

# Middle Managers Who Are Doing Well With Change: Helping and Hindering Factors

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## Abstract

This research study was influenced by the fact that while change is synonymous with middle management, and there is much that has been written about how middle managers can help their organizations through change initiatives and how they might assist their staff in coping with changes, there is a surprising lack of research regarding what helps middle managers themselves to deal well with change. Informed by positive psychology, this study looked at middle managers who self-identified as doing well with the changes affecting their work. The Enhanced Critical Incident Technique (ECIT) was utilized for the purpose of investigating what helps, hinders, and may help middle managers to do well with changes that affect their work. Ten middle managers working in the financial sector in the Greater Vancouver and Toronto areas were interviewed. Participant responses generated 84 critical incidents, which were classified into 7 categories: perspective, relationships, work factors, experience, personal life, personal control, health and fitness. Implications for organizations, middle managers, and counselling practice are discussed.

## Résumé

Cette recherche a été influencée par le fait que tandis que le changement est synonyme des cadres intermédiaires, il existe un

manque de recherches sur ce qui aide les cadres intermédiaires de bien faire face au changement. Informé par la psychologie positive, cette étude a regardé les cadres intermédiaires qui se sont identifiés comme faisant bien avec les changements qui affectent leur travail. La technique de l'incident critique (Enhanced ECIT) a été utilisée dans le but d'enquêter sur ce qui aide, entrave, et pourrait aider les cadres intermédiaires, à bien faire avec les changements qui affectent leur travail. Dix cadres intermédiaires travaillant dans le secteur financier, dans les régions de Vancouver et de Toronto ont été interrogés. Les réponses des participants ont donné 84 incidents critiques, qui ont été regroupés en 7 catégories: la perspective, les relations, les facteurs de travail, l'expérience, la vie personnelle, le contrôle personnel, la santé et la condition physique. Implications pour les organisations, les cadres intermédiaires et la pratique du counseling sont discutées.

Despite the fact that change can be quite difficult for workers to deal with, change efforts are increasingly common within organizations. So much so that recent research has focused on the experience of change fatigue in workers (Bernerth, Walker, & Harris, 2011). Change is certainly ever present in the role of middle manager (Luscher & Lewis, 2008), and the relationship between middle managers and organizational change is a unique one given that

they are both the targets of organizational change and the implementers (Balogun, 2003). Middle managers play a pivotal role in organizational change (Balogun 2003) in that they are charged with interpreting it, implementing it, and selling it (Rouleau, 2005). In addition, they are expected to help their staff to cope with change (Huy, 2001).

The challenges of a position so interconnected with change have been acknowledged in the literature. For example, middle managers are expected to serve as role models in embracing organizational changes (Labianca, Gray, & Brass, 2000), despite the fact that these changes (especially large scale changes) are often ones they did not choose, yet are mandated to implement (Balogun & Johnson, 2004). Although middle managers may not have been part of the decision making process, they are expected to understand the changes, figure out the details, and ensure they are executed (Balogun & Johnson, 2004). Luscher and Lewis (2008) described middle managers as experiencing confusion and anxiety, struggling to make sense of all the changes "which debilitates decision making and implementation" (p. 222). Further, middle managers have been said to be susceptible to cognitive disorder during large scale changes because they are the ones responsible for implementing the many details of restructuring, such as deciding how to reorganize departments, and which jobs to eliminate (McKinley &



Scherer, 2000). As a result of many change initiatives, the role of middle manager itself has “become increasingly pressurized”(p. 192) with middle managers taking on a wider range of tasks and experiencing a poorer work-life balance than ever before (Conway & Monks, 2011). Since change is intrinsic to the role of middle management and given that research shows middle managers are under increased pressures as a result, it is surprising that so little research touches upon how middle managers deal with change, or that investigates what could be of help to them in managing change more effectively for themselves.

Middle managers working in the financial sector in recent years have likely experienced even more change than is typical. The enactment of the Dodd-Frank act and of Basel III in the United States impacted nearly all aspects of the financial industry (Harvard, 2010). Dodd-Frank has been described as the most extensive increase in regulation of the financial services industry since the ‘Great Depression’ (McKinsey, 2011). These enactments also led to substantial changes within the Canadian financial sector (Canadian Business, 2012). Also, given the criticality of the financial sector to the economy and to people’s well being, understanding their experiences of change affecting their work, and how they have been able to deal well with these changes, would be important to understand.

### Method

As a way to investigate what helps and hinders middle managers in dealing well with change, the Enhanced Critical Incident Technique (ECIT) was utilized (Butterfield, Borgen, Maglio & Amundson, 2009). The ECIT is a qualitative research method that enhances the Critical Incident Technique (CIT)

developed by Flanagan (1954) with the addition of nine credibility checks designed to increase the trustworthiness of the findings. The original CIT has been used in prior studies investigating managers (Hamlin & Serventi, 2008) and is well suited to the research question of this study as it is intended to elicit both helping and hindering factors (Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson & Maglio, 2005). The ECIT goes one step further by also asking participants whether there are factors that would have been helpful to them in dealing with change had they been available, or factors that would be helpful to them going forward (Butterfield et al., 2009).

### Participants

For the purpose of the study, the term middle management was defined as “all levels of management between the supervisory level and the top of the organization” (Parris, Vickers & Wilkes, 2008 p. 407), thereby encompassing a wide range of management positions from one level above first line supervisor to two levels below Chief Executive Officer (Huy, 2002). These managers are “in the middle” in the sense that although they are leaders themselves, they are also being led (Stoker, 2006).

Recruitment of participants consisted of purposive sampling, word of mouth and “snowballing” wherein participants recommended others who might be interested in also participating. This led to the participation of individuals across three financial institutions within two large Canadian cities. Participants were chosen to participate if they: a) were employed as middle managers, in the financial sector b) reported having experienced change/s which affected their work in the previous 6 months and c) self-

identified as “doing well” with the change/s.

The sample included five female and five male (N=10) middle managers between the ages of 32 and 52. Participants were not new to the financial sector as the average length of time in the sector was 22 years. Positions included a range of middle management levels from sales manager to roles with significant scope of influence such as department president and senior director. Household incomes ranged from \$150,000 to \$450,000 per year, and the average was \$300,000. Four participants reported possessing a Bachelor’s degree and two a Master’s degree. Nine of the ten participants reported being married, and all but one reported having children.

### Data Collection Procedure

Prior to participation participants signed an informed consent document which outlined the purpose of the study, their rights as participants, and informed them of the measures which would be utilized to maintain their confidentiality. Participant interviews were conducted according to the ECIT method (Butterfield et al., 2009). Participants were first asked open-ended questions designed to provide a contextual frame from which the critical incident data could be understood. They were asked to describe their current work situation, and were asked what ‘doing well’ meant to them. Next, participants were asked to rate themselves on a scale from one to ten in regard to how well they felt they were doing with the changes they had experienced. They were asked to relate the changes they had experienced in the past six months and to describe the impacts of these changes upon their work. They were told that change in any area of their life was considered relevant so long as it had impacted



their work in some way.

Participants were asked the critical incident questions according to the traditional CIT method (Flanagan, 1954): a) what has helped you in doing well with the changes that have affected your work? and b) what has made it more difficult for you to do well? In order to ensure the credibility of the incidents provided, participants were also asked to provide examples of these incidents and/or to explain the way in which these incidents were personally helpful and/or hindering. Additionally, a wish list component (Butterfield et al., 2009) was incorporated by asking participants to relate what would help them to continue doing well and/or what would have been helpful to them had it been available. Lastly, demographic data was obtained for the purpose of describing the sample. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and coded in order to maintain confidentiality.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis was conducted according to standard CIT methodology (Flanagan, 1954; Woolsey, 1986). An item was deemed to be a critical incident (CI) if it was described by a participant to be helpful or hindering to their ability to do well with the changes they experienced. Similarly, wish list items (WL) were those that participants believed would have been helpful to them in dealing well with the changes or would be helpful going forward. CI and WL items were only considered credible when supporting evidence (the importance of the item and/or an example of how it was helpful or hindering) was also present.

Once the CI's and WL items had been identified from interview transcripts, categories were created by looking for similarities, differ-

ences, and themes among the CI and WL items. One transcript at a time, the CI and WL items were placed into either existing categories (merging or expanding the categories as needed) or new categories as deemed necessary to appropriately represent the items. When 10% of the interviews remained to be placed into categories, a self-descriptive title and operational definition for each category was finalized. All of the remaining CI and WL items fit into the created categories (Butterfield et al., 2009), which suggested that the categories were comprehensive in representing the interview data.

Data were subjected to nine credibility checks according to ECIT procedure (Butterfield et al., 2009): (a) descriptive validity (audiotaping of interviews), (b) interview fidelity (one in four recordings was reviewed by someone other than the interviewer to ensure adherence to the interview protocol), (c) independent extraction of a random selection of critical incidents and wish list items by a second researcher with 100% agreement required for utilization, (d) exhaustiveness, the point at which no new categories surface, achieved prior to completion of data analysis, (e) participa-

tion rate of at least 25% required for a category to be considered viable (Borgen & Amundson, 1984), (f) independent placement of critical incidents and wish list items into the category scheme with an agreement rate of 80% or higher required (Andersson & Nilsson, 1964), (g) post interview cross-checking by participants to ensure that their critical incident and wish list items were placed into fitting categories with appropriate category titles, (h) expert opinion obtained regarding the rationality of the categories created, and (i) theoretical agreement with the categories created. Data from the current study met or exceeded each requirement of the ECIT methodology (Butterfield et al., 2009).

**Results**

**Critical Incident Data**

The 10 participant interviews produced 84 critical incidents, of which 47 were helpful factors, 17 were hindering factors, and 20 were wish list items. These were placed into seven categories: perspective, relationships, work factors, experience, personal life, personal control, and health and fitness. These categories, participation rates, and num-

Table 1  
Critical Incidents and Wish List Items

\* *Bolded numbers indicate the four highest participation rates*

	Categories	Helping Critical Incidents (N = 25)			Hindering Critical Incidents (N = 15)			Wish List Items (N = 15)		
		Participants (N = 7)	Incidents		Participants (N = 7)	Incidents	N	Participants (N = 7)	Incidents	n
		n	%	n	n	%	N	n	%	n
1.	Perspective	7	<b>70.0</b>	11	2	20.0	2	1	10.0	1
2.	Relationships	7	<b>70.0</b>	10	2	20.0	2	2	20.0	2
3.	Work Factors	5	50.0	6	7	<b>70.0</b>	10	8	<b>80.0</b>	14
4.	Experience	5	50.0	7	1	10.0	1	1	10.0	1
5.	Personal Life	4	40.0	4	1	10.0	1	0	-	0
6.	Personal Control	4	40.0	6	1	10.0	1	1	10.0	1
7.	Health & Fitness	3	30.0	3	0	-	0	1	10.0	1



ber of incidents are shown in Table 1. In the following section, each category is described in further detail and samples of participant comments (CI and WL items) that were placed into the category in question are provided as examples.

### Category 1: Perspective

This category contained the highest number of helpful incidents of all the categories (11) and had a 70% participation rate. It was also described twice as being hindering (20% participation rate), and once as a wish list item (10% participation rate). Within this category, maintaining one's perspective by remembering that "this is not life or death, it's just a job" was said to be helpful. Several participants explained that it was helpful, even exciting, when the change they experienced was one they viewed as "sensible" or "positive." Having a sense of humour and trying to find the positives in a given situation, was also said to be helpful. One participant explained that "there's always going to be change, it's not all bad, so look for the positive... that helps you because you're not down in the muck." Another participant described his perspective stating, "My perspective on change is less about fear, worry, and the unknown, and more in terms of how I can influence, what I can bring to the table, what I can do." Conversely, resisting change or being concerned that a change could have a negative personal impact was said to be hindering. As one participant stated, "Resistance to the change and avoidance of the realities, I think are what got in the way." Along the same lines, focusing on the positive aspects of the changes "rather than the one negative" was mentioned as something that would be helpful going forward.

### Category 2: Relationships

This category contained the second highest number of helpful incidents (10) and had a participation rate of 70%. There were also two hindering factors (20% participation rate) and two wish list items that fit into this category (20% participation rate). Helpful incidents included having a supportive spouse to talk to, having a mentor, liking the people one works with, and having a respectful relationship with those who report to you. For example, one participant stated that speaking with people who were also going through the same changes was helpful, especially positive people, because it allowed for access to information, different perspectives, and insight. Another said:

The other thing that's good for dealing with change is liking the people you work with. If you all like each other it's a lot easier to laugh about something, or swear about something and then move on and get through it...

One participant described her relationship with her small children as helpful because of the distraction and change in perspective it provides. Hindering incidents in this category included having to leave the co-workers one enjoys working with and working with a "negative and untrustworthy person".

As a wish list item, one participant expressed a desire to reconnect with friends in order to share frustrations, laugh, and learn new ways to cope. Another participant expressed a desire for a specific type of relationship:

I would love a mentor... somebody that I could have safe productive discussions with... that would ask you thought-provoking questions or say things that would

make you think differently about change.

### Category 3: Work Factors

This category contained both the highest number of hindering factors and the highest number of wish list items. While work factors were described as helpful 6 times (50% participation rate) they were described as hindering 10 times (70% participation rate) and mentioned as wish list items 14 times with 80% of participants contributing to this category. Having to "help others (her staff) with the change" was described as helpful by one participant because it forced her to accept the changes quickly, rather than challenging them or ruminating about them. Hindering incidents included factors such as the politics at work and having experienced long delays between the announcement of upcoming changes and their actual implementation. One participant also listed others' "ability [or inability]... to deal with change" as hindering. Wish list items in this category included items such as a desire for additional job training, support in implementing changes, and technical tools they could provide to their staff.

Within the work factors category, it was striking how often communication and information were mentioned (12 incidents by 6 participants). Access to information and clear communication was described as helpful; while the opposite, which was mentioned more frequently, was described as hindering. For example, one participant stated that communicating honestly, or "calling a spade a spade", was helpful when discussing changes with his staff. Another participant discussed how it was hindering to not be informed about upcoming changes before her staff members were because it left her with no time



to absorb the information and prepare for their questions. Another described “mixed messaging” from the organization as hindering. Along the same lines, seven wish list items shared by participants conveyed a desire for not only more information from their organizations but also clearer and more timely communication. For instance, one participant stated that it would be helpful to “have the context, the rationale for the change explained” because in “the absence of context and rationale for change people provide their own...which is never good.” Another reported that the communication of a clear organizational purpose or vision would be helpful. He expressed a desire for “a compelling value system to act as the lens through which all decisions are made [because] right now... some of the changes that we’re making, there’s not a clear enough sense of why, so I think that’s why there’s some resistance.”

#### Category 4: Experience

This category contained seven helpful factors (participation rate of 50%), one hindering factor (participation rate 10%), and one wish list item (participation rate 10%). Helpful incidents included such factors as having been through tragedy in the past and having already experienced many changes. For example, one participant stated that “having been through tragedy sometimes provides you the coping skills [such as] how to look on the bright side...control what you can control, all those things that you learn in getting through difficult times, makes it easier the next time”. Another participant described “time in the job and experience... being around and knowing the players, how the organization works” as being helpful as it enabled him to get around the bureaucracy and get

things done quickly. Conversely, a lack of experience was described as hindering by one participant.

#### Category 5: Personal Life

There were four helpful factors (40% participation rate), and one hindering factor (10% participation rate) which fit into this category. There were no wish list items. Examples of helpful factors within this category included maintaining a work life balance and having a full personal life. For example, one participant stated that it “is very important to have external things that aren’t really related to work [because] when you have other things to focus on you’re less likely to be obsessing about something that you may or may not be able to change”. Another participant discussed the importance of not talking about work too much while at home and of the need to maintain a life outside of work so that work doesn’t become all-consuming. Conversely, one’s personal life was said to be a hindering factor, when “there are problems in my personal life.”

#### Category 6: Personal Control

Incidents in this category were said to be helpful six times (40% participation rate), hindering one time (10% participation rate), and mentioned as a wish list item once (10% participation rate). Specifically, having some control and focusing on the areas one has control over was described as helpful, while a lack of control was said to be hindering. For example, one participant stated that “being in the driver’s seat” of the change was helpful and less stressful than experiencing a change that was forced or mandated. As a wish list item, one participant expressed a desire for more autonomous decision-making in implementing the mandated

changes, stating “Okay, so as long as we’re still getting to where you want us to go, why do we have to walk in a specific way?” Being allowed to customize his approach would allow the change to happen more quickly and efficiently.

#### Category 7: Health and Fitness

This category contained three helpful factors (30% participation rate), no hindering factors, and one wish list item (10%). Examples of helpful incidents included running and getting as much sleep as possible. One participant stated “exercise is always good for coping...it’s precious to me because it does so much for me mentally and physically.” Another stated “personal health helps you to do well...it’s a big piece of how I manage” and explained that physical activity “helps deal with the stress component”. As a wish list item, making health a priority was described as necessary in order to continue doing well.

#### Discussion

Many of the factors described by participants as helpful lend support to the existing organizational and psychological thriving literature and to previous studies of workers. However, this study is the first to investigate what helps middle managers specifically, and as a result some noteworthy differences were found.

Social support has been found to contribute to well being and thriving (Cohen & Wills, 1985). By affording positive experiences on a regular basis, relationships provide a feeling of stability and self-worth (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Social networks also function as resources that can help an individual to avoid negative experiences, such as economic or legal problems, since one can call



upon members of this network to assist or advise (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Additionally, social support is said to be helpful because it affords opportunities for individuals to discuss and process their experiences. Such discussions can assist an individual in identifying the positive aspects of a situation and to engage in meaning making (Lepore, Silver, Wortman & Wayment, 1996). Indeed, a number of participants mentioned that talking to one's spouse, friends, or colleagues was helpful to them. From an attachment perspective, positive relationships are seen as beneficial because a secure attachment to significant others provides a sense of security that in turn can promote adaptive responses to stressors. In fact, one's perception of having adequate relationship resources is linked to better coping (Carver, 1998). Perhaps one of the reasons participants were able to report "doing well" with the numerous changes they must deal with is that they have a sufficient number of relationships, which provide them with needed resources, emotional support and a sense of security.

Consistent with Bandura's 1977 self-efficacy theory and the concept of mastery experiences, 50% of participants cited their previous experiences with change and/or having dealt with challenges in the past, as helpful to them in dealing well with change currently. These findings suggest that dealing well with change is a skill that, like any other skill, can be improved upon through practice.

The work factors category contained the largest number of wish list items of all the categories, and contained more hindering incidents than helpful ones. This is in line with previous findings that for middle managers the job itself is the greatest cause of their grievances (Akuratiyagamage & Opatha 2004). Within this category, participants ex-

pressed a desire for more information as well as clearer and timelier communication from the organization. These findings are in line with literature on the topic of organizational thriving, which describe organizational communication as crucial when change is occurring (Jimieson, Terry, & Callan, 2004) and therefore recommend that the channels of communication be widened during these periods (Mckinley & Scherer, 2000).

Focusing on the positives as well as actively looking for positives was identified by participants as being helpful, while resisting change was described as hindering. These findings support the literature on coping and thriving. Carver (1998) theorized that when individuals interpret a situation as likely to have positive outcomes, they not only cope in more adaptive ways but they do in fact experience more positive outcomes. Research has also found that individuals who are optimistic are more likely to cope in healthy ways (Carver, Scheier & Segerstrom, 2010) and to report thriving and stress-related growth (Park, 1998). Interestingly, several participants described their outlook as a conscious choice. This seems to suggest that looking for positives and choosing to focus one's attention on them is a technique that can be utilized even if an individual is not naturally optimistic.

Participants stated that maintaining a balance between their work and personal lives was important and helpful to them. They spoke of the need to have other things in their life besides work, such as non-work activities and interests as well as conversations that are not work related. Similarly, within the literature, maintaining a balance between one's work life and personal life is described as 'critical' and failure to do so is linked to higher levels of stress and illness, a higher likelihood

of substance abuse as well family-life problems (Hobson, Delunas, & Kesic, 2001). The impact on the workplace (of not maintaining such a balance) includes more frequent absenteeism and reduced productivity, as well as reduced loyalty to the organization (Hobson, Delunas & Kesic, 2001). Given participants' comments, it appears that many of them understood the importance of their personal life and the need to maintain a work-life balance. The fact that several of the middle managers in this study described maintaining a healthy balance is interesting given that the literature tends to describe middle managers as doing poorly in this respect due to the demands of the job. It would be interesting to investigate what enabled them to do so. Most of the middle managers in the study were fairly senior within their organizations and it is possible that this provided them with additional autonomy and flexibility regarding the use of their time. Also, most of the middle managers in this study were married. It is possible that this allowed for the sharing of household responsibilities, thereby reducing their workload and freeing up time for activities such as socializing, and exercise.

Participants spoke of exercising and getting sufficient sleep as valuable to them. There is recognition within the literature that exercise assists with coping in various ways. For instance, exercise has been found to enable individuals to recover more quickly after a stressful event (Crews & Landers 1987), to contribute to a more positive attitude (Blonna, 2005), to improve cognition (such as the ability to come up with solutions to problems and to think creatively) and to increase productivity (von Thiele Schwarz & Hasson, 2011), self-efficacy (Craft, 2005), and self-esteem



(Spence, McGannon, & Poon, 2005).

There is acknowledgment within the literature that having control over one's job, such as being free to decide how to accomplish a specific task or how to achieve a particular goal, is both motivating (Hackman & Oldham, 1976) and empowering to workers (Antonioni, 1999). Control in the workplace has also been linked to better mental health (Ganster & Fusilier, 1989). Further, high levels of perceived control is said to be associated with a number of other positive impacts such as higher job satisfaction, better job performance, lower levels of distress, and less frequent absenteeism (Sparks, Faragher, & Cooper, 2001). Similarly, the psychological literature describes control as helpful in coping with stressors, and as exerting a positive effect on psychological well being in general (Creed & Bartrum, 2008). In line with the literature, participants described personal control as desirable, expressed a desire for additional control over their work, and described a lack of control as hindering.

Although many of the helpful factors mentioned by the participants are quite similar to those in previous studies of workers, there are some interesting differences as well. First, the middle managers interviewed in this study were not dealing with numerous transitions across a number of life domains - as has been the case in previous studies (Butterfield et al., 2010). Rather, the changes they described were nearly all within the realm of work (75%). Also, the middle managers in this study likely experience higher levels of control than the average worker due to their high household income (average of \$298,000), mature age (45) and senior roles within the workplace. They may also benefit from a greater sense of stability than many groups of workers given their

tenure within their organizations (average of 18 years). It is possible that these differences are responsible for the fact that, unlike workers dealing with change in previous studies (Borgen, Butterfield & Amundson, 2010), these middle managers did not describe symptoms indicative of job burnout or depression.

### Implications for Organizations

In line with the above findings, recommendations have been made within the management and organizational psychology literature that, during times of organizational change, special attention should be given to communication (Jim-mieson, Terry & Callan, 2004). Specifically, it is suggested that the channels of communication be widened during these periods (Mckinley & Scherer, 2000). This is perhaps of heightened importance with regard to middle managers given that they are typically the ones responsible for the widespread communication and implementation of change within organizations.

Participants stated that having a full personal life, and maintaining a work - life balance, was helpful to them. This is supported by the organizational and career-counselling literature, which clearly states that not maintaining a healthy work-life balance, has serious consequences for both workers and organizations (Hobson, Delunas, & Kesic, 2001). Despite such acknowledgements, middle managers are described as struggling to balance both work and personal life demands, with one of the impediments being the organization itself (Parris, Vickers, & Wilkes, 2008). Duxbury and Higgins provide a number of specific suggestions as to how organizations can ease the 'work-life conflict' experienced by workers. They recommend that employers

need to find ways to reduce the workload of workers (managers and professionals especially), provide flexible or alternative work arrangements, and reduce job-related travel and overtime (2001). More recently, they also highlighted the need to change organizational culture, the unwritten rules and norms which influence how things are done and what is valued within the organization. Specifically, they emphasize the necessity for organizations to move away from a culture of "work takes priority over family" where employees who always put work above family are valued (Duxbury, Higgins & Lyons, 2012). Similarly, Hobson, Delunas, and Kesic (2001) recommend that organizations "aggressively embrace work-life balance programs and recognize that employees have major responsibilities outside of their jobs." Organizations who follow these suggestions reap the rewards of employee commitment and motivation, and are able to easily recruit and retain workers who are talented and productive.

Participants spoke of engaging in health-promoting activities, such as regular exercise, as helping them to cope well with change. The benefits to both employees and organizations of health promoting activities are supported within the literature (Mills, Kessler & Sullivan, 2007). Organizations can do much to promote employee engagement in exercise. For example, employees who are not currently interested in exercise might be encouraged to do so if they were provided with information that highlights the personal and professional benefits of exercise. Information explaining the connection between exercise and optimum mental and emotional functioning could be provided to middle managers through organizational newsletters or included in the orientation process of new employees.



Alternately, such information could be provided via the organization's regular skills training sessions or the organization's Employee Assistance Program (Hobson, Deluna & Kesic, 2001). Providing on-site exercise facilities would increase the likelihood that middle managers would engage in exercise, while also displaying the organization's commitment to employee health. Further, organizations may benefit by allowing for time during the workday to be utilized for physical exercise, given that a small reduction in work hours for the purpose of engaging in exercise does not negatively impact productivity. Rather, it has been found to increase production due to "increased output during work hours and a decrease in sickness absence" (von Thiele Schwarz & Hasson, 2011).

Middle managers in this study expressed a desire for more information, and improved communication from the organization. Openness of communication is recommended overall (London, 1993), and during periods of organizational change doing so becomes crucial (Jimmieson, Terry, & Callan, 2004). Providing clear and timely communication should be a priority among organizations as it results in lower levels of anxiety among workers and better reactions to changes (Miller & Monge, 1985). This is likely of heightened importance with regard to middle managers given that they are frequently the ones who are required to widely communicate and implement organizational changes. Participant comments in this study suggest that middle managers may need additional lead time to process proposed changes, obtain additional information or clarification, and to select the best way to present the changes to staff prior to the 'rolling out' of the changes to the organization at large. According to the literature (Zaremba, 2006), organizational

communication must not only be timely, it also needs to be clear, accurate, pertinent, and credible. Marques (2010) also found that workers desire communication that is concise and sincere. While, the middle managers in this study expressed a desire for communication that fulfills these criteria, several also expressed a desire for information that speaks to a logical rationale for the changes they must implement. Not only would this help them to better accept the changes themselves, it would enable them to communicate this reasoning to their staff rather than leaving them to question whether there is a sensible reason for the changes occurring. As one middle manager explained, "in the absence of context and rationale for change people make up their own...which is never good".

#### **Implications for Middle Managers**

Middle managers would benefit from maintaining a healthy work-life balance, spending time with social supports, and making exercise a priority. Although doing so may take time away from work tasks, it is likely to improve not only their enjoyment of life, but also their work performance and productivity. Doing so may require critically looking at one's schedule for ways to make changes, or delegating some tasks to support staff. It may also be necessary to make requests for workplace changes that would support a healthy work-life balance. One such request might be to work from home one day per week, or to arrive at work at non-peak times in order to reduce time spent commuting. In regards to exercise specifically, utilizing the full hour of one's lunch break could provide 30 minutes of cardiovascular exercise either at an on-site gym or by walking at a brisk pace outside. Doing so with a colleague could provide both

social support and exercise simultaneously.

#### **Implications for Counsellors and Career Development Specialists**

Relationships were the most frequently mentioned helpful factor in this study and it is well documented that one's perception of adequate social support facilitates coping with organizational change and other stressful facets of life (Lawrence & Callan, 2011). Given that one of the primary objectives of counselling is to provide short-term support and that counselling is sought more frequently when social supports are lacking, counsellors may be well suited to provide such needed support to middle managers (Goodman, Sewell, & Jampol, 1984) on a temporary basis while also assisting clients to create a more permanent support network for themselves. Counselling could also assist middle managers by helping them to identify and focus on the areas of their work, and of the changes they experience, that they do have control over.

Given participants' statements about the helpfulness of exercise in dealing with the stress of change, along with the body of literature describing its wide range of benefits to mood and mental functioning, exercise can be viewed as a psychological intervention (Salmon, 2001), and it is one which counsellors are urged to utilize (Okonski, 2003). It is recommended that practitioners begin by providing clients with psycho-education about the benefits of exercise. Once the rationale for engaging in exercise has been explained, counsellors can then engage clients in appropriate goal setting and in the creation of an individualized program (Chung, & Baird, 1999) and behavioural contracts (Okonski, 2003). Practitioners not well versed in how to do so can



benefit from learning health promotion counselling skills (Wendt, 2005) provided within the literature.

Counselors, particularly career counselors in the corporate sector, or other career development specialists, can help middle managers to develop a helpful perspective toward a specific workplace change by facilitating the exploration of possible benefits that might result from the change. They could also enhance the self-efficacy of the middle manager by engaging in an exploratory discussion regarding changes the middle manager has successfully dealt with in the past.

### Implications for Future Research

Participants reported that having outside interests and maintaining a balance between work and personal time has proven helpful to them. Others spoke of the benefits of exercising and otherwise maintaining their physical health. How these individuals are able to engage in these helpful activities despite the time constraints of being parents (9 of the 10 participants) as well as being full-time workers in demanding roles with high levels of responsibility would be beneficial to know. Such research could be of assistance to the many middle managers who are said to be struggling in this regard.

The sample size of the current study was small and the population of interest was a very specific one. Therefore, a broader sample of middle managers from a number of different sectors might reveal differences between the two groups or, conversely, yield similar findings, which would then suggest that the factors that help or hinder are consistent across different contexts. Also, since the majority of participants had been promoted to senior levels of middle management within their organizations, it may be in-

formative to investigate the possible relationship between the possession of strategies for dealing well with change and career advancement.

### Conclusion

In summary, the results of this study support prior research (Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, & Erlebach, 2010; Koert, Borgen, & Amundson, 2011), which found that there are in fact strategies which can aid workers in doing well with change and that it is possible for individuals to improve in this capacity. This study provides insights into strategies that help middle managers to deal well with the frequent changes they experience as well as ways that organizations and counselors can assist middle managers in their efforts. Although the sample size is small, it is hoped that this study can serve as a starting point for additional research. Given the rapid rate of change in today's workplace and the unique position middle managers hold in regards to change, further research would be valuable.

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