ from prior works by providing an in-depth understanding of which behaviors middle managers should engage in the strategy implementation process. This study provides insight in how strategists should behave and how that is influential for the practice of strategy.

In addition, a large number of leadership behaviors have been identified in this study to have a positive effect on the strategy implementation process. The variety of desired leadership behaviors is higher in practice than those demonstrated by theory. By this, existing research can be extended, and future researchers can deductively test the identified leadership behaviors. To be more specific, future researchers can determine the behaviors' generalizability by testing them in other industries or regions. In order to do this, future researchers can utilize the propositions that were formulated in chapter 4.

Furthermore, this research answers the calls from the SAP perspective to identify which behaviors middle managers - aggregate practioners - should actually engage in order to put strategy into practice. By this, the gap in our knowledge of what implementation exactly means in terms of micro detail of the agency involved is reduced. Micro-level characteristics of strategy implementation are identified in this study and therefore existing SAP literature is extended (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Johnson et al., 2007; Whittington, 2006). Additionally, new insights into how to direct organizational activities so that practice will be aligned with the strategy of an organization is a valuable addition to existing SAP research (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). Furthermore, almost all management concepts are dominated by the understanding of strategy as a rational top down formal planning process. This study distinct from traditional studies by providing insight in how strategy should be implemented by middle managers. This study therefore extends the traditional perspective which attributes strategy only to senior management and therefore neglects the influence of middle management on strategy. This study

also provided insight into the role of middle management in a specific context, namely from the perspective of an organization of engineers and technicians (Balogun & Johnson, 2005). Existing theories can therefore be extended with these findings.

Organizations that are struggling with the implementation of their strategy can use the identified leadership behaviors to put strategy into practice. As such, the findings of this study are highly relevant to X, because this study provides insight into which leadership behaviors of middle management contribute to a successful implementation of strategy. In addition, an explanation was given regarding why currently, the intended strategic objectives do not lead to the desired implementation and result. For practitioners, these findings provide some useful insights about the behaviors middle managers require to daily fulfil their role to implement strategy. As we saw, successful middle managers should employ a variety of leadership behaviors. The mentioned leadership behaviors in this study serve as a frame of reference for practitioners to successfully implement strategy, or in other words, to put strategy into practice.

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Appendix 1: Organization chart

x

## Appendix 2: Interview protocol

The potential respondents will be contacted by mail and/or by phone to seek approval and to confirm their participation in this study.

Either via e-mail or via the phone appointment(s) for the interviews will be made. The date, time and place will be confirmed by e-mail and an explanation of this study will be included.

The interview questions will be sent to the interviewees beforehand, so that the interviewees can get familiar with the questions.

The interviews will be conducted by one interviewer.

All interviews will be recorded.

All interviews will be conducted face-to-face at the interviewees preferred place.

The interviews will take approximately 40 to 60 minutes.

At the beginning of the interview, the study will be explained to the interviewees and the interviewees will get the chance to ask questions.

After the interview has taken place, the interviews will be transcribed immediately.

The transcribed interviews will be sent to the interviewees for approval.

## Appendix 3: Questionnaire

### Interview with middle managers

Before start: I will anonymize the interviews so your name will not appear and therefore I would like to ask if it is okay to use your data for my research.

Short explanation of the research [origin of the research, strategy implementation process, role middle management and leadership in strategy implementation, leadership behavior]

#### **Introduction [5 minutes]**

What is your function within this organization?

How long do you work for the organization?

How large is the team that you manage?

How diverse is the team that you manage?

How would you describe your strategic role within the organization?

*Optional: How do you see yourself as a leader?*

#### **X strategy [10 minutes]**

How would you describe the X strategy of the organization?

Do you think the X strategy is clear for all middle managers at X?

Is there a clear direction towards all employees can work to?

To what extent do you notice employees are engaged in strategy?

Is there awareness of the X strategy?

Do employees know how they can contribute to realize strategic goals?

Can strategy be translated into concrete actions? Is there a measurable result, timing and clear responsibilities?

In general, what is / how do you perceive your role in the implementation process of the X strategy?

*Optional: What is your vision of where you want to go with your team/department?*

*How do you measure the implementation of each strategic objective to accomplish the end vision?*

Explanation of X strategy that needs to be implemented: .....

## Leadership behavior and strategy implementation [30 minutes]

*Help tool:*

### Task-oriented behaviors

*Ensure that people, equipment, and other resources are used in an efficient way to accomplish the desired goal.*

Planning and organizing work, monitor operations, clarify roles, clarify objectives, set goals and deadlines, informing, establish well-defined pattern of communication.

### Relation-oriented behaviors

*Enhance member skills, the leader-member relationship, identification with work and the organization, and commitment to the mission.*

Supporting, recognizing, empowering, and developing people within a team, establish trust and good communication with subordinates.

### Change-oriented behaviors

*Encourage discussions about future possibilities, expressing vision, valuing strategy.*

Articulating and inspiring vision, advocating and envisioning change and encouraging innovation.

### Passive behaviors

*Avoiding involvement, avoid making decisions, only reacting to problems if serious, reacting to failure and responding with delay.*

To what extent and in what way do you already support the implementation of the X strategy? *(how much time per week, how do you translate strategic objectives into your team, what activities)*

Which leadership behavior should you, as a leader, engage in order to support the implementation of the X strategy? *(focus on help tool, which behavior and how does this influence the implementation in their opinion)*

What are the key behaviors of a leader to steer employees in the right way so that activities are aligned with the X strategy?

*Optional:*

*What do you need as a leader to support the X strategy?*

*What do you expect from senior/top management? What help do you need as a leader from senior/top management*

*How do you motivate your team to accomplish the strategic goals of the X strategy?*

*How do you set long-term goals for your team? How often do you check and review these goals?*

*What kind of activities of employees will contribute to the implementation of a strategy?*

### **Barriers [10 minutes]**

What are the various challenges you face during the implementation process of the X strategy? *Sufficient engagement?*

Which leadership behaviors are barriers to effective implementation of the X strategy?  
*Or overall barriers?*

*Optional: How/what should the organization change to successfully implement the X strategy?*

### **Conclusion**

Are there any other relevant themes I did not consider and discussed yet, and which could be important to mention?

Do you want to have my final research?

## Interview with employees

Before start: I will anonymize the interviews so your name will not appear and therefore I would like to ask if it is okay to use your data for my research.

Short explanation of the research [origin of the research, strategy implementation process, role middle management and leadership in strategy implementation, leadership behavior]

### Introduction

What is your function within this organization?

How long do you work for the organization?

How would you describe your role within the organization?

### X strategy

Are you aware of the X strategy?

How would you describe the X strategy of the organization? *If employee does not know anything about the strategy:* How important is strategy for you?

How would you describe the vision of your team? (*what are your team's goals*)

Is the X strategy sufficiently clear to you? Is it formulated clearly enough?

Is there a clear direction towards you can work to?

To what extent are you engaged in strategy?

In general, how do you perceive your role in the implementation process of the X strategy?

*Explanation of X strategy that needs to be implemented: .....*

## Leadership behavior and strategy implementation

*Help tool:*

### Task-oriented behaviors

*Ensure that people, equipment, and other resources are used in an efficient way to accomplish the desired goal.*

Planning and organizing work, monitor operations, clarify roles, clarify objectives, set goals and deadlines, informing, establish well-defined pattern of communication.

### Relation-oriented behaviors

*Enhance member skills, the leader-member relationship, identification with work and the organization, and commitment to the mission.*

Supporting, recognizing, empowering, and developing people within a team, establish trust and good communication with subordinates.

### Change-oriented behaviors

*Encourage discussions about future possibilities, expressing vision, valuing strategy.*

Articulating and inspiring vision, motivating, advocating and envisioning change and encouraging innovation.

### Passive behaviors

*Avoiding involvement, avoid making decisions, only reacting to problems if serious, reacting to failure and responding with delay.*

Do you know how you can contribute to the greater whole (how to contribute to realize strategic goals)?

What do you need (information, resources) as an employee in order to know how you can contribute to the greater whole (to support the X strategy)?

To what extent do you notice that the X strategy can be translated into concrete actions? Is there a measurable result, timing and clear responsibilities?

Which leadership behavior should your leader engage in order to support the implementation of the X strategy? (*help tool*)

What does your leader already do to support you in implementing strategic plans of the X organization?

If you were a manager, how would you ensure that employees can translate from strategy to execution? (how to align activities with strategy)

## Barriers

What could your manager change to improve the implementation of strategy?

Which leadership behaviors are barriers to effective implementation of the X strategy?

*Or overall barriers?*

How/what should the organization change to successfully implement their X strategy?

### **Conclusion**

Are there any other relevant themes I did not consider and discussed yet, and which could important to mention?

Do you want to have my final research?

Appendix 4: Coding tree

